

Ambiguities of Animation

On Being “Just the Voice”

DRAVIDIAN DISPENSATIONS

Not long into the movie *Vivasayi* (Farmer, Tamil, 1967), the hero (actor M. G. Ramachandran), a farmer who aims to improve the lives of poor agricultural laborers, meets the landlord’s daughter (actress K. R. Vijaya), a spoiled, urban-educated, car-driving, English-speaking girl clad in a tight sleeveless dress. The hero’s efforts to convince her to “wear clothes that give respect” is dramatized in the song “Ippaṭi tān irukka vēṅṭum pōmpalay” (This is how a girl should be). As the heroine clumsily tries to walk while wearing a sari, the hero sings in a brash tenor:

Ippaṭi tān irukka vēṅṭum pōmpalay	This is how a girl should be
English paticcālum	Even if you’ve studied English
Inta tamīl nāṭṭilē	In this Tamil country
Ippaṭi tān irukka vēṅṭum pōmpalay	this is how a girl should be

She replies, in a high-pitched voice:

Uṅka soṛpaṭiyē naṭantukkuvēn—solluṅka	I will enact your words—tell!
Nān eppaṭi eppaṭi irukkaṇumō	Whatever ways I should be
Appaṭi appaṭi māttuṅka	Change me in all those ways
Uṅka soṛpaṭiyē naṭantukkuvēn—solluṅka	I will enact your words—tell!

In the ensuing verses, the hero enumerates the ways: you must not wear revealing clothes, you must keep your modesty, you must not wear lipstick, you must not change the culture/refinement we have developed, you must do your work in the house well. As the music switches to rock guitar chords, she asks “if from day to day things are changing, why can’t we change too?” In reply, the hero paints a picture of a topsy-turvy world in which “men are doing women’s work in the house”

while women are going out. By the end of the song, the landlord's daughter has vowed to change her ways. She promises to become the animator of his authorial desires, singing "whatever job you give, I'll do it."

The lyrics of this song mobilize a set of oppositions foundational to the patriarchal vision of the DMK, which came into political power the same year that *Vivasayi* was released. They juxtapose a spoiled, Westernized girl with a proper Tamil woman; a headstrong, sassy woman with a docile wife; a woman who maintains the home with one who goes out to work. But beyond its content, the form of this sequence—that is, both its production format and its sound—employs other oppositions that had, by this time, become second nature to Tamil cinema, enabling the "message" of the song to come through loud and clear. The most obvious of these is playback's division of labor between onscreen actors and offscreen singers. The voices in this song sequence are those of T. M. Soundararajan and P. Susheela, who, by the 1960s, had already sung thousands of songs for films and become well-known celebrities in their own right. And, as I have suggested, this division of labor brought with it highly stylized differences between male and female voices. By 1967, the range, timbre, and style of Soundararajan's and Susheela's singing voices, often paired, had become synonymous with idealized male and female voices; the singers themselves were described as working together behind the scenes seamlessly and cooperatively, "like husband and wife" (see fig. 8).

But, although such oppositions and divisions of labor seem absolute, other contrasts are brought into play here in a more ambiguous way, particularly in relation to the female voice. Susheela's voice sings both the world of libertine sexuality, evoked by the song's foray into rock guitar chords and the actress's shimmying dance moves, and the world of proper domesticity, evoked by her timbral purity, high pitch, and melismatic vocal style. This same voice embodies the docility that the hero is trying to inculcate by teaching the landlord's daughter how to behave and the flirtatiousness of the caper enacted onscreen between actor and actress.

To make sense of the potent mix of oppositions at play here, I focus in this chapter on the years—the mid-1950s through the 1960s—when playback singing, as a division of labor and a set of gendered vocal practices and aesthetics, became naturalized. During this period, playback singing afforded new opportunities for women to participate in the film industry as singers without appearing onscreen, their existence lending a degree of respectability to cinema. The assumed immorality of an actress displaying her body on the screen was mitigated by the assumed moral rectitude of a woman singing behind it. Singers' moral status depended on the fact that they were not anonymous "behind-the-scenes" voices but rather celebrities whose voices were immediately recognizable and linked to their name. Every onscreen appearance thus activated two star texts: that of the actor or actress and that of the playback singer.



