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The sonic presence of the nightclub singer

An excerpt from a new book on female vocalists in Hindi cinema looks at the influence of nightclub songs on films in the 1950s–60s

The nightclub in the 1950s and the ’60s was often framed as a gangster’s den with diegetic performances by dance bands with a sonically amplified performance by the lead singer, who made eye contact with the guests and danced with abandon. In Baazi (1951), the hero meets the guitar-playing Leena (Geeta Bali) singing “Tadbeer se bigdi hui taqdeer bana le.” Sung by

Geeta Dutt, the song begins with "he he he he he," a musical gesture that hails the noir hero to stay and try out his luck in the gambling den. In Awaara (1951), "Ek do teen/123" frames Cuckoo singing and dancing in a smoke-filled den of gambling men as Raj and Jagga watch her performance. Shamshad Begum's voice for Cuckoo competes for attention as we hear the men talking and laughing throughout the song. This corporeal style of female vocality became an aural strategy that helped to invoke the nightclub as part of the city's underbelly. At the same time, the nightclub singer's voice was connected to an expanded sonic universe that included voices of chorus singers, rhythmic clapping of hands, foot-tapping sounds, and a bevy of musicians with an ensemble of Western instruments. This mélange of sound underscored the idea of a hybrid space of porous class and racial boundaries, where one encountered both illicit desire and violence.

Scholarship on the nightclub dancer of Bombay cinema has emphasized the binary between the vamp and the heroine on the axis of vice and virtue. This framework, however, is not specific to the vamp presented in song sequences, particularly those enacted in the nightclub. Ranjani Mazumdar signposts a more complicated landscape of the vamp's corporeal performance as "both fascinating and dangerous, embodying the dialectic that marks urban life." In her reflection on the Navketan films of the '50s, Mazumdar draws a connection between Bombay's cosmopolitan vision and the depiction of free-spirited women like Sylvie in Taxi Driver (1954) who occupy the space of the nightclub. Similarly, analyzing the nightclub songs in the city films of the 1950s, Aarti Wani reads the image of the vamp/club singer/dancer as a sign of urban modernity, straddling neat moral binaries.

Considering that music played such a defining role in the nightclub songs, hardly any attention has been paid to the vamp's sonic presence in the nightclub and its interaction with the spatial setting in the cabaret songs. The genealogy of the nightclub linked to the colonial history of the subcontinent has been traced by scholars like Naresh Fernandes and Bradley Shope to suggest that their presence in cities

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like Bombay, Karachi, and Calcutta from the 1930s enabled a heady encounter with the travelling jazz bands that revolutionized the soundscapes of Indian modernity. The city of Bombay in the late 1940s attracted Goan musicians who formed fluid connections between the film studios and the dance bands of its hotels and gymkhanas. Several of these musicians became arrangers for the film music industry, introducing into film songs a hybrid amalgamation of sounds drawing on a range of sources that included Arabic influences, Latin American rhythms, and jazz.

The nightclub singer, with an alluring public persona, seems to draw her lineage from the modern girl of the 1930s

The musicking body of the nightclub dancer expanded the registers of female vocality carrying the sonic trace of a post-colonial reimagination of colonial culture. The nightclub singer, with an alluring public persona, seems to draw her lineage from the modern girl of the 1930s, conveying fluid religious and racial identities. For instance, Cuckoo Moray, who performed in and several films in the 1940s and the '50s, was an Anglo-indian actress. Helen, born to an English father and a Burmese mother, became the most successful actress to play the role of the nightclub dancer/vamp right up to the 1970s. Helen was first noticed for her highly energized dance in "Mera naam chin chin choo" (My name is chin chin choo), in the film Howrah Bridge (1958), a cabaret number set in a nightclub n Calcutta, where she dances as a Chinese girl...

"Mera naam chin chin chu" created a hyperactive space marked by flowing identities and an array of costumes, props, gestures, and bodily practices. The female body's nteraction with other sonic bodies, clapping, whistling, and singing in chorus, became a recurring trope in nightclub songs. For nstance, China Town (1962) opens with the sound of a ship s horn on a night shot of Calcutta, evoking the idea of a port city. The city is shown to us on a moving camera as Asha Bhosle's voice singing "Thandi baharon se gulzar China Town" (The breeze is cool here, this is China Town) is introduced with rolling credits. After almost two minutes of the song, we enter a nightclub with Helen dancing in a Chinese-style costume with a parasol. The singer invites the spectators to China Town, warning both the on-screen and off-screen onlookers of the dangers that lurk beneath. This movement into the nightclub simulates the listener-spectator's entry into the exhibition theatre where the sound/voice could create a three-dimensional space, exceeding the two-dimensionality of the image. Apart from foot tapping and whistling, the sonic field includes the sound of castanets in several Flamenco-themed songs, turning the nightclub into a place for the productive articulation of desire and infinite possibilities.