

Listening to Western Pop in 1960s



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Not many people listened to western pop music in the 50s and 60s in Lucknow. Those who did were either Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians, or students of the schools run by the missionaries. I was in the latter group.

I have a very clear memory as to what got me interested in western pop. It was the song [Bernadine](#) from the 1957 movie with the same name. By this time, I and some other teenagers in Lucknow had also discovered rock and roll through the hit song [Rock Around the Clock](#) by Bill Haley. Its copy [Lal lal gaal jaan pai he lagoo](#) in the 1957 Hindi movie [Mr. X](#) was probably the first *desi* rock n roll song.

Then came Elvis Presley, and all others were pushed to sidelines. My friends and I went to see Elvis's [Jailhouse Rock](#) with great excitement and clapped (with the rest of audience) with the beat through the songs. I think I could have sold my soul at that time for a recording of [Jailhouse Rock](#). Among other things I craved at the time were a racing bike, a leather jacket and blue jeans. Many in India grieved when Elvis had to go for his 2-year military service in 1958.

The songs that defined our teenage years were rock, pop and doo wop. Pop music was changing from its usually placid and sentimental drivel, and what better example of this change than songs such as [Lipstick On Your Collar](#) and [Stupid Cupid](#), the latter with scandalous lyrics like "I can't do my homework and I can't think straight, I *need it* (sic) every morning 'bout half past eight...."

In 1960 and 1961, Pat Boone was big, and so was Ricky Nelson. It was the time of [The Theme from A Summer Place](#), [Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka dot Bikini](#) and [Greenfields](#). Other popular songs that made the hit roster were Elvis's first song after his return [It's Now or Never](#), Ricky Nelson's [Travelin' Man](#) and the Drifters' [Save the Last Dance For Me](#).

Digitalization and the Internet have revolutionized music industry and one can store, play and listen to music any time anywhere in the world. There were only a few ways to listen to western pop music in 1950s and 60s in India. The main source was the radio. A few pop hits were released in India as 78 rpm records, which we played on hand-cranked HMV gramophones. The needles for those gramophones were 1/3 of an inch long and could be used as tacks, a far cry from the miniscule stylus of electrical turntables that were soon to follow, only to become obsolete by 1990s. The 45 rpm disks popular in the west with spindle holes that were an inch in diameter did not work in India because few had the kind of record players needed to play them. The most popular record player brand was Garrard, which some lucky people had. Luckier ones had record changers. This situation improved as the 1960s progressed, and the LPs came on the scene. And with them came the less expensive record players.

Information about Hollywood, show business and music came through movies and cine magazines. My favourite was *Movieland and TV Time*. Male actors mostly sported the shiny, ducktail haircuts; the one that Elvis had was a good example. It was cool to comb your hair frequently. We knew and could recognize actors and singers who were in the movies, but we knew little about those in TV shows like *Bonanza* and *77 Sunset Strip*. There was no TV in India till the 1980s.

Another way to get western pop music was to ask a relative or friend abroad to send you the records or bring them for you when that relative came on visit to India. But the number of Indians living in the West or those visiting foreign countries was a fraction of what it is in 2014. Therefore, music and records through this source were few and far between.

As in Hindi, the English service of Radio Ceylon played western pop hit songs. The best and the best-known show was the Binaca Hit Parade. Binaca Geet Mala in Hindi may have been the more popular radio show, but the English version had preceded it.

There was another reason besides the hit songs to listen to the Binaca Hit Parade. There was a prize of 100 rupees for the listener who could correctly predict the sequence in which the hits would be played next week. If there were more winners than one, the jackpot was split among them. I used to send postcards (only postcards were accepted) in my name and in the names of family members. No one but me listened to the hit parade in my family. I did not tell anyone about me sending the postcards.

Once the postcard I had sent in the name of my sister Kiran Yashpal hit the jackpot along with two others, and won 33 rupees and 33 paises. The guy who presented the songs on radio had a hard time pronouncing her name; the winners usually had names like DeSouza and Perriera. He could have been the legendary Gred Roskowski. My sister was flabbergasted when she began to receive phone calls from her friends: “Hey, I didn’t know you listened to Binaca Hit Parade.” “Congratulations on winning the jackpot.”

I kept the prize money. For many years afterwards, the story of my winning the jackpot was often told to show how smart I was.

1961 was also marked by the release of Chubby Checker’s hit *The Twist*, which introduced western pop to people hitherto indifferent to this kind of music. It was not so much the song as the dance it engendered that brought a minor social change in the music and dance scene in Lucknow. Ballroom dancing up to then was confined to a small section of people. One had to know the dance steps and follow the rhythm and the beat of the music.

With the Twist, everyone could do the dance without having to learn it; just twist your bottom to one side then the other and keep on repeating the movement. It solved the problem of having to find a partner to dance with. Twist could be done alone, without touching another person. Both these factors played a part in the popularity of the dance in Lucknow.

Lucknow University was the first time 99 per cent of its students had had their first experience of ‘co-education’ – male and female students attending the same college at the same time. This proximity to those creatures of fantasy called girls could be a thrill for boys, in particular for those from the countryside.

With the thrill came the desire to make an impression on girls. In 1963 no students’ show was complete without a few of them doing the Twist. The song of choice was the theme song from the 1961 movie *Come September* with Rock Hudson, Gina Lollobrigida and teenage heartthrobs Sandra Dee and Bobby Darin. You heard this everywhere in those days at social events; brass bands leading the bridal procession played it; students out on a picnic danced to the tune.

The craze to dance the Twist and to show off at social occasions and parties was such that a couple of times university students whom I did not know came to see me to borrow the *Come September* record, presuming that I'd have one because of my interest in western music.

I owe my interest in western music to the American Library in Lucknow. The library was a real blessing for aficionados of western music. It had a music section from which one could borrow records. There was a good selection of American jazz, popular, folk and show/musical albums. There were only a few classical albums perhaps because not many composers of western classical music have been Americans.

It was there that I first learned about Broadway musicals, which became a lifelong passion. I knew about the original *My Fair Lady* with Julie Andrews as Elizabeth Doolittle much before the limp movie version with Audrey Hepburn. I was bowled over by *West Side Story*, perhaps the greatest musical ever written, that was made into a spectacular movie. I also came across many lesser known musicals, which allowed me to show off my knowledge of musicals later in life.

The American Library closed in the late 1960s. Its absence, along with that of the British Council Library, is felt by the people of Lucknow to this day.❖

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