FIGURE 8. P. Susheela and T. M. Soundararajan in the studio, ca. 1965. Photo from the collection of S. V. Jayababu.

For female singers who came into prominence in this period, their own stage performances were crucial opportunities to link their voice to their own name and persona and thus to distinguish themselves from the onscreen actress. At the same time, ideals of female modesty required singers to disavow or downplay as much as possible their bodily involvement in the act of singing. This led to a mode of performance marked by nonglamorous appearance, bodily stillness while singing, and an avoidance of interaction with the audience. During these years, a certain kind of female playback singer attained iconic status: a type who managed to embody seemingly contradictory elements, pairing a high-pitched, girlish voice with a modest, even plain appearance, a singer whose voice might be matched with onscreen characters of varying social position and status but whose live persona and demeanor remained that of a nonglamorous, “respectable,” middle-class woman. The ideal in performance was to imitate as closely as possible the more controlled act of recording one’s voice in the studio, a space that served as a social and technological buffer between a singer and her mass audience. Both the new vocal sound these female playback singers performed and the distinctive form of celebrity they embodied were shaped by the tension between the mobility of female singers’ voices—across different characters and films and across different contexts of performance and playback—and various practices, aesthetics, and ideologies that emerged to contain and mitigate that mobility.¹

Playback singers are “delegated voices” (Keane 1991) in two senses: they serve as the singing voice of the onscreen actor/character while remaining offscreen themselves, and they serve as the medium for the realization of songs whose words and melodies have been authored by music directors and lyricists. Animating both the actor’s mute body and the composer/lyricist’s creation, they enable the separation of voice from both appearance and authorial agency. As I suggested in chapter 2, playback established singing and speaking as two different modalities of vocal expression (Urban 1985; Graham 1986), such that singing was understood to be giving voice to the melodies and words of others (composers, lyricists, characters), but speaking, to be done by the actor/actress,² was construed as voicing and presencing a “self,” either one’s own or that of a diegetic character. Whereas men, both actors and singers, could exploit the ambiguous space between singing and speaking for positive effect, for women, “singing” was not to be confused with acting or other kinds of vocal expression, such as speaking or expressing emotions, which might imply the involvement of their body, will, or intention. Female playback singers, as one prominent singer of this generation put it to me, conceived of themselves as “just the voice.”

The singer’s own emotional involvement and artistic intentionality were not only not at stake; they were specifically disavowed by this idea of her as “just the voice.” But the seeming restriction of the singer’s role was also a kind of fetishization, a narrowing and focus that granted her voice a larger-than-life affective power.³ Remaining unmoved herself, she could move others to tears or joy. In this

sense, the playback singer exploited the inherent ambiguity of the animator's role, serving simultaneously as the mechanical relayer of words and voice and as the animating force that gives them life (Nozawa 2016).

Technologies of sound amplification and reproduction were central to this aesthetic, not only enabling female playback singers to be heard in public but also shaping in a fundamental way their modes of performance, their vocal sound, and their very notions of themselves as singers. Alongside their nonglamorous public persona and nonemotive performance style, equally important for the female playback singers of this generation were their consistency and recognizability, even as they voiced different kinds of characters, and their ubiquity, which was constituted by a small number of singers singing tens of thousands of songs over multidecade careers. Playback singers figured themselves (and were figured by their audiences) as a kind of playback technology: "machines," as several put it, for reproducing their songs.

At first glance, the mechanical, conduit-like concept of being "just the voice" seems straightforward and uncomplicated. But as we will see, the multiple oppositions involved in constructing this role—the voice and not the body; singing and not acting; just singing and not authoring or speaking words—generated tensions. Indeed, for female singers of this period, the bleeding through from character or actress to singer was an issue that had to be constantly negotiated. For being "just the voice" generated potent structural contradictions. To be respectable, these singers had to appear as disengaged as possible from the content of what they were singing. Yet the more they approximated a conduit, the more they participated in the conduit's indiscriminating openness, its essential promiscuity. At the same time, the bodily stillness and facial blankness cultivated to limit the promiscuity of women's bodies left their voices oversaturated with meaning that needed to be carefully controlled.

