

***This Being Human Transcript***  
**Ep. 14 – Salim-Sulaiman**

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

**FEMALE VOICE:**

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

So welcome to This Being Human. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I don't know if you know this Salim, but I -- you know, when I put your name in Google, Google gives all of these interesting, you know, questions to ask about Salim Merchant and the first, one of the first questions that comes up is: "is Salim married?" [laughs] So clearly Salim, you are a global heartthrob.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

Oh, you are making me feel so nice. Thank you.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I want to know, Sulaiman bhai, what's it like to be a global heartthrob's older brother?

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

What - that's an odd question Abdul-Rehman, but anyway.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

It's great, whatever whatever brings food to the table, whatever brings fame to the table. It's - it's all good. We love it.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Today, composing duo Salim-Sulaiman. In India, composing songs for movies is kind of like writing the soundtrack to a country. The music of Bollywood is everywhere - weddings, births, celebrations of all kinds. And brothers Salim and Sulaiman Merchant are behind a lot of those hits. As the duo Salim-Sulaiman, they've composed background scores and beloved songs for dozens of films -- such as *Love Aaj Kal*, *Bhoot* and *Chak De! India*. Their fame goes well beyond the Hindi movie scene. They're also pop music producers, recording in a wide variety of

genres, from classical Indian music, to electronic dance music, to devotional hymns. They've written a FIFA World Cup Anthem, remixed a Lady Gaga song and last summer, they launched their own record label: Merchant Records. They joined me to talk about the secrets behind writing hit songs, what it's like to spend decades working with a sibling, and why Bollywood is such a major cultural force around the world.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Salim Merchant Sulaiman Merchant, welcome to This Being Human.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

Thank you, AR.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

Thank you so much.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You know, I'm the eldest in a South Asian Punjabi family. And, you know, in Desi families, it's always an insult if we don't go to the older brother first. So Sulaiman bhai I'm gonna start with you, how do you make a hit song?

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

Well, you don't make a hit song. You make a good song and then you hope that it becomes a hit because if you try to make a hit song, you might miss it completely. But I guess the way to do it is to be true to yourself. You have to make sure that you're being true to your script. You imagine what the actor is going to be doing while the song is going on. And once you start imagining all these things, it becomes easier. And, you know, then I guess it's the gift of God Almighty. You just sit down in front of your instrument and a melody comes through.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

You work together as brothers and you work together so closely and your identity is so tied to one another -- so Salim, it makes me wonder who does what in the process?

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

Well, I mean, from a very young age, you know, I studied keyboards and piano and Sulaiman studied drums and percussion, and we both tried to bleed into each other then, you know, when we were kids. Sulaiman learned the piano, but obviously chose drums and so did I. I tried the drums, but I was too young to move my hands and legs. So I taught piano and harmonium is more comfortable. So I moved there. And even 'til today, you know, I try and I mean, I do the melody -- melodic stuff and Sulaiman does the rhythmic percussion stuff. But again, we do bleed into each other's, you know, areas because music is both melody and rhythm. And I always say music is about people and it's not just me and Sulaiman, but then when more other musicians come in and join us whether it's on stage or whether it's in the recording, there's more life, there's more soul, there's more love. And that's what keeps the music alive.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Sulaiman bhai, what's it like to work with your brother?

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

We've been doing it for so many years that it doesn't actually feel like work. And I guess we're both fortunate to be able to have the same kind of passion. That's the key behind this. Of course, we have our arguments and like most others do, we fought earlier, we've done all of that. You know, now we've been working for twenty eight years, maybe twenty nine years together. It doesn't feel like we need to go into arguments and any of that because we have a connection. We have a link between ourselves. And that is something very, very rare.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

It is a very deep connection. Look, we grew up learning music together, listening to music together. Our father was our biggest idol. We played in a band together when we were kids. Were just teenagers. And to add to the reality, obviously there is - there's friction and -- but there's you know, there's always healthy discussions, I would say, sometimes even arguments, but -- it's never about who's right. It's always about making good music and it's never about who wins because music always wins.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Both of you have mentioned your dad, Sadruddin Merchant, and you know, he was the leader of the Ismaili Scouts and my understanding is that he wrote more than four thousand five hundred songs for - for - for movies. I'm so intrigued to hear, Sulaiman bhai, what was on the record player in your house as you were growing up, what was the music that you were listening to?

