



The composer recently made it on the New York hit parade with a song titled *In every city*.

In an interview R. D. Burman talks about his craft.

Left: R. D. Burman with Latin American composer Jose Flores.

Below: The 'Pantera' team, among others R.D. Burman (centre), Jose Flores and (far right) Pete Gavankar.



**W**HENEVER an Indian achieves a milestone abroad, he instantly gets more recognition in his own country. Perhaps it's the colonial hangover that still makes us believe that they are always right over there. In this case however, the distinction is not going to make any difference as the person gaining it is already a household name here.

Rahul Dev Burman, who has given music for 225 Hindi films, has made it to the New York hit parade with a song titled *In every city*. He is all set to launch the album—'Pantera'—in India. Two people have been responsible for getting him there—his father Sachin Dev Burman who was the only member of the family willing to let him enter films, and Pete Gavankar, a friend of thirty years who goaded him into seeking new pastures and has financed the album.

Intrigued, we decided to find out just how the international album had come about and while we were at it, also gauge just how much R.D. had already packed into his life of 45 years. It turned out to be much more than we had thought as we had to have several sittings before we were through. But R.D. was patience itself. His partner Sapan Chakraborty was there to help out R.D. who whenever he got stuck scratched his forehead and asked, *Woh kaunsa gana thai* or an occasional *Qui bolche?* We also met Pete Gavankar.

Pantera began when R. D. and Asha Bhosle met Pete and his wife in Las Vegas in 1975. Pete, a micro-chip genius who's made millions after migrating to America 25 years ago, told Pancham (as R. D. is known to all and sundry) that he had to move out of India to progress. R. D. hesitated. Making a record in America is a long process—anything from three to four months.

According to R.D., "Pete was really excited about it all. He said he'd arrange the whole thing. Anyway Pete had said, even if the record flopped, it was his money."

Finally when Pete visited India in 1980-81 he took 15 tunes from R. D. They had taken him just seven days to compose. Pete handed over the cassettes to his sister Nilu, who knew many pop groups in San Francisco, and she in turn played them for Jose Flores, an up-and-coming musician. Jose liked five numbers, mixed them with Latin-American music and recorded them. The result? "It sounded terrific," says R.D. "It wasn't even a professional recording, just done in a hall, yet it sounded good."

After listening to the cassette Pete had sent him, R.D. decided to go to San



**"An important tip I learnt from my father was picking up cues. 'R.D. with S.D. Burman (left).**

Francisca and record the songs. The day after Pancham landed in San Francisco was carnival day, May 15. The atmosphere inspired him; he composed the "carnival" number on the album then and there. Later that evening they visited a disco where R.D. and Jose's joint number *In every city* was played.

An excited R.D. related what passed: "The number began with a bang, *New York city, Chicago, LA, San Francisco and Bombay*. All the people there started dancing. At the climax all were clapping. I was so moved I almost cried."

"At a get-together later Pete asked how long it would take to brush up the whole thing," R.D. went on. "I said about four days. For the sound mixing Pete managed to wangle the services of Patrick Gleason, a master synthesiser who worked with Francis Ford Coppola on 'Apocalypse Now'. They also used Gleason's studio which has the most sophisticated equipment.

"Gleason uses a digital synthesiser which can create any sound, including animal calls. For the Pantera number we tried to get the actual sound from the zoo but as the recording wasn't satisfactory we finally had the synthesiser produce the sound—and it's perfect. To Gleason's astonishment we cut

the album comprising six songs in a marathon ten days."

For this new album of Latin-American-Indian music only raw talent was chosen. All the artistes were budding youngsters, the vocalists were even from different backgrounds, a Japanese, a Puerto-Rican and a Negro. Pete was euphoric about the cooperation and wonderful team-work they experienced.

"There was such complete synchronisation," Pete says. "Even as a producer, I wasn't there just to provide the money. It was sheer team-work that made us a success. We worked out a strategy and we've made it big." How else could R.D. Burman and Jose Flores have featured on the same radio programme as Paul McCartney, Michael Jackson and Lynda Ronstadt?

The late S. D. Burman had first realised his son was musically inclined when he heard him play the harmonica at a school function. Obviously 'Dada', as the industry knew him, was ignorant of his son's achievements since he himself stayed at Bombay and Pancham at Calcutta.

Prior to this, R.D. had been to Bombay for a short period. There they first stayed in a Borivli chawl and later shifted to a one-room home which the

Burmans shared with Harindranath Chattopadhyaya's family.

Realising how hard up Dada was, R. D.'s grandmother whisked him back to Calcutta saying she'd bring him up. On one of his visits to Calcutta, Dada was made the chief guest at a school sports function. He even handed over a prize to Panoram for cycling. R.D. positively blushed while relating this incident.

The same evening Dada discovered his son's talent. "The next morning my father asked me how long I'd been practising and what my aim was. I replied that I'd been having a go for the past eight months and wanted to be a better music director than he. My answer must have surprised him."

Dada set about the task of moulding his son. First he put Panoram under *tabla* maestro Brajen Biswas who taught him the basics of rhythm and after that under Ali Akbar Khan and later Ashish Khan to learn the *sarod*.

"This was around 1950-51. My father explained that before you compose you must know the range of the instruments at your command to get the best out of them. I spent over four years with that family and learnt the basics of classical music from them. Even today when I work on a film that has a classical base ('Kinara') I am subconsciously influenced by that period in my life.

"I was very bad in studies and my grandmother used to complain constantly. My father was in Calcutta one day when he made the decision to take me to Bombay. My grandmother objected saying the industry would be a bad influence on me. Father however was adamant. He said, 'My son is not a good student, I am getting old, I must take him to Bombay and groom him. In ten years I may be able to make something of him.' A quarrel ensued and father left Calcutta. Before leaving he asked me if I'd composed anything. I played the 15 tunes I had ready.

"A year later, while watching the film 'Funtoosh' I suddenly heard one of the tunes I'd composed. I blurted out aloud—'My God, that's my tune'. I wrote and accused my father of flicking my tune and he admitted he had." The song was *Ae meri topi palat ke aa*—a big hit in its time.

"In December 1955 Guru Dutt came to Calcutta for the shooting of 'Pyaasa'. He was close to my father and I asked him to use his influence to get me to Bombay. It worked. 'Pyaasa' was the first film I helped my father with. I not only composed one of the songs but also played the mouth organ and some other instruments at the recording. Seeing me work like this my mother's fears were laid to rest and she was convinced I was in the right line.

"From then on my father started grooming me. He taught me how to mould a song to the satisfaction of a producer or director. For instance if someone narrates a 'situation' you immediately compose a tune to fit it—today after having done it for 25 years it's become a habit. If the situation is bad you have to come up with the best you can. Of course you can try suggesting a change in situation but you don't always succeed.

"Another thing my father inculcated in me was never to get over-excited about what I composed. He had a habit of composing the *mukhada* and passing on the *antara* to his two assistants (Jaidev Verma, Surit Kaur) and me. A sort of healthy competition prevailed while we tried to outdo each other.

"My father would choose the best and sometimes I scored too. If I felt happy about it, he'd snub me and call the servant and ask his opinion. The

father was picking up cues. When you heard a bird chirp and started humming you thought of a particular aspect of life—you had the situation and the tune that went with it. When I told him that I sometimes dreamt tunes, he asked me to immediately get up and either hum it into a tape recorder or jot down the notations. The next morning, he said you can improvise on it. The tunes of *Kanchi re kanchire* ("Hare Rama, Hare Krishna"), *Turn bin jaun kahan* ("Pyar Ka Mausam") and *Duniya main logon ko* ("Apna Desh") have all come to me in my dreams.

"That the film industry is full of fair-weather friends I came to know in 1961 when my father had a heart attack. At that time he'd already composed about five songs for Guru Dutt's 'Baharen Phir Bhi Aayegi'. My parents told Guru Dutt that I was capable of getting the songs recorded but he declined and said sorry but he couldn't wait. After



R. D. Burman with Kishore Kumar.

moral of this was: simple is beautiful. While composing, he used to say, we can get carried away and add a bit of everything which finally makes it less appealing.

"He also advocated introducing new sounds. The producer or director may not immediately take to it but a novel idea can click in a big way. When a situation was narrated to him my father would visualise it and even dance it out. In the song *Chhod do anchal zamana kya kahega* ("Taxi Driver") by just adding that *Ah* at the beginning he changed the whole complexion of the song. He explained that's how a girl will react when the hero teases her.

"An important tip I learnt from my

that one by one all the producers left my father. The only one to stick with him was Dev Anand—he told my father not to worry, that he'd delay the film. That's something nobody will ever do for a music director today.

"Five months later, when my father had recovered, we finished all the 'Guide' songs in five days and will you believe it, at the first session Dev Anand okayed four tunes? Shailendra even penned three songs right there—*Aaj phirjeene ki tamanna hai*, *Din dhal jaye* and *Tere mere sapne*.

"My father was at last proud of me. One day, returning from his morning walk he said: 'Today I'm very happy with you. Till now I was recognised as

S.D. Burman but today someone pulled me out and said—There goes R.D. Burman's father."

R.D.'s first break as a music director came through Guru Dutt. The latter signed him as music director for "Raaz". "My father wasn't in favour of this. He feared that since I'd only put in two years in the industry a successful film would go to my head. But Guru Dutt was adamant.

"Unfortunately, after two songs were recorded, the film was shelved. I was thoroughly dejected. I pleaded with the director that it was my first film but he said 'Sorry, *apne ko jum nahin raha*'.

"Mehmood, a friend of mine, heard about this and offered to take the songs but Guru Dutt refused to part with the recorded ones. The unused ones, among them *Ghar aaja ghiraye badara sanwariya*, Mehmood used for 'Chote Nawab'. This was in 1957-58 and that was when Lata first sang for me. She

day and ordered "*Eh Pancham, gana sunao*".

"I began a Nepali folk song. After I'd hummed two lines, Shammi completed the song for me. He said '*Aage chalo, ye song mein Jaikishen ko dene wala hoon*'. After that I knew the going wasn't going to be smooth. One by one I started all the songs composed for "Teesri Manzil". *Diwana mujhsa nahin, Oh hasina, Oh mere sona re-sona, Aaja, aaja*.

"After listening to all of them Shammi turned to Nasir Husain and said, 'Pancham says he has 150 tunes, hear them and take what you like'. To me he said: 'I don't want to hear any more songs, you've passed. From now on you're my music director'.

"Somewhere along the way I developed a taste for jazz. I used to accompany friends to their sessions. The musicians just take a sign line and improvise. This brings out your creativ-

was recording for "Naujavan". I saw a very thin girl in a simple sari enter. *Nati si ekladki aage aayi*. I thought she was a pilot singer. Then my father introduced us. I've been a fan of hers ever since. She has a special high frequency cy suitable for dynamic microphones. She sounds totally different without a mike.

"Again one day, sitting on a wall of the same studio, I saw a man wearing a muffler and cap and holding a black stick. He was imitating everyone who passed, just like a monkey. When we went into the studio the man jumped off the wall and came into the recording room. *Jo jo gana gatey the unka satyanash karte hue woh khud gana gane lage*. When I asked him why he was doing it he said: 'I am an orphan. Nobody looks after me. Please give me a chance'." Amused at the recollection, R.D. gave a hearty laugh.

The man on the wall was Kishore Kumar who, according to R.D., is the best male singer we have. "He is flexible. He can sing a classical song better than any of the others. I know because I've worked with all of them. He can sing a funny song or a sad song, nobody can beat him in versatility. He has never learnt any music but his ability to grasp is the secret of his success. He observes the music director and mimics.

"Several songs which proved great hits were originally rejected by producers. *Dum maro dum* ("Hare Rama, Hare Krishna") Dev Anand had said sounded funny and wouldn't run. I persuaded him to keep it in the album as it was a situational song and useless for any other film. *Kora kagaz tha* ("Aradhana") had been disapproved by Shaktida, Kaka everybody. So was *Kaaton se kheench ke* ("Guide") by Dev Anand. Goldie filmed it only because they were already on location. All the tunes of 'Amar Prem' had earlier been recorded for a Bengali film 'Raaj Kumari' which flopped miserably."

R.D. confessed ruefully that sometimes tunes are rejected just to make the music director work more. "But frankly," he says, "the first spontaneous inspiration is always the best. It's true of my tunes at least. Ninety per cent of my tunes have come to me within two or three minutes of listening to the situation."

Does the way it is filmed play a part in the success of a song? "Of course. 200 per cent. The song *Na mein dhan chahun* ("Kala Bazar") sounded very good when recorded and might have helped the film. It was a key song in the film but was filmed very badly, the placement was wrong and didn't sound good at all. In 'Mehbooba' all the songs



At song recording with S. D. Burman (left) and Lata Mangeshkar.

came for a session, heard the song, rehearsed it and blessed me. That was one of the important moments in my life.

"When Nasir Husain was on the lookout for a new music director Majrooh Sultanpuri recommended me. The film was 'Teesri Manzil' directed by Goldie Anand. The catch came when Shammi Kapoor replaced Dev Anand in the film. I believed my chances of doing the film were kaput then as Shammi at that time was king, behaved like one and had his own group. But Jaikishen, whom Shammi approached to come in as music director, convinced him that I was good and should be given a chance. Shammi relented. He came over one

day. If a music director doesn't know jazz, he knows nothing. That's how I feel. Spontaneous improvisation is the hallmark of a good musician.

"Coming back to my career. Till the end of 1964 I didn't have much work. 'Teesri Manzil' was the only big hit to my credit. It was only after I assisted my father in 'Aradhana' that producers thought '*Pancham ko bhi kaam dena chahiye*'. Shaktida who had seen me work in 'Aradhana' gave me his 'Kati Patang'. My assignments started picking up then on.

R.D. recalls his first meeting with Lata Mangeshkar and Kishore Kumar. He was surprised by both. "I met Lata at Kardar Studio in 1950 when my father

were badly filmed and harmed the film. Shakti Samanta is of course good, but in this case he missed the bus. Before this film was released the songs could be heard blaring from loudspeakers but two weeks after the release they too were rejected by the audience.

"Pre-release exposure of songs usually helps the film. Care should only be taken that the situation justifies the song and it is visually beautiful. Sometimes our judgement also goes haywire. For instance all the songs in 'Lovers' were destined to be big hits, we thought. The film was sold just on the basis of the songs. The audience rejected the film on the first day."

What songs does he consider milestones in his career? *GAar aaja ghiraye* ("Chote Nawab"), *Oh mere sona re*, *Aaja aaja* (both "Teesri Manzil"), *Dum maro dum* ("Hare Rama, Hare Krish-

na"), *Piya tu ab to aaja* ("Caravan") and *Mera naam Shabbo* ("Kati Patang"). Some of the films he has enjoyed working in are "Aradhana", "Kati Patang", "Aandhi", "Parichay", "Amar Prem", "Aap Ki Kasam", "Betaab" and "Agar Tum Na Hote".

How does he react to allegations that he has stolen western tunes? "In the past two years I haven't copied any. 'Betaab', 'Masoom' have both been totally Indian."

But he used to 'borrow' tunes from Abba, for instance. "If I like a particular line I take it but after that I improvise. I only borrowed eight bars from Abba's *Mama Mia*." Any copyright problems?

"Not really. If you copy in toto you may have trouble. Again, there are common phrases in music too and two people using the same may just be a coincidence."

What should be the equipment of a good composer? "He should be well-versed in classical music. This is an absolute must. Some knowledge of jazz and orchestration also helps. He must also have the instinct of picking up cues—say from a car horn or the ringing of a bell."

R.D. believes a singer can bring out the best in a song. "When we compose we know who will best sing it. Whether it will suit a male or female voice." Among the new crop of singers he feels Amit Kumar will make good after "Jawani". Shabbir Kumar and Penaaz Masani are also sure to go far.

On the personal front R.D. is a twice married man. He first took the plunge in 1960 and was divorced in 1974. He married Asha Bhosle in 1981.

**V. S. Gopalakrishnan  
& Meera Pandya**

**Recording a song for "Kati Patang" with the late Mukesh (left). At centre, Rajesh Khanna.**