In the ideal of being "just the voice" lurked the potential for certain kinds of performative excess, as the singer could be seen as not merely singing but actually feeling, acting, or embodying the emotions or characters she was expressing. The frame of a "behind-the-scenes singer" who is "just the voice" could potentially be compromised, both in the profilmic event of recording the song in the studio and in the moment of the song's reception by listeners/viewers. There was always the potential for the singer to break out of the role of a behind-the-scenes performer to that of a more intentional or agentive role or the potential for the playback voice to be heard as that of the onscreen actress. Thus, although singing was constructed as inherently more respectable than acting, respectability as a film singer still had to be carefully cultivated and maintained. As we will see from examining the lives and careers of prominent female singers of this period, managing these potential risks involved mastering certain embodied techniques of vocal production, as well as various strategies of social interaction, self-presentation, and performance.

Being "just the voice" was a precarious achievement supported by technologies, modes of performance, and embodied techniques, but it was also enabled

by societal expectations. Crucially, the labor of constructing respectability was undertaken not only by the singers themselves but also by the audiences and media surrounding them. Their modesty, their stillness in performance, and their unchanging, “god-given” voices received constant comment and discursive elaboration from fans and journalists. These representations were critical to producing and controlling the meaning of their voices, even as those voices were paired with actresses’ bodies onscreen and endlessly reproduced and circulated through recordings and radio. For, as William Mazzarella has suggested, while the authority to preside over a performative dispensation may, in the days of kingly power, have resided in a single patron figure or institution that provided the space and financial support for performances and simultaneously policed their contents, effects, and meanings, in mass-mediated contexts, the work of creating and maintaining the performative dispensation is more ambiguously dispersed among audiences, media, institutions, and the performers themselves (Mazzarella 2013).

ENTERING THE STUDIOS

By the mid-1950s, women who neither hailed from the hereditary musician communities that had traditionally produced female performers nor sang the kind of “classical” music that would have sanctioned their public performance were able to become professional playback singers. But for playback singing to be seen as an acceptable activity and source of income for women from middle-class, upper-caste backgrounds, they had to have families who supported their ambitions. The successful singers of this generation were introduced into the playback singing profession by a parent (often a father) or a husband; the move was not seen as a transgressive one within their families and communities. As one singer’s relative put it, “There was never any question about their respectability.”

The first South Indian female playback singer to attain a near monopoly over female singing roles and a multidecade career was P. Susheela (b. 1935). Originally from Vizianagaram, in Andhra Pradesh, Susheela studied Karnatic music as a girl. Her father, a lawyer, was ambitious for her to be a classical singer like the famous M. S. Subbulakshmi. He would bring her along on his trips to Madras, where she studied in Madras Government Music College and sang on All India Radio children’s programs. It was through the radio that she was discovered by film producers and brought to the studios at the age of sixteen. Around 1950, Susheela moved to Madras with her brothers. She quickly overshadowed two slightly older female singers, G. Krishnaveni (Jikki) and P. Leela, who had made their playback singing debuts in the late 1940s.⁴ By the mid-1950s, Susheela had become so busy that she was recording five to eight songs a day.

In the late 1950s, S. Janaki (b. 1938), also from Andhra Pradesh, was discovered as a talent. Janaki had little interest or training in Karnatic music as a girl but learned to sing film songs by listening to the radio. From a young age, she sang film songs in stage programs and was eventually discovered by the son of an actor in whose

programs she was singing. The actor's son resigned from his job in Nellore to act as Janaki's agent and secretary in Madras. In Madras, they married.⁵ Janaki was introduced to the Tamil film producer A. V. Meyappa Chettiar and signed a contract as a staff artist at AVM Productions; she later canceled her contract because she had already become well-known enough to receive plenty of work as a freelancer.

