

The Island LeisureLAND

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“Mervyn Perera - One of the most beautiful voices in the country, is lost to Sri Lanka.” - A web post.

Another artiste who represented what is now called the 'old generation' faded away. That was on November 7. He was Mervyn Perera. A singer, musician and an epitome of Omar Khayyam's 'Rubaiyyat.'

Mervyn Perera was the singer who sang "Me Nagaraya." There are only a few other songs here that have virtually invaded the common or, to be precise, the middle-class psyche in Sri Lanka. Lamenting on the nostalgia, the everlasting sorrow and the reality of 'young love,' the song marks the best ever 'campus song' here. Referring to a fictitious love story that took place in the University of Peradeniya, the song became an unofficial national anthem, like Milton Mallawarachchi's "Eda Re" of the youngster and adults alike who tend to lose in an aesthetic sorrow of lost love. Undoubtedly, it was Mervyn's greatest hit.

When Premasiri Khemadasa died about a month ago, the master musician was hailed as a legendary figure in the Sri Lankan music world. Mervyn had a different aura.

Mervyn, though he always represented leftist politics throughout his over 40 years in the field of Sinhala music, was not endowed with the sort of charisma similar to that of Gunadasa Kapuge or Nada Malini. Though Mervyn sang in a lot of political rallies that were organised by either the Chandrika Bandaranaike regime or the present Mahinda Rajapaksa government, Mervyn was never considered a revolutionary singer. Mervyn, instead, leaves in Sri Lanka a different mark as a singer. What is it?

Rubaiyyat

When 'The Island' met him in 2003, a year after an organisation at Kalutara, led by Charith Suddachari, held a felicitation ceremony at the Kalutara Town Hall, Mervyn, 63 then, was a very fit person, not showing any signs of a crumbling health. We learnt one thing after over three hours of talking in this unpublished interview. Mervyn epitomised the lifestyle defined and propounded by Omar Khayyam, the renowned Persian poet who wrote the classic 'Rubaiyyat.'

"Come, fill the Cup, and in the fire of Spring,



Mervyn Perera at a felicitation ceremony held in 2002 in Kalutara to mark 35 years in the field of music. (Files)

Good Bye Mervyn!

*Your winter-garment of repentance fling:
The bird of time has but a little way
To flutter—and the bird is on the wing."*
- 'Rubaiyyat' (7th Verse)

While emptying about half a bottle of arrack, sharing his jokes and anecdotes with a few of his friends, we remember how the hefty musician uttered verses from the much hailed and sometimes frowned upon 'Rubaiyyat.' He was a man who wanted to swim in eternal enjoyment. His face, his mannerisms and all his statements reflected only one thing. Enjoy your life man! Drink, sing and enjoy! That was his message.

The venue of our interview was the Kalutara Rest House. No wonder, because there is no better place where we could meet Mervyn. During those days, the fellow was present there almost every morning. There were no recordings nor were there any professional engagements for him during those days.

He was a vehement critic of the present generation of singers. The up and coming stars of various private TV channels, he was very critical of. He thought they lacked the basics. "There is no restraint," he complained.

Mervyn represented a generation of artistes who lived a simple life. The artistes belonged to the late 1960s or early '70s. They are a stark contrast with the present Bathiya & Santhush generation, who have already received a barrage of criticism for what is called a shallow show by them, ruing the older generation with their finger wagging business which they call either 'hip hop' or 'rap.'

Mervyn came on to the local music scene along with a set of singers and musicians who created an aura that was specific for themselves.

By the dawn of the 1980s, all of them had become extremely

popular. One was Victor Ratnayake. Then there was T. M. Jayaratne, Sujatha Attanyake and Amarasiri Peiris, etc. The lyricists for most of them were either the slain Premakeerthi de Alwis or Lucian Bulathsinhala.

"When Premakeerthi gave me the lyrics of 'Me Nagaraya', he had underlined the lines 'Singithi putha athangillaka ellee enava'. He said that that was the key piece of the song. It happened that way. Neither myself nor Premakeerthi was a Peradeniya scholar. Whenever we went to any university, that song was their main request," Mervyn said.

