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Forever in MS blue

Vikram Doctor, TNN, Dec 15, 2004, 12.22am IST

MUMBAI: Vandyke Brown, Titian Red, MS Blue... one of the unexpected achievements of MS Subbulakshmi, the great Carnatic singer, who passed away on Saturday in Chennai, was in being one of the few people to have a colour named after her, and certainly, the only singer.

MS Blue was the name given to a distinctive shade of blue, inky yet iridescent and shot through with black and green highlights, that was used in saris woven specially for her by Kancheepuram Muthu Chattiyar, a fan who was also a sari merchant.

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There was perhaps an element of business sense mingled with his devotion, because as soon as 'MS' started wearing the saris, they became a rage and Chattiyaar was besieged by south Indian ladies, who simply had to have an "MS Blue" sari.

By restricting his supply, Chattiyaar ensured that for many years a sari in the correct MS Blue shade was a coveted item. We associate fashion trends with fashion designers and film stars, yet Subbulakshmi was setting style long before them.

For a singer – and one from as conservative a field as Carnatic music – to make such an impact in visual areas as colour and fashion is an indication of Subbulakshmi's celebrity status.

This term might seem odd for her, since in her modesty, her devotion to her music and, above all, in her refusal to cash in on her talent (most of her fees were given to charity), she seems light years from the money-chasing celebrities we are used to now. Yet Subbulakshmi was a celebrity and one as consciously created as any other.

To acknowledge this does not detract for a moment from her musical achievement. Subbulakshmi had a voice and talent that only come once in a generation, if at all. Yet other geniuses of the Indian arts have failed to achieve her international success, nor managed to set trends within India.

"With most Carnatic musicians, unless you are a music lover, you do not have a strong visual association with their name," says Mani Ayer, the ex-head of Ogilvy & Mather ad agency. "But when you think of Subbulakshmi you can instantly see her face."

The large eyes, the red tikka mark on her forehead, the diamond earrings and double nose-rings, the circlet of jasmines in her hair, all form a visual signature as strong as any brand.

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Two men were responsible for this. Subbulakshmi's husband, T Sadasivam, has a mixed reputation with her devotees, with shades of Svengali for what is said to be his total control over her. Yet this overlooks the fact that this 'control' wasn't exercised for personal gains, but to further her reputation.

As advertising manager for the Ananda Vikatan magazine, Mr Sadasivam had the necessary marketing skills. With him in charge of her career and image, she could focus on her music.

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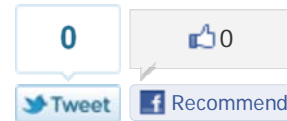
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The other contributor to the Subbulakshmi image was more exotic. Ellis R Dungan was a Hollywood-trained cinematographer who came to India in 1935 at the invitation of Mani Lal Tandon, a college friend at the University of Southern California, whose family had Bollywood links.

The idea was for Dungan to help Tandon with a film for six months, but when that fell through, Dungan started looking for other projects and ended up with the budding Tamil film industry. Six months turned into 15 years during which Dungan directed 17 feature films in Tamil and Hindi.

Subbulakshmi's entry into Tamil films was thanks to Sadasivam who, in 1937, got her to act in her first film, Savitri, to raise money for Kalki, the magazine he was to start with R 'Kalki' Krishnamurthy.

Dungan's first Tamil film Sathi Leelavathi (1936) was based on a serial in Ananda Vikatan and through this connection he had met Sadasivam. He agreed to direct Subbulakshmi in Sakunthalathai (1940) and Meera (1945), her last and most famous film, which helped fix her image as a bhakti singer.

Dungan is credited with identifying her saintly beauty and finding out how best to present it. He even went to the extent of making a plaster cast of her face, which he studied carefully to decide what lighting would suit her best.

"With Subbulakshmi you had everything: great music, real beauty, a saintly personality, the careful presented details like the red tikka she always had," adds Mani Ayer. "Perhaps subconsciously, her husband really knew how to market her."

Subbulakshmi's musical genius may have passed beyond recovery, but like the 'MS Blue' saris, which can still be ordered in Chennai shops, the lessons of her image remain for artists to learn from.

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