Crucial to the self-narrative of female singers of this generation was the idea that they “just sang,” harboring no ambition themselves. Entering the film world was never an individual, intentional choice. Rather, it was the accidental “discovery” and subsequent training of their voices by men—husbands, fathers-in-law, and the paternalistic world of All India Radio and the film studios, in contrast to mothers, who made them learn Karnatic classical singing—that propelled them to fame. But the process also required learning to inhabit the role of a conduit, letting go of their own artistic intention and will. A contemporary of Susheela and Janaki described to me the dynamics of being a young female singer “trained” by older, male music directors in the 1960s. “It was our duty to satisfy the music director,” she said. Part of that was figuring out how to please different music directors, from the laconic and intimidating type to the exacting type, who required the singers to do thirty or forty takes before he was satisfied, to the fatherly type who only asked for one or two takes from singers before saying “pōṭum” (enough). The young female singer was clearly subordinate in these interactions. She vividly recalled her interactions with a particular music director in the early 1960s:

SINGER. He was not very cordial with singers—he was a certain type. He wouldn't say much.

[imitating younger self:] “Namaskaram, sir!” (formal, polite greeting)

[imitating music director:] “mm. Pō. U||e pō. Nī pō.” [mm. Go (informal imperative). Go inside. You go.]

AW. He wouldn't even say “pōṅka”? (formal/polite imperative)

SINGER. I was just a small girl, I didn't even expect respect.

She animated his stern voice and her own faltering, high-pitched replies while humbly pleading for the chance to sing another take:

[imitating younger self] (in very low-pitched, soft voice). “Sir innoru take pāṭarēn sir. Please sir, orē oru take sir.” [Sir, I'll sing another take. Please sir, just one more take.]

[imitating music director] (in loud forceful voice). “Vēṅṅām! Nallā vantatu! Itu tān best!” [Not necessary! It came well! This was the best!]

[imitating younger self] “Ille sir, please, orē oru take . . .” [Oh no, sir, please, just one more take . . .]

Music directors had the power to shape a young female singer's voice and the trajectory of her career, framing their role as that of a "teacher" who tested the singer's speed and capacity to correctly "catch" what they taught. Another singer recalled the music director's words to her during the recording session of one of her first songs in the early 1960s:

He said, "I've given you this song. If you sing it well, your future will be first-class." . . . Because he gave me that song, today I am here as a singer. When we are first getting opportunities, that we ourselves also have a specialty [*tanmai*]*—*I myself didn't know I had that [*appaṭi enkiṭṭe irukkum, enakkē teriyātu*]. He was the one who expected that and gave it to me. While they are teaching you have to catch it correctly. No one thought I'd be able to, but I did. So [all the music directors] really liked me. Because no time would be wasted on my account. The recording would get done quickly. Whatever he gave me, he'd say, "*Sikkaram pāṭiṭṭu vā*" [Finish singing quickly and come]. That was a challenge. Because I took the challenge, today I am here.

Having a husband who could mediate their interactions with the film world was a crucial marker of respectability for this generation of singers, even as their careers reversed the usual gendered pattern of earning in the family. Female singers of this generation supported their families with their earnings as playback singers while their husbands either quit or decreased their own work to act as chaperones and agents for their wives. One spoke of her husband as devoted to her singing:

My husband is very cooperative. Throughout his life. I never wanted him to work. Because if he was in some job he wouldn't be able to come with me. Programs, recordings . . . I wanted him to come with me. I am not a very pushy type, so I wanted his support behind me. First my father would come with me. Then he would come. If there were known people in the recording studio then I might go alone *tairiyamā* [boldly, without fear]. . . . [It was only after] I reached age forty-eight, I got maturity and . . . would go alone to recordings.