Mervyn came from Payagala, about five, six kilometers south of Kalutara. He was the son of a famous musician of the area. As it was the case with many others, Mervyn's 'nursery of music' was the village church. Later, he took a knack to play the violin and joined the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. He was a composer of a huge number of popular songs and later became popular for a host of love songs, which he sang himself. If Kapuge became a revolutionary through his songs, Mervyn was, with a gifted voice which was regarded to have rare personality and a romantic touch, a singer of love songs. He never got away from one thing in his adult life. That was his love for liquor.

"It was for my enjoyment. I know some of my friends drank much more than me. One actually (another popular singer) kept his bottle under his bed and drank constantly. I think after you pass 60, you can just carry on without any trouble. If you are to die due to your drinking habit, that ought to be before becoming 60. That is my belief."

*"Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough,
A flask of wine, a book of verse—and thou
Beside me singing in the wilderness—
And wilderness is paradise now."*

- (ibid)

Despite his frequenting at the Kalutara Rest House and being known pretty well for his drinking habits, everybody in the area respected his immensely. He was one time the music teacher of Kalutara Gnanodaya Maha Vidyalaya. Mervyn produced a host of people who learnt music, especially how to play the violin, under Mervyn.

"I'm a very popular person in my village. Everybody is good with me. My friends are ranging from the village grocery man to the toddy seller. I'm still gathering more and more attendants to my funeral," he explained.

Like Kapuge, Mallawarachchi, Milton Perera, Mervyn too leaves us an indelible mark in the tradition of the Sinhala language songs in Sri Lanka. "Me Nagaraya," "Sanda Midulata Enawa," "Ma Sanasa," will ever be sung by generation and generation of youth, the 'losers' from love, and those who love to love. And, most significantly Mervyn will ever be remembered, at least amongst his close ones, as we found in our interview at that Rest House while sharing 'A flask of wine and a book of verse,' that Mervyn lived his life fully.

He had no big plans for the future. He didn't look for a great glory in life or any great financial gains. Not even intellectual glamour. He just needed to live his life in peace. He may be the one last hero of that 'Rubaiyyat lifestyle.'

Today, the Sri Lankan middle-class loses one of the heroes of their aesthetic word. A sad day for the 'old generation' representatives of the highly volatile and polarised music and artistic world in southern Sri Lanka.

Good Bye Mervyn, for the soothing tunes, lovable words and great, great life!

"Jeewithya Heenayakei Kiya Sithenawa," (Entire live is a dream) said the last line of his "Me Nagaraya."

Picture sparks claims of wood on Mars



The landscape picture, taken as part of Nasa's Mars Exploration Rover mission in May 2004, that sparked rumours of martian wood Photo: NASA / JPL

A photograph of the surface of Mars showing a mysterious object has prompted a wave of speculation over alien involvement.

Detail of the NASA image. The plank has been explained as a trick of lighting and viewing angle Photo: NASA / JPL

The picture, which was taken as part of Nasa's Mars Exploration Rover mission in May 2004, has given excitable internet message board users reason to believe that a civilisation has formed on the planet.

Some of the more far-fetched theories over the object's identity range from a plank of wood to a giant flake.

However, Dr Jim Bell, an Associate Professor of Astronomy at Cornell University and the lead scientist in the development of the Rover project's cameras, has provided an alternative explanation.

He told the Universe Today website that "sadly" there was no wood in the picture, adding: "I say 'sadly' because personally I think it would be incredible and spectacular to find a wooden plank on Mars. However, in this case, it's just a trick of the lighting and the viewing angle.

He added: "What you're seeing is a piece of flat, platy, layered sulfur-rich outcrop rock ... Sometimes, like in this case, those flat, platy rocks have been tilted or dislodged, this one probably from the forces associated with the huge impact crater that formed nearby.

"And this one's being viewed edge-on. That edge-on view, combined with the layered nature of these rocks in general gives the surface a sort of grainy texture. So, indeed, it looks like a wooden plank on Mars."

While frozen water was discovered on the planet earlier this year, it is thought unlikely that conditions on the planet would allow for life to develop.

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