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

We were actually listening to pretty much everything. We were listening to *ghazals*. We were listening to *geets*, which is in Gujarati. We used to listen to Boney M and ABBA as well. We had those 44 rpm record players - our dad exposed us to every kind of music. Also what he did was he left the films in 1962 and started manufacturing musical instruments. And he started composing songs which were devotional. And so, you know, if you see our discography, you'll see a lot of devotional songs in there because it does come a little bit from our dad as well, because he was very into devotional music. So, his thing was every day in the morning, he'd wake up have his three cups of tea and he would have his small keyboard on his lap and he would do some accounts and then play something. And then he would take a phone call and then he would play something. And his his keyboard was always next to him and his instrument was always next to him till he left for work, which was right opposite our house. And it was right there. We would be able to go to the workshop and see all the instruments. I would go and fiddle around with whatever percussions were lying around, whatever instruments were lying around. So it was one of those environments that you grew up in where music came to us very naturally. It was just in the evenings we would you know, we would hear either our dad teaching somebody the various different instruments or he would be rehearsing with his band and we would hear that. Or we would be at home. And some new record would have come and we

would be hearing that or we'd be hearing some cassettes or - there was always music around us.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Do you remember your first, like, joint composition?

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

Absolutely. Both of us do.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

Yeah. When "We Are the World" came out, we were both like, "wow, what is this?" You know, so many artists coming together and doing something so grand for Africa, was such a big thing. It was - the music had soul, but it also had purpose. And we both were very attracted to that piece. And we thought of covering that song. And at that point, our father had this sequencer which was - I mean, it was a keyboard called YS200. It was a Yamaha keyboard and, you know, it had a 16-track sequencer and like, you know, and so we said, okay, fine.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

Eight-track sequencer.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

Eight-track sequencer. And so we had seven tracks of music. And then we dedicated one track to to - to rhythm. And then there was a sampler in it and it was like - and so we created a cover of "We Are the World." I won't get- elaborate on that. But it was such a big, big achievement for us. We thought we made our first record, you know, even though it was a cover, it was such an achievement. I think we didn't sleep for 48 hours or more. And it was like we were completely addicted to this passion of creating music. And that's when we both knew that this is the beginning of something, Inshallah, something big. That was quite some time ago. I think that was when I was probably 14 or something, so it was probably like thirty-three years ago.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

That's incredible.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

But our first actual album which released was in 1992. It was called *Raaga Raaga*, which is kind of like a rap slash classical album.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

That also won us the first award, by the way.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

Yeah.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

It was the first - it was best composition, or Best Pop Composition Award.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I had read somewhere that you had started at the beginning of your professional career also making jingles. And, you know, one of the things that I remember about going to Pakistan and to visit my family as - as a young person was watching Pakistani television and hearing these incredibly addictive jingles for the television commercials. And I remember after a summer in Rawalpindi and Lahore and Multan and Karachi, you know, I would come home and have - I'd have all these jingles in my head. And I always used to tell my friends that American-Canadian television has nothing on the television back home because they know how to get under your skin. How do you strike the balance with writing a jingle between being annoying and being catchy?