Because recording a song in the 1950s and 1960s required the singer, the music director and his assistants, and a full orchestra to be present, the studio constituted a kind of public: a space filled with unknown men (see fig. 9). The wives of music directors and other men who worked at the studios did not come to the studios. During an interview with a man who had worked as a sound recording engineer in a studio for many years starting in the 1960s, I asked his wife, who was sitting with us and seemed to know the details of every song he spoke about, whether she had ever gone to the studio with him. Not once in forty years, was her emphatic reply; the closest she ever got was seeing the outside of the studio from the car if they came to pick him up. The female playback singer would thus routinely be the only nonmale person in the studio; having a husband or male chaperone there could mitigate the awkwardness of being a woman in that space. So could being good and finishing fast; it was said of Susheela that her singing was so perfect that she could finish a song in one or two takes while her car waited outside. Maximum



FIGURE 9. Musicians in a posed photograph in the studio, ca. 1962. P. Susheela is the lone female figure seated in front. Photo from the collection of S. V. Jayababu.

efficiency and compliance with orders were essential aspects of being a female playback singer.

GOD-GIVEN VOICES

For female singers of this generation, the comparison with Karnatic classical music was a recurrent theme. One singer told me that it is impossible, especially for women, to sing both classical and film music; she noted that one's voice "sets" in the high pitch required for film songs and makes it hard to go back to classical singing. Yet she was careful to stress that this film voice is not an "artificial" voice that should be compared to the "real" voice cultivated by classical musicians; it is simply that the two voices come from different parts of the body: the film voice from the chest and head, the classical voice from the stomach.⁶ In the course of a long morning spent teaching me one of her well-loved film songs, she repeatedly noted the high level of *bhāvam* (emotion, devotional sentiment) in this song, using a term usually heard in the context of Karnatic classical music.

Indeed, regardless of its actual degree of truthfulness, a common trope in the media- and self-representation of female playback singers of this period was their training in and literacy in Karnatic classical music. Emphasizing the continuity between classical singing and playback singing was a common way to make singing for films a respectable activity. In a feature on nine famous female playback

singers and their favorite ragas (*Bomma* 1975b), each singer was featured with a photo and a small paragraph in which she named her favorite raga and what film songs she had sung or hoped to sing in it. The assumption was that these singers would conceive of their film songs in terms of raga, a melody concept used in Indian classical music, rather than in terms of lyrics, meaning, music directors, or characters.

But, although classical music served as a kind of shield that granted respectability to what these singers were doing, they generally drew a distinction between learning Karnatic music and playback singing as a gift that must come naturally. When I asked one singer if she had taught anyone playback singing, she laughed at the absurdity of the question. “Teaching? Sollikkotukalle. [I haven’t taught.] What can I teach? *Atu tãnã varañum*. [It has to come by itself.] No one can teach. . . . Otherwise, they must learn classical. That is a different style; you can practice it from the beginning and learn.” Implied in this contrast is the notion that playback singers are essentially self-taught, unlike classical singers, who can achieve mastery through devoted discipleship. And when I asked another singer about who had influenced her, I was gently but firmly rebuffed. “There’s no question of influence. Of course I used to listen to Lata, Mohammed Rafi, Asha Bhosle, [and] P. Leela songs in my childhood. But it’s not influence, just a god-given gift. If we just want to sing like that, we can’t. God must give. Otherwise we wouldn’t be able to sing.” Similarly, when asked in a magazine interview about which female singers she wanted to emulate, P. Susheela replied, “I didn’t follow anybody. I made my own *bani* [style, lineage]” (*Bomma* 1970b, 61). In contrast to those singers who actively strive to “follow” or imitate others, the idea of the voice as a god-given gift detaches the singer from the world around her, attributing responsibility not to the singer’s efforts or aspirations but to a higher power.

SINGING VS. ACTING

Female singers of this generation were experienced in giving voice to many different kinds of characters. Janaki, for instance, became known for her versatility. Over the years, as one fan described to me, she had sung “pathos songs, where you have to cry in the middle”; happy songs, “where you have to laugh in the middle”; folk-type songs, devotional, or “bhakti-type” songs; and “sexy” songs, where “you have to give some effects.” Janaki had even sung in the voice of old women and young boys; nevertheless, she and other singers of her generation did not conceive of what they did as being anything like acting.

The absolute nature of the distinction made between acting and singing became clear to me when my interview with M, a singer of this generation, was interrupted by the arrival of a visitor who was a dancer. A long discussion ensued between M and the dancer about the differences between singing and dancing. M explained that to sing a song well, the particular emotion, or *bhavam*, has to enter your *manacu* (mind, heart). But, rather than “imitating” what a person

in that state of mind would sound like, you are “doing justice to the character and the song.” She continued, drawing a distinction between dance, in which “you have to do so many things with your hands, feet, and face,” and singing, in which “the acting is all in the throat”—that is, invisible. Maintaining the licitness of playback singing meant deliberately keeping certain things hidden, enforcing a strict separation between the invisible and the visible, between one’s insides and one’s outsides.

Although in the course of her career, M had been offered the chance to act in films—in “good musician roles,” as she put it—she had always refused. “Anyone can act, but God gives you only one voice,” she remarked, drawing a contrast between voice as a god-given gift and acting as a mere profession. Another singer of this generation, R, put it even more bluntly. “God has given us one voice,” she said. “If we start changing it around, it becomes mimicry. We are not doing mimicry or *kintal* [imitative teasing]. Some gents will change their voices. Changing your voice is like putting a mask on.” R also made a moral distinction between a singer following the teaching and directions of a music director, which she equated with respecting one’s *sonta kural* (own voice), and a singer simply changing her voice of her own accord from one song to the next, which she described as “mimicry” or “putting on a mask.” She used the Tamil inclusive honorific pronoun “we” (*nām/nāmma/namm-*) as a way to voice the former, a self who accords and is accorded the proper respect, juxtaposed with an arrogant “I” (*nān*), used to voice the latter, the promiscuously mimicking self.⁷

AW. Do you sing in different ways for different actresses?

R. Everyone says that—“for different artists we must sing differently.” That’s wrong [*atu tappu*]. . . . God has given one voice [*kaṭavul koṭuttatu oru voice tān*]. The music director, when he’s composing, has a variety of thoughts. In those thoughts he composes and gives to us [*nammukku*]. Then when we [*nāmma*] sing for a character, if that movie becomes a big hit, what do people [*avañka*] say? [in singsong voice] “Ah, she changed her voice and sang, she changed her voice and sang.” How can one change one’s voice and sing? With our voice [*namma kural*]⁸—what the music director teaches—we [*nāmma*] reproduce that. He tells [us] to “sing this way, sing that way.” The music director teaches. Therefore the credits go only to music directors. If I [*nān*] just sing in different ways, isn’t that mimicry? If I [*nān*] start speaking like you speak, the way you speak Tamil, that becomes mimicry. It’s like I’m [*nān*] making fun of you. That is not the way.

The contrast encapsulated by these two pronouns was also temporal. R described an earlier period—the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—when music directors never asked a singer to change her basic “tone,” in contrast to the present, in which young music directors routinely ask singers to change their tone if it isn’t to their liking:



FIGURE 10. Music director K. V. Mahadevan, actress J. Jayalalitha, and actor M. G. Ramachandran preparing to record Jayalalitha singing her own song for the movie *Adimai penn* (1969). Photo from the collection of S. V. Jayababu.

- R. Now in this period there are music directors who want a tone change. “Change your voice,” they say [voice-*ai māṭṭun̄ko*]. Some gents sing in all different ways.
- AW. But *you* wouldn’t—
- R. No, no, it’s not like that. If they tell me to sing like that I’ll [*nān*] also do it. In these times, if they say to sing changing one’s voice, one may sing like that. But, our own [voice] needs to be there, no? [*namma sontam irukkaṇum illeyā?*] Now, what is my face like? If I [*nān*] put a mask on this face, that is like changing one’s voice to sing.

While “mimicry” here is associated with acting and low-class variety entertainment, “singing” is associated with respect, value, and the maintenance of self-integrity. By the 1960s, this distinction was solidly bolstered by a division of labor between female playback singers who did not act and actresses who did not sing. While comedy or “character” actresses did sing their own songs, the heroine-actresses (and the hero-actors) did not. We can get a sense of how solid this division was from the stir created when Jayalalitha, then a budding heroine-actress playing opposite MGR in many films, sang her own songs in the film *Adimai Penn* (1969) (see fig. 10). Although it caused a sensation at the time—reviewers crowed, “The dancing peacock is singing!” and “Just like Bhanumati and Rajakumari [singing actresses of the 1940s and 1950s] she too can act and sing in her own voice!”—it did not become a pattern. In a magazine interview that year, Jayalalitha described

her mother's ambition to make her a dancing star in films, in contrast to her own longing to show the world that she had "sankīta nānam" (sangita gnanam: music knowledge): "While I was lip-syncing and acting in films, a desire bubbled up in my mind/heart/insides [uḷlam]. Will the chance to sing in my own voice not come? My uḷlam would long for it. But this was only a dream. Gradually I lost hope that I would sing in my own voice in films. . . . But the desire remained. At home, to cure my desire I would sing aloud and get satisfaction in my uḷlam. During movie shootings, in break times, while sitting by myself I would hum a song" (*Bommaī* 1968a).

Between the lines of this recollection, we can hear the poignant story of an actress trying to gain prestige by tapping into the status conferred by "singing in one's own voice." Anchoring her onscreen image to her own voice, for a heroine-actress, could help to make her work into more than just acting, especially if her songs were good "melody" songs that showed her sangita gnanam, her proper training in music. But for female singers, the divide between singing and acting could not be breached.

During our interview, M continued to describe her skill in singing for so many different characters. "Yes," she said, "I can do a Brahmin voice, a folk voice, whatever voice. But from the first word they still know it's me." This notion of voice recognizability, despite what might transpire on the screen or in the plot of the film, was crucial to how singers of her generation conceptualized their work and their relationship with listeners. For them, hierarchies of prestige were embedded in the idea of a constant, unchanging voice that would always be recognized even when it was associated with different characters onscreen: the very opposite of "mimicry" or "putting on a mask."

Though phrased as a simple technical or mechanical phenomenon, voice recognizability also entails what has been theorized in political theory and anthropology as recognition: a form of subjectification in which the subject's status and privileges depend on consistently inhabiting a category and way of being recognizable to hegemonic power structures (Povinelli 2002). What, we might ask, is so threatening about not being recognized? For playback singers, it is the threat of losing star status, of losing their extrafilmic identity. For female playback singers, not being recognized also involves the more specific threat of losing one's status as "respectable," since respectability depends on being able to maintain a persona independent of the onscreen characters for whom one sings. Although the ideal of voice recognizability that emerged in the 1950s has been linked specifically to the strategically achieved vocal monopoly of Lata Mangeshkar in the Bombay film industry (Majumdar 2001), the broader reason for the emergence of this ideal lies in the negotiation of acceptable public female performance. In effect, voice recognizability allowed a playback singer's voice to bypass the film, even as her voice was carried by it, constituting one of the conditions under which playback singing could become an acceptable profession for women.

BODILY STILLNESS

Having others instantly recognize your voice is related to the notion of never forgetting who you are in the course of performance. As my interview with M went on, her visitor continued talking about performing as a dancer. "When I am portraying a character, I forget that I am myself. I have to forget." This provoked an immediate response from M. "You need to do justice to the character, but you must not forget who you are," she said, and then repeated several times, "You know who you are."

Female playback singers of this generation, as M's remarks make clear, did not hold with the idea of "losing oneself" in expressive performance. The danger in this would be a body that performed out of control. Rather, female playback singers cultivated the ability to separate their voices from their bodies. M talked about how, in order to sing playback, one had to learn to "give expression just in the voice, not in the face." The idea was to channel all of one's expressive power into one's voice, leaving the face and body to remain still and expressionless. M demonstrated this by singing for me in an astounding range of voices, from little boy to young woman to old lady, while keeping her face expressionless, her body perfectly still, her arms unmoving on the sides of her chair. As she explained it, this ability to perform "just with the voice" was essential to being a good playback singer; moving one's body might interfere with the music ("How could I sing if I was really laughing or really crying?") and would, in any case, be "a waste" since no one is supposed to see the singer.

