

The King of Rock n Roll



Anand

Anand has been a print and broadcast journalist in Canada. His translations of Hindi fiction into English have been published by Penguin India and Rupa Books. He has also translated Canadian fiction writers, including the 2013 Nobel Prize winner Alice Munro into Hindi. He divides his time between Montreal, Canada and Lucknow, India.

The King of Rock n Roll was a swarthy teenager who couldn't have been over 5 feet 6 inches tall.

His claim to fame was a crest on his blue blazer that showed a guitar and curlicues that said, "King of Rock n Roll."

If you went to an English-medium (or convent) school in India in 1950s and 1960s, you'd know what kind of blazer I am talking about. These blazers with crests of schools have now become very common in India. Every school with the name of a saint (sometimes, imaginary saint) attached to it has a school dress with a blazer and a tie. The blazer is worn only in the winter, but the tie, sometimes looking like a twisted rope, is de rigueur.

No one had heard the King sing, or seen him play the guitar. No one knew if he could even play the instrument. In 1960, rock n roll had caught the fancy of teenagers in India as mainly dance music; it was its nascent stage and the genre that we know today as rock music was yet to come.

For teenagers it was another kind of pop music, one that did not require any talent to sing or musical sense to appreciate it. Apparently the King too thought so, and so did the rest of the crowd, for no one in my knowledge had ever asked about that particular crest or challenged his claim to being the King of Rock n Roll.

The King wore his blazer with the crest as soon as the weather permitted, and wore it till the very last day one could tolerate wearing a woolen jacket in the rapidly warming days. He wore it everywhere, regardless of the occasion or the place. Any hour of the day you went to Lucknow's fashionable Hazaratganj, he was there in his blazer, walking up and down the bazaar. Or sitting in Kwality's restaurant in Mayfair building or in Royal Cafe with presumably fawning – and paying – fans.

The people who knew the King had no idea if he went to school. At that time, it was possible to appear in the High School or Intermediate Board exams as a private student without having to attend a school regularly. Therefore, it was possible that he was a student.

As the story involves a cinema hall, a word about these halls in 1950s and 1960s in Lucknow. In Lucknow, like in all major cities in India, all better quality halls showed mainly English movies, and had names like Odeon, Palace, Capitol, Prince, Minerva, and Regal. In Lucknow, the swankiest hall used to be Mayfair. Even today, people wax nostalgic about how going to see movies at Mayfair was considered to be the epitome of style, the chic thing to do. Since the heydays of old style, big and grand movie halls are all but over, I doubt if any of these old monikers survive today

One day, the King had to sing at a Cub Club show.

Cub Club was something that the famous Mayfair cinema hall had begun. On a Sunday, every month there would a movie show where a movie considered to be suitable for young minds would be shown. Mostly these were happy-ending family movies or comedies with Jerry Lewis or cartoons. Jerry Lewis was big at the time. Looking back it is hard to imagine laughing at his silly antics, but if teenage fun is not corny, then what is?

Cubs, or the ‘members’ of the Club, could buy tickets for that particular show at a discount. The ticket was one rupee per head. One could sit anywhere in the hall, even in the balcony, which had the most expensive seats at normal times. But most people wanted to sit up front at a Cub Club show, for a reason that shall soon be disclosed.

Oh yes, the Cub members were given metal badges, and you could buy the one rupee ticket only upon showing it. The management soon found out that, at times, the same badge was being used to buy more than one ticket for those who were not cubs. So the metal badge was replaced with a card that had names of months in a grid. When you bought a ticket, the month that month was checked off so that the card could not be used again.

Two activities were held during the movie’s intermission. First, a cake was cut, and shared by members whose birthdays fell in that particular month. Like the loophole with the metal badge, the management found that some cubs had birthdays twice in a year. So a way –I can’t remember what – was found to make sure that no one had a second birthday in the same year. Besides the compere, someone, usually a Christian woman, was present to lead the Cubs in singing Happy Birthday to You.

The second activity was a talent contest. A dozen or so cubs would come on the stage, where they would show, one by one, their talent by singing songs, reciting poems, playing a musical instrument, and the like. In the end, a winner was selected by holding a handkerchief over the head of the talents one by one. Who got the most applause was the winner, and he or she got a small prize.

This was the venue for the King’s performance. Before one Cub Club show, he had seemed excited and nervous. What I remember is that he had found out that the Christian woman who sang Happy Birthday during the intermission was going to be absent. He kept on mumbling and wondering who was going to sing it in her absence. Although he knew the manager of the theatre as well as the compere, he was clearly too shy to suggest to them that he was willing to sing the birthday melody.

Somehow, I got the impression that he wanted me to do something about it.

He and I waited together for the intermission. I could sense the tension building in the King’s demeanour. When the time came to cut the cake, the compere asked for a volunteer to lead the audience in singing.

To me, this seemed to be the cue to raise my hand and yell, “Here!” I pushed the King forward. Although the King had been waiting for this moment, he made a pretense of being surprised. He walked towards the stage where the compere was waiting. He got onto the stage, and began to sing in a baritone-like voice. I must say that the few bars of the song that he sang passed muster.

That was also King of Rock n Roll’s swan song. The woman returned the next month to sing Happy Birthday, ruling out a repeat of one and only public display of the King’s talent.

We outgrew the Cub Club and moved on; it had begun to seem silly and childish. Rock n roll came of age in the 1970s and kept on growing.

I don't know what became of the King. I heard that he had to find some ordinary job that had nothing to do with music or singing. But I do think of him when I think of Lucknow of 1960s. That thought is accompanied by an image of him as an older man, who once in a while dusts off his old blazer with the crest, and remembers the time when he was the King of Rock n Roll.❖

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