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

Well, it was the same thing. You had to be catchy to the point of annoying. You had to be able to get into a person's head in 30 seconds, and actually when you do a cut down, it was only 15 seconds. And we we did thousands of commercials. Getting the knowledge, getting the insight of how to be able to catch a person in 15 seconds was really helpful when we came down to actually composing songs. I remember the very first few ones that we did was [singing] "every day and every hour, you've got the Visa Power. There's so much more you can discover when you've got Visa Power." So it was one of those you know, it stays in your head all the time.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Yeah, I love it. It's like this description that you have of like, it's almost like the express hook. You know, every song has a hook, but you got to get to the hook right away and you got to make sure it stays.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

There's no wasting time because every second was worth millions of rupees on advertising.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

During this time, Salim and Sulaiman were also producing pop songs. But their path to the film industry was an unusual one. It happened through a chance encounter in the early 90s with the celebrated filmmaker Sanjay Gupta.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

So we were working on a jingle again at a studio, and we were doing something for Cadbury, the chocolate company. It had a very big orchestral sound and it had like a lot of voices and a choir. Kind of a gothic orchestral sound. And we were playing it pretty loudly at a studio that we rented. And, you know, the doors kept opening and Sanjay Gupta was editing his film in the - in the suite next door. And he kept listening to this Gothic sound. So he got intrigued and he knocked and he asked if he could listen to what he was, you know, to what he was hearing from the next room. So we invited him in and he heard the piece and he just asked us do, you know,

you guys want to, like, work on a movie or are you interested in doing a score? And we said, of course we are. And that's it. And we started working on his film *Hameshaa*, he expected a very Gothic orchestral sound. And that was like our first film. We also got nominated for that film for Filmfare. And it, it really sort of got us on on the map, you know, with with Hindi films. I hate to use the word Bollywood. I would say Indian films. And that's that was a big thing, because in 94, very early in our career, we got nominated for this film, *Hameshaa*, and a lot of people saw work and and after that, there was no stopping.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Salim bhai, I'm intrigued by what you just said, particularly your allergy to the term Bollywood. Could you unpack that for us a little bit?

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

I think it's a very westernized way of calling. Also, Bollywood is connected to a lot of I mean, people think of dance moves and, you know, kind of like just the song and dance thing of, you know. Which is in in I mean, any in the Western world, it's called musical. And I would I'd rather like use the same word. I would say an Indian film musical, you know, for a - I mean, of course, all our f-- mostly all our films are musicals because they all have song and dance. But I still like to call it Indian films versus Bollywood.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

Well also, if you look at it now, Bollywood basically represents only the Hindi films, whereas Indian cinema is actually now not just Hindi, it's -- you have just in Maharashtra, you have Marathi, you have Tamil cinema, you have Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi cinema. Lots of it. Lots of Punjabi stuff coming out. Lots of beautiful films coming out from the east. You know, you can't call Bollywood - that's not what Indian cinema is. Bollywood is just one small section, well a large, very large section, but it's still a small section compared to all the other stuff that is representative of the Indian cinema.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER**

I have a small favour to ask you. If you enjoy this show, there's a really quick thing you can do to help us make it even better. Just take five minutes to fill out a short survey. This is the Aga Khan's first-ever podcast and a little bit of feedback will help us measure our impact and reach more people with extraordinary stories from some of the most interesting artists, thinkers, and leaders on the kaleidoscope of Muslim experience. To participate, go to [agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey](http://agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey) Once again, that's: [agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey](http://agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey). Thanks for listening to This Being Human. Now, back to the interview.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Sulaiman bhai, when you're handed a movie to make music for - what does that look like?

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

So it usually comes in a bound script. If there is no bound script, there's a narration and a fairly large descriptive narration which takes you into the story. And the minute, you know, you have to have a little bit of imagination while you're while you're going through the narration or when

you're reading the script, you start imagining all the various things that are going to happen and then specifically go to the section where the song is gonna be and you see what's coming before that and what is going to follow the song. And you grab that mood as well and then go into composing the song. The film itself gives you the colors. You start imagining what kind of instrumentation it's going to be, what kind of genre of music it's going to be. And for a film like *Kurbaan*, we knew we're going to make a song like *Shukran Allah*. We didn't know it was going to be *Shukran Allah*, but we knew there was going to be a Sufi song because Saif Ali Khan goes to the mosque and he's just finished praying and says, "thank you a lot for all the love that I have." And so, you know, you take that and then you go into a song which has to have a Sufi-esque love story to it. You can't do anything else over there. You can't have a club song, right? So, the colors and the instruments and the fabric of the song comes from reading the script or from the narration.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