The ability to dissociate one's voice from one's body was essential to the live performances of female playback singers of this generation. They were known for standing absolutely still while singing, whether in the studio or during stage performances. An acquaintance of Janaki's, for instance, remarked with wonder and admiration that "you could be standing right next to her and not know that she is the one singing." A woman standing immobile before the microphone, eyes fixed on the music stand or her book of lyrics, using one hand to keep the end of her sari carefully draped over her right shoulder: this is the iconic image of the respectable female playback singer. It is a stance that explicitly distances the singer from the content of what she is singing. Any hand movements she might make are not related to the meaning or lyrics of the song but rather to conduct the orchestra behind her. In June of 2002, I attended a wedding at which P. Susheela had been booked to give a live concert of her famous film songs with a male cosinger and a backup orchestra. Throughout the performance, she stood close to her microphone, one hand at her ear and the other keeping the end of her silk sari carefully draped over her right shoulder.

Such practice confounds Western expectations of a "live" performance, in which sight and sound are expected to work in tandem as singers "give expression" to whatever they are singing. What, then, do audiences get from these performances? Why do they pay for expensive tickets to hear their favorite playback singers live?⁸

As an audience member put it to me, “We come because we want to see the source.” Importantly, this “source” denotes the singer-as-voice, as emitter of sound, not expresser of emotion—a presence that might, in fact, be compromised by too demonstrative a performance onstage. A performance full of movement and gesture could distract from the voice, as could talking to the audience, something that female singers of this generation avoided in their stage programs until they had reached old age. Playback singers of this generation exemplify what Neepa Majumdar has termed “aural stardom,” in which “the absence of glamour and the invisibility of playback singers can be regarded as defining features of their star personas. In the context of Indian cinema, aural stardom is constituted by voice recognizability, the circulation of extratextual knowledge about the singers, and the association of certain moral and emotional traits with their voices” (2001, 171).

The live appearances of playback singers constitute one of the primary sources for such extratextual knowledge. We might take Majumdar’s term *invisible* not in the literal sense but rather as meaning that the singers of this generation were not rendered visible in the same way as actresses were; they appeared, but only under cover of a stylized form of dress, the respectably draped silk sari. Aural stardom, then, paradoxically, relied on playback singers’ frequent appearances in which they were seen as decidedly unglamorous nonperformers.

Crucially, bodily stillness was not simply maintained; it was aestheticized, positively valued as a source of affective power. “She won’t move even an eighth of an inch,” the singer S. P. Balasubrahmanyam, who sang with Janaki throughout the 1970s and 1980s, told me. “But if you close your eyes, you will see someone dancing, crying, or laughing.” The affective power generated by these singers’ voices was predicated on their capacity to move others with their singing, seemingly without moving themselves—bodily or emotionally. The bodily stillness of the singer and the closed eyes of the listener constitute practices of acousmatization, techniques that effect a separation of hearing from seeing, voice from body, so that the former can be heard as transcendent (Kane 2014, 101). Acousmatic listening does not always require the source to be invisible but sometimes may, in fact, require its visibility: “the visual presence of the source and the palpability of the auditory effect operate in tandem, but across a gulf not bridged by any mechanical cause . . . [producing] the simultaneous co-presence of spectacle and sound, both in absolute correspondence, but seemingly without worldly connection” (Kane 2014, 142).

REPLICABILITY AND MONOPOLY

Equally as important as strategies undertaken by the singers themselves was the way they were presented to the public in extrafilmic contexts. Notably, both Sush-eela and Janaki were regularly referred to in the press as “duplicate Lata,” emphasizing their likeness to Lata Mangeshkar, who had achieved a near monopoly on female voices in the Bombay film industry by the early 1950s. The phrase seemed to refer not only to the sound of Susheela’s and Janaki’s voices but perhaps even

more so to the type of figure they were: sari-clad, respectable women not to be confused with the actresses who appeared onscreen. Implying the desirability of duplicating Lata, the phrase also points to one of the main gendered values that underlay playback singing in this period: the idea that there was a single female voice that could represent all female characters, and all that was needed was to sufficiently reproduