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### Full of technical innovations

Behind the making of the classic ``Meera'' are several interesting incidents. RANDOR GUY recalls some.



**Ellis Dungan and M.S. at a shooting session**

THE INDIAN film musical classic, "Meera" (1945) produced by Chandraprabha Cinetone and directed by Ellis R. Dungan is one of the most memorable milestone movies in the history of Indian cinema. Even after nearly sixty years this film is vividly etched in

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public memory, and its songs and MS as Meera, are evergreen in the minds, hearts and souls of Indians, especially in the south of Vindyas. With MS in the lead role, others in the cast were Chittoor V. Nagaiah as King Rana, Meera's husband, K. R. Chellam, K.

Sarangapani, T. S. Balaiah, Serukalathur Sama, T. S. Durairaj, `Appa' K. Duraiswami, `Baby' Radha (MS's step-daughter, now Radha Viswanathan), `Baby' Kamala, and in a minor role, lost behind a white bushy beard, turban and all, M. G. Ramachandran! Not many are aware that the noted singing-star from Karnataka, C. Honnappa Bhagavathar was the first choice to play King Rana. On second thoughts V. Nagaiah was brought on board.

Honnappa Bhagavathar spoke to this writer about his life and career in films on audiotape during November 1990 at his residence in Bangalore, for two days in spite of his poor health and recent surgery. It was part of the Aural Film History Project in which this writer was deeply involved, for National Film Archive of India (NFAI), Pune. "I had met Sadasivam, and after discussions he told me that he would make arrangements for an advance payment and agreement, but I never heard from him again! I was more than surprised when I heard that Nagaiah was booked for that role. Of course I was disappointed. It is a rare honour to act with M.S., is it not?" he said in his Kannada-tinted Tamil. A Tamil film star of 1940s, he came into prominence after M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was arrested in December 1944 for his alleged involvement in the sensational Lakshmikantham Murder Case. MKT suffered a 30-month jail term, which effectively ruined his career and life. Honnappa Bhagavathar passed away some years ago.

According to the director of the film, Ellis R. Dungan, Nagaiah was his choice. "Somebody suggested P. U. Chinnappa, but I rejected him as he was uncouth and did not have the regal presence needed for that role. I recommended Nagaiah, and Randor, you will agree with me, he proved the right choice for a Rajput king!" Dungan told this writer during a long chat in Los Angeles) Lyrics were by Papanasam Sivan and Kalki, and S. V. Venkataraman was the music director. Thuraiyur Rajagopala Sarma also worked in the music department.

### Musical feast

"Meera" was a musical feast with MS singing almost all the songs. Many songs became hits and the most famous of them all, "Kaatrinile Varum Geetham" (lyric-Kalki) is an immortal melody of Indian cinema. Its tune and melody were taken from a song by the famous Bengali singer, Juthika Roy, whose gramophone records were very popular in South India in those years. The original Bengali song was a favourite of Kalki's who hummed it often and not just in the

bathroom! He suggested the tune to S. V. Venkataraman and the timeless, ageless song was born. Indeed, the first line became a metaphor in the Tamil language. Some critics and historians are of the firm opinion that the story of Meerabai is only a folk tale and not factually or historically true.

There was an ardent devotee of Lord Krishna named Meerabai who composed the bhajans, but she was not married to the Rajput King of Chittoor. And she was not a contemporary of Akbar the Great. No Rajput king of the days of Akbar and his favourite court musician, the celebrated Tansen, had such a queen called Meerabai. Well, that's what serious historians say...

(The incognito visit of Akbar and Tansen to listen to Meerabai's soulful music, and leaving behind as a gift, a bag of gold coins bearing the Mogul Royal Seal is a highlight of the Meerabai tale, the plays in many languages like Telugu, and also the film.) The making of the movie "Meera" is interesting and the `back story' (as they say in Hollywood) deserves to be told.

The brilliant technician trained in Hollywood, Ellis R. Dungan brought in many creative, technical innovations never ever seen before in Indian cinema of that period. Dungan shot a scene that created history in south Indian film technique.

The girl Meera, (Baby Radha, MS's step-daughter), changes into the young woman, Meera (MS), and the transition is made with a melodious song sung by Baby Radha and MS, "Nanda balaa enn manaalaa..." When the changeover takes place, there is a 45-second, fast-paced musical interlude by the background orchestra as bridge as part of the song. Normally such background musical interludes are recorded along with the song in a recording studio long before the shooting of the film commences. But Dungan did not do so.

He shot the scene first and the changeover sequence consisted of a number of shots of the statue of Lord Krishna... lighted candles with flames flickering ...flowers on trays... prayer offerings.... Krishna's flute in the statue...and then a cut to a close-up of MS singing with great feeling and emotion, "Hey! Murali... Mohana..." The shots were static, and also on fast trolley in close-up. (There were no `Zoom lenses' in 1944-1945!) Dungan edited them all by himself into a rapidly cut fast-paced sequence first, and then the sadly underrated but highly talented music composer, S. V.

#### Brilliant score

Venkataraman scored the background music, in rhythm with the shots in a recording theatre. The impact was ecstatic and brilliant. It was the first time such a technique was used in Indian cinema. Even

today this sequence is breathtaking and evokes much admiration.

S. V. Venkataraman told this writer in 1980s.... "I almost went mad scoring music for that bit! In those days we had only mono-channel recording and few mikes, not like today. I had many instruments playing, and the players were seated on the floor. Only the piano-man was given a chair. ... It was hard work and took a whole day. But the results were excellent as you can see. Only Dungan could think of such a thing. He was a wonderful man, a genius." Another experiment Dungan made in "Meera" is also unique and few have done it to this day in India.

MS is a woman of exceptional beauty and charisma radiating inner charm. To capture it all on camera and project her ethereal beauty, Dungan made an experiment with his cameraman, another movie camera wizard, Jiten Bannerjee. He had a mould made of MS's face, and took shots of it from different angles with varied patterns of lighting. The shots were cut into frames and were studied repeatedly by Dungan and Bannerjee on screen with a `slide-projector.'

The best angles and lighting patterns were selected and used in the film. Consequently, the close-ups of MS in "Meera" are captivating, evoking appreciation from even film technicians of today.(The film is in Black and White.) Other songs by MS in "Meera" are "Enadhu ullamey....," "Giridhara Gopalaa....," "Hey Harey Dayalaa....," "Maraveney yenn....," "Maraindha koondil....," "Engum niraindhaayey...." (an eternally haunting melody, it has a male voice in the beginning and that's S. V. Venkataraman singing), "Janardhanaa Jagannathaa...." and "Brindhavanathil Kannan..." (a melodious chorus with MS leading). The interior sequences of "Meera" were shot at the then famous Newtowne Studio in Kilpauk, Chennai. During 1937-1950s it was a hectic hive of film production in many languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam and even Sinhala. M. K. Thyagaraja Bhagavathar was a major investor in this studio and was on its board of directors.

Others were noted film technicians of that day, F. Nagoor (well known art director and filmmaker), Jiten Bannerjee, and Dinshaw K. Tehrani (famous audiographer). All of them worked on "Meera" with Ellis R. Dungan. (Sadly this historic studio no longer exists. The Rajaji Vidyashram run by Bharathiya Vidya Bhavan, to whom the land was donated by the kind owner, functions on the site. Not a trace of the studio, not even a broken brick is seen today....)

### In disguise

Dungan had an interesting experience while shooting in Dwaraka. As he was not a Hindu, he could not enter the Krishna temple. But he

was the director of the film and he had to be present.

MS was keen that he should be with her. So Dungan was made up as a Kashmiri pundit with turban, beard and all, and he went in with no questions asked or eyebrows raised!

He knew a few Hindi words like `Chalo,' `Jaldi' and `Kaam Karo', which he used liberally! If he spoke with a nasal American twang Dwarakapuri-wasis did not bother! Maybe that's how Kashmiri pundits speak Hindi, they thought perhaps.

Not many are aware that "Meera" was launched in 1943, and that N. S. Krishnan and T. A. Madharam were to have acted in it. But with NSK's arrest in December 1944, in the sensational Lakshmikantham Murder Case, he could not work in the film. Instead, T. S. Durairaj played a minor role in the film, but could create only a poor impression, and was no patch on N. S. Krishnan.

"Meera" was released on Deepavali Day in 1945. Two years later, the Hindi version came out in 1947, and with it MS became a national celebrity. The film had an on-screen introduction by the noted politician and poet, Sarojini Naidu, who described MS as `The Nightingale of India'.

The film was seen by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Mountbattens and other leaders who became her ardent fans and friends. She went on to conquer new areas around the world and became an international celebrity.

"Meera" made more than half century ago, will always live in the hearts of Indians and moviegoers everywhere. The hallmark of a classic, an immortal movie.

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