What is it, Salim bhai, about Indian cinema that captivates and that grabs audiences from Nigeria to America, from Scandinavia to South Africa? I've traveled all over the world and there is one kind of cinema that I have found to be almost universal. And it's Indian cinema.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

First of all, thank you for not saying it Bollywood. [laughs] I think there are multiple things. First of all, I feel it's a very strong emotion, you know, be it a romantic emotion, be it, father, mother, son. These are very strong emotions which Indian cinema has been able to capture for years now. You know, be it separation of two lovers. Be it separation of a mother and father or just a person being far away from the motherland. The other emotion, which is really strong, is music and dance. A piece of cinema that can capture all these romantic romance, separation, drama, action, music, dance, gives the viewer a complete experience, you know, and I feel that it doesn't need to be need to have any language because there are certain things which are so human that it's you know, even if you don't put subtitles, people from other countries can understand because it's really out there, you know. Thirdly, and the last thing is like, man there are one point three billion Indians just living in India. I'm not catching Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans living outside India, you know. I'm only talking about people living in India, is one point three billion people, which means every seventh guy, which makes us a massive audience, you know what I mean? So that's like, so I mean, it's just numbers, you know, it's crazy.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

We, Indians, are a song and dance nation, right? We've always had that. And when you look at it now, you know, you - you hear the music that's going on in the West. And sure, it's, it's got its appeal and it's got its beauty. But what's classic is, is a song that you would be able to hear again and again and again and will never die, because these are the songs that, you know, have pain, these are songs that have love. And that is what Indian cinema was built on. You have a song for every emotion. Of course, we love the fact that we are slightly over the top in everything that we do. Right? Everything is magnanimous. It's huge. Everything is massive. So

a lot of the rest of us look at that sometimes and wonder, hey, what's going on? Is it really like this? Are these people really like that? Because when you see Hollywood and you see a Western cinema has evolved over the last hundred years, we are still in that period where a lot of cinema that comes out is still mushy and still has that, you know, I'll die for my brother and I'll kill for my mother and, you know, all of that. So that emotion is something that a lot of people connect to deep inside and a lot of people laugh at also sometimes. It's a complete entertainment package, that is what Indian cinema is, is all about.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I've found in listening to your music, deeply moved by so much of it and deeply moved by, by the devotional music that you do. Your collaboration, for example, with Abida Parveen, who I grew up listening to in my in my parents home, was just - was just stunning. How is the process of, of writing devotional music different from composing a film song or a pop song, or is it different?

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

It's not, really. When you're making a love song, you know, your spirit and your feeling towards that is for two characters. When you're making a devotional song, it's truly your story, which is actually very easy. Your faith, your belief in the Almighty. And that is something which all you have to do is just open your heart and do a prayer in the form of music. And, you know, I wish we would make more devotional songs, you know, because it gives us a lot of peace and it spreads a lot of happiness in this world. And I think music is such an amazing force that really binds and spreads so much joy and happiness in the world to unite people, people from all different castes and faith to come together as one human race. Music truly is a beautiful force for that. And devotional music is something that has been going on for centuries. That will continue to go on for centuries. It's something that will always stay as part of human culture.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

What does this being human mean to you?

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

It's such deep knowledge of, you know, whatever is happening around you, take it in its positivity rather than look at the negative, because everything is a lesson if you look at it like that.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

For me, being human is by giving happiness to humans, because the best way for you to feel happy is to give happiness to other people. And that is the best form of happiness.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Sulaiman Merchant, Salim Merchant, this has been such an honor and a pleasure. Thank you for joining me on this Being Human.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

Thank you Abdul-Rehman.

**SULAIMAN MERCHANT:**

Thank you, AR.

**SALIM MERCHANT:**

It's been a pleasure.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our supervising producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Production assistance by Sydney Bradshaw. Original music by Boombox Sound. The Executive Producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. This Being Human is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum go to

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