Unsung Heroes? A Cross-Cultural Analysis of
Lip-Syncing in American and Indian Film
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Who are these unsung heroes? They are the voice-dubbers in Hollywood film.
Throughout the history of Hollywood, actors and actresses have resorted to voice-dubbing in
films in which they have had singing numbers. However, in American music performance
practices, especially in the popular music and film industries, lip-syncing is often criticized,
leading to debate over the technique. In comparison, Bollywood films also feature voice-
dubbing, and although there is hostility towards this technique in Hollywood, it is perfectly
acceptable in the Indian film industry. The majority of Bollywood films feature singing, and in
all, it is the role of the voice-dubbers, also known as playback singers, to provide voices for the
film stars. In addition, many of Bollywood's playback singers have become as popular as, if not
more than, the actors and actresses for whom they sing. Much of the reason for this stark
difference in acceptance of voice-dubbers is found in the different ideologies of authenticity
surrounding the use of lip-syncing. In North America, listeners expect perfection in the
performances, yet are disappointed when discovering that there are elements of inauthenticity in
them. Yet in India, both film producers and audiences have accepted the need for the talents of
multiple people to become involved in the film production. In this paper, I will first discuss
ideologies surrounding musical authenticity, then compare how these discourses have shaped and
influenced the acceptance or rejection of voice-dubbers in Hollywood and Bollywood films.

In his book, *Authenticities*, Peter Kivy discusses the ideas of authenticity in musical
performances. Although his book primarily focuses on the early music movement and historical
performance practices, his ideas shed light on the issues of lip-syncing. Kivy notes that, in
Western culture, the highest praise in musical performance is for being authentic, categorizing
two main ways for it to do so (Kivy 1995, 1). The first is that authenticity can come from the
authoritative, or original, source. In the case of music, this is the original performance or the
composer's intentions (Kivy 1995, 3-4). Many times, listeners have pre-conceived expectations
of a performance, wanting to hear music in a particular way; this usually means that the
performance should be historically accurate or as close to the original or composer's intentions
as possible. By doing so, the "perfect" performance is given, leaving little room for surprises or
errors.

In contrast to the authoritative belief of authenticity, Kivy discusses "personal authenticity" which validates the performer to be self-originating and sincere in his or her work (Kivy 1995, 108). Similarly, Richard Taruskin argues that since, "…there is no unmediated access to the past[,] all 'pasts' are constructed in the present," there can really be no historical performance (Taruskin 1995, 218). Thus the only type of true authenticity is the personal. This authenticity allows the performers room for interpretation without restricting their expression, which would otherwise happen when trying to be historically accurate and fulfilling listeners' expectations. In relation to lip-syncing, this personal authenticity can be taken one step further. If, to demonstrate personal authenticity, one needs to be self-originating, then one cannot resort to lip-syncing or any other type of production editing since the sounds would not be original products of the vocalists. Instead, the music would become a manufactured post-production artefact that was created with the intentions of perfection in mind.

The controversy in musical performance, including lip-syncing, arises from the ongoing battle between the two conflicting meanings of authenticity discussed. To better understand this, we can look to Glenn Gould's essay, "The Prospects of Recording," in which he discusses how recording technology has allowed musicians to transcend the limitations of performance. Listeners, or the audience, usually have expectations in mind when listening to a performance, whether it is live or on film. Usually, the original performance is preferred, indicating to the audience what the music should sound like. From there, all following performances are compared to the original. If these performances happen to stray from the original, unless done exceptionally well, they are critiqued for straying from the authoritative source. Due to these expectations, perfection in the proceeding performances is sought; to be replicated without error. For Gould, it was with the advent of new editing technology that there became no excuse to settle with satisfactory live performance when a recorded performance could be edited in any way to perfect and exceed those expectations (Gould 1966). In film and the music industry, this requires alternative approaches in the quest for the desired perfection. If an actor or singer cannot sing a melody perfectly, producers have to resort to alternative editing processes such as lip-syncing, track splicing, Auto-Tune etc.

However, these post-production methods lie in contradiction to the personal authenticity Kivy discusses. Although there is this quest for flawless performances, there is also the expectation that the performers can achieve these themselves. Since they are such famous

vocalists or film actors and actresses, it is assumed that they have the talent needed to fulfill their performing role. If not, why would they be as popular as they are?

It is here that the predicament rests unresolved. Both authoritative and personal authenticities are desired, but in the entertainment industry it is often impossible to have both. Either maximum entertainment is given to the audience at the expense of natural talent, or a "sincere" performance is presented at the possible expense of a higher level of entertainment. For those in the entertainment industry, the choice is clear. Higher levels of perfection and spectacle equal higher levels of entertainment, and, in turn, attract wider audiences, and thus increased revenues.

Both the American and Indian film industries have included lip-syncing in musical numbers since the introduction of sound in film, beginning with the release of the first "talkie," *The Jazz Singer*, released in America in 1927. Although there had been experiments with film sound prior to this movie, it was the first film to have a substantial amount of dialogue and songs incorporated into it. In this and other early sound films, producers found it difficult to record the vocals because of the technology available at the time. Microphones were hidden on the set causing uneven dynamic levels of recording when the actors moved around (Kobal 1970, 18). In addition, unwanted background noise from the set was being picked up by the microphones, restricting clean recording voices from being produced. The solution to this was for the actors to pre-record their vocal numbers in a studio and have the tape played back while the scene was being shot and the actors lip-synced (Siefert 1995, 45). By 1929, the majority of films were being produced this way.

As sound in film integrated into the North American film industry during the 1930s and 40s, Hollywood musicals were becoming increasingly popular. This led to a larger audience market and financial gain for Hollywood, but it also increased stress on the production side to create successful films. It was difficult to find actors who could sing since coming out of the silent era, many were not accustomed to, or required to, use their voice. Many stars such as Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland and Alice Faye made successful careers by singing in their own movies, but many times the film studios did not have the resources, time, or finances to develop multiple actor-singers (Siefert 1995, 48). Because the voice could be edited behind the scenes, the priority for the film producers was to have popular and attractive lead actors to ensure greater popularity of the films.

Bollywood films took a similar path with the incorporation of its playback singers. With the influence of the British and the Americas, India began to produce silent films by the beginning of the twentieth century. Although many of these early films featured Western actors and settings, many were influenced by the traditional Indian theatre and included Indian story lines, settings, and actors. However, what was missing was the musical component that was so integral to its theatre tradition (Thoroval 2000, 2). In 1931, this changed with the production of India's first talkie, *Alam Ara*. With the introduction of sound, films were now able to include song and dance numbers into the films, giving them equal importance to the drama of the films.

Indian films of the 1930s featured actors singing their own musical numbers live for recording. But, as was the case in Hollywood, since film was coming out of the silent era, it was difficult to find enough actors who could both sing and act. In India, since singing was influenced by the difficult classical Indian style, producers tried to find people whose top quality was their voice, making attractiveness and acting talent optional secondary features. Unfortunately, as was the case for the singer K. D. Saigal, film critics were not fond of these singers' presence onscreen. Reviews about Saigal included, "his views on acting should not be taken seriously," and "his face is pudding-like" (Majumdar 2001, 167).

As a result of poor film reviews, in 1940 music director Keshavrao Bhole experimented by placing singers in front of a microphone off-screen or camouflaged behind trees and bushes while the actors lip-synced to the songs (Pendakur 2003, 122). This allowed the film to still feature live musical numbers and more talented actors since they no longer had to sing. Soon after, playback recording was used in Indian films, leading to all the featured music being pre-recorded.

Since Indian film was derived from its theatre traditions with themes of mysticism, fantasy, and gods, it was easy for both the film production team and the audience to accept lip-syncing. Like in the theatre, lacking was the sense of realism in the films being created by way of similar plots and settings. The films were boasted for their fantasy-like qualities and high levels of entertainment and fun. And so, however similarly these two film industries came to the use of voice-dubbers or playback singers, Bollywood has come to terms with not only freely using playback singers for musical numbers to improve to quality of the films, but also with letting the public become aware of this performance situation.

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Why then, do we in North America resent the dissolution of personal authenticity if we desire high levels of entertainment? Much of this ideological difference has to do with the performance or music "morality" we possess. As Gould discusses, we are reluctant to accept the consequences of new technologies, for if we did take advantage of them, we would somehow be emotionally short-selling ourselves and regressing socially and culturally (Gould 1966). It is this attitude, quite possibly, that we possess that prevents us from freely accepting the integration of technology and post-production editing techniques into music production.

However, other arts, such as film production, which use visual special effects, are more willing to accept technological changes in order to improve on the end product. Perhaps then, it is because music, specifically the voice, is somehow more closely tied to personal authenticity or identity that this problem arises. As explained by Marshall McLuhan, technology can be considered any extension of the human faculty (McLuhan 1967, 26). The tools (technology) created allow our actions to be more efficient and help us to do things that would otherwise be difficult or impossible to do. In the same way, music can be considered an extension of the voice or any other sound able to be created with the human body. Even singing, the most basic realization of music, is a music technology, since it is the application of vocal techniques to the human voice for the practical task of projecting a song. The voice is the original musical instrument and, unlike other musical instruments or multimedia tools which are physical or external extensions of the body, the voice comes from within us; it is part of us.

Authenticity and the Shaping of the Film Industries

Throughout the early history of American film, we have come to know only a few instances in which lip-syncing has become a controversial issue. This is primarily because the use of it has been kept from the public to avoid ridicule, making it a case of neglect instead. It has been noted that "movie producers have declined to give credit to ghosts [voice-dubbers] because they claim that if the public knew that the star was not singing, it might hurt the box-office appeal of the star and the picture" (Schumach 1962). As a result, the personal authenticity of the singers was ignored in order to save the reputation of the stars and risk of financial loss.

Nicknamed by a film critic as "The Ghostess with the Mostess," for years singer Marni Nixon was not credited for the films she had sung in (Winer 1987). Trained as an opera singer, Nixon began to dub voices of Hollywood actresses in over fifty films during the 1950s and 60s.

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After dubbing her first voice, that of Margaret O'Brien for *The Secret Garden* in 1949, Nixon sang the musical numbers for actresses including Deborah Kerr for *The King and I* (1956) and *An Affair to Remember* (1957), Natalie Wood for *Westside Story* (1961), and Audrey Hepburn for *My Fair Lady* (1964), amongst others, but was never given any onscreen credit.

Although Nixon understood her role as a voice-dubber, she, like other vocalists, felt resentment towards the film industry for giving them little if any credit for their productivity (Schumach 1962). Royalties had to be fought for and it was only into the late 1960s that screen credit was finally granted to them for their contribution. Unlike the playback singers of Bollywood who are praised for their personal authenticity or talent, this lack of credit alienated the vocalists from their work, diminishing the importance of their own personal authenticity.

Much of this resentment had to do with the disconnect between the voice and the body as the following conversation clearly suggests:

> "Alan Jay Lerner, the lyricist, had been coaching Marni Nixon's vocal recording of Audrey Hepburn's songs for several days. On one difficult day, Nixon took off the earphones and snapped, 'Are you aware, Mr. Lerner, that I have dubbed the voice for Deborah Kerr and for Natalie Wood, and for dozens of others.' Lerner replied, 'And are you aware, dear, that all those ladies dubbed your face?'" (Previn 1991, 105).

Since the image took precedence over sound in film, the role that these singers had was not really understood. As Nixon discussed, it was thought that there was probably something wrong with the voice-dubbers since they were not the ones featured onscreen; that they were either physically unattractive or could not act and thus could only contribute their voices to the films (Youtube 2009).

Further discrepancy between the voice and the image was created through the vagueness and marketing ploys for the film soundtracks. In the seven soundtracks that reached number one on the pop charts during the 1950s and 60s including *The King and I, Gigi, The Sound of Music, West Side Story, South Pacific, Mary Poppins* and *Oklahoma,* only *Mary Poppins* and *Oklahoma* had original voices in the leading roles (Siefert 1995, 54). However, on these soundtracks as well as numerous others, the singers' names were not mentioned. Instead, pictures of the film stars appeared on the album covers, and the names of the characters were used to inform the listener who was singing on the track (Siefert 1995, 55).

As mentioned earlier, much of the reason that voice-dubbing was used in Hollywood was for the deliverance of higher levels of entertainment and audience expectations allowing the authoritative authenticity to dominate. A particular case of this can be noted with the film, *My Fair Lady*. The story, which was a successful Broadway musical six years prior to its Hollywood release, stared Rex Harrison, Stanley Holloway, and Julie Andrews in the leading roles. However, in the film rendition of the musical, only Harrison and Holloway were chosen to play the leads. To fill the role of Eliza Doolittle, a box-office name was wanted but at the time, Julie Andrews was not well known enough in the film industry so the role was given to Audrey Hepburn instead. Hepburn had sung in prior movies including *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Funny Face*, and at the time of *My Fair Lady*'s production, she had practiced for the role expecting to sing her own musical numbers but was told at the completion of the filming that her "voice was unacceptable" (Siefert 1995, 53). Instead, Nixon sung the numbers since she was easily able to match the original vocals of Andrews. This new vocal arrangement resulted in less room for comparison between the musical and movie and satisfied the audience's expectations. Although *My Fair Lady* was a success that year, winning eight Academy Awards, critics believe that Hepburn did not win the award for best actress because of her only flaw: lip-syncing (Majumdar 2001, 165). Ironically, Julie Andrews won that award for her role in *Mary Poppins* during the same year.

Another example of audience expectations and the demand for an authoritative authenticity was with the voice-typing of male leads. Many times, the actors did sing their own musical numbers but when romantic or intimate numbers were sung, a smooth mid-range baritone voice was desired. Dubbed voices included Bill Lee singing for Christopher Plummer in the *Sound of Music* and John Kerr in *South Pacific*, and Jim Bryant for Richard Behmer in *West Side Story* (Siefert 1995, 58).

Fortunately for Indian playback singers and film stars, they have not experienced the same neglect that those in Hollywood have had. In the 1940s, when playback singers were first being used, there was some discomfort in knowing that "ghost voices" were included in the films (Majumdar 2001, 168). Audiences wanted the stars to sing their own musical numbers but as mentioned, due to the nature of the singing traditions, it was difficult to find actors who could sing well. As the decade progressed, the audience too realized that the situation would not change and that films produced with the inclusion of the playback singers were higher in quality

and entertainment value than those without. Unlike in Hollywood, Indian producers did not hide the situation. Instead, they foresaw this coming acceptance of the playback singer as a marketing tool and took advantage of the situation. Soon, there was little, if any, hostility, and by the 1950s, playback singing was successfully integrated and accepted in Bollywood movies (Majumdar 2001, 168). To avoid the ridicule for the actors not being personally authentic, they promoted the films as having multiple talents—as featuring not just the actors but the singers as well. It became not only about borrowing a voice but also about borrowing a body. By doing so, they were able to claim the inclusion of personal authenticity in the films without sacrificing the entertainment value of them.

Since this acceptance, many playback singers have become as popular, if not more, than the actors for whom they have sung. One such singer, Lata Mangeshkar, who began her career in 1942 and, perhaps the most popular of all, has become a national icon. Ironically, her big break came in 1949 with the film *Mahal*, in which she was a "ghost voice" literally singing for a ghost's voice. In this film, her voice was used as a singing spirit, played by actress Madhubala, to the song "Aayega Aanewala." After the film's release, there were so many requests for the song on radio that it eventually became known as Mangeshkar's own song. Critics believe that it was her contribution to this film that was also the turning point in the acceptance of playback singers (Majumdar 2001, 170). Since the beginning of her career, Mangeshkar has sung in over 25,000 songs in eight different Indian languages for over 2,000 films (Thoroval 2000, 59).

The reason for such numbers is not only because India has the largest film industry worldwide, but because of the iconic status that Mangeshkar and other playback singers have obtained in India's entertainment industry. Since playback singers' work is done off-screen, they can have longer careers than actors whose appearance matters for the types of roles they play. Even if their voices have aged, singers are still allowed to sing for stars that are much younger than them. Here again, as was the case with Marni Nixon, the image and sound are disembodied. Although Mangeshkar's voice aged, as all singers' voices do, her voice was always used for the lead female roles throughout her career. This resulted in the disconnect between the image of the young actresses and the elderly voice appearing to be projecting from them. Similarly, many actors and actresses in Bollywood films have been dubbed by singing voices identical to other actors and actresses in other films. For example in the films *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) and *Lagaan* (2001), playback singers Udit Narayan and Alka Yagnik supply the voices for the leading

male and female roles in both films, although these parts are played by different actors and actresses.

But the idea of the disembodied is different than that of Hollywood. In American films, producers try to make the audience believe that the actors are flawless by keeping lip-syncing and the disconnect between voice and body undisclosed. By doing so, the voice-dubbers are disembodied from their own voices. But in Bollywood, since the voices are associated with the playback singers, the films continue to be fantasy-like, or surreal, as if the actors and singers are working vicariously through one another.

Here, this notion of the disembodied is not only accepted, but demanded. The audience not only expects good acting performances but has high expectations of the singing as well, uniting the two types of authenticity as discussed. Just as Hepburn was chosen to be the leading actress in *My Fair Lady* because of her popularity, Mangeshkar and other popular singers are demanded for their iconic statuses which are owing to their voices. The high-pitched, almost shrilling, voice of Mangeshkar has become the standard sound associated with the main heroine's role (Pendakur 2003, 129). Since her debut, most subsequent female playback singers have tried to match her timbre, making her voice the authoritative or authentic sound for these roles. Similarly, her sister, Asha Bhonsle's voice is the standard for the more cabaret and disco numbers in films, and Kishor Kumar and Mohammed Rafi have set the voice types for the male leads (Majumdar 2001, 172).

Film soundtracks account for over 60% of India's music market (Thoroval 2000, 196). Due to the popularity of the music, a soundtrack is usually released up to six months prior its film's theatrical release as a promotional scheme. However, unlike the Hollywood soundtracks in which the film singers were not credited, the musical singles of Bollywood movies have always been known by both the film stars and the playback singers. Again, credit is given to all the contributed talent by acknowledging the authenticity of the singers in a way that still allows for high profits. In the majority of cases, the album covers feature images of the lead actors and actresses since they are known for their "image" while the singers are not, but the singers are always recognized for their talents and given credit on the albums. Often times even, CD compilations are created and marketed by focusing the promotion on the singers themselves.

Today, while India's film and music industry continue to flourish from the use and recognition of its playback singers, Hollywood has yet to take a similar step. Like in the

American pop music industry, the use of lip-syncing in film is not publicly discussed by those in the industry, and the public only finds out about these instances through poor live performances or media press releases. When these lip-syncing instances are discovered, the performers continue to be ridiculed for them. A recent example of this includes Zac Efron's performance in the movie *High School Musical* in which his singing voice was dubbed over by another vocalist. It was only after being criticized by the media for it that Efron openly admitted to the act but tried to justify it with the excuse that his own voice at the time had not yet matured enough to reach some of the low notes (Wenner 2010).

Conversely, when Johnny Depp and Nicole Kidman sang their own musical numbers in *Sweeney Todd* (2007) and *Moulin Rouge* (2001) respectively, reviews such as "Nicole Kidman and Ewan McGregor [co-star] are very good indeed at singing their own songs, despite their lack of musical and vocal experience," (Powers 2011) and "Depp sing-talks his way through the film and while his vocal skills aren't likely to land him a record contract, he does hold up admirably while tackling Sondheim's bizarre lyrics," (Murray 2011) acknowledged both stars for their attempt at owning their own voices despite whether or not they sounded great. Their endeavours in being personally authentic added an individual flair to the films, landing both Depp and Kidman Academy Award nominations.

So who are these unsung heroes? Or *are* they? Our world is a world of illusion. Beyond substituting voices, dubbers have been used for instrument performance and stunt work, both of which are considered part of a film's production.   Stuntmen are even praised for their work. But if this is accepted, why then, is there such a controversy over lip-syncing in Hollywood film? Most singers, both in film and in the popular music industry, resort to Auto-Tune or other technological editing tools to enhance their voices anyway. But even in these instances, they are often ridiculed for doing so. Bollywood has managed to come to terms with its use of playback singers, learning how to balance both the authoritative and personal authenticities that audiences demand. Conversely, perhaps the use of the playback singer also homogenizes the musical style of Bollywood by favouring a standard voice (set by singers such as Mangeshkar) to be imitated by younger performers and thus favouring authoritative authenticity.

As suggested by Glenn Gould, technology and post-production editing needs to be embraced and accepted as part of the artistic process. However, technological change is not necessarily always an advancement, and it should not always be accepted just because it is there.

Perhaps a new approach in which attempting to maintain as much transparency as possible between the performer and its mediation needs to be taken. By doing so, we will be able to stop faking to be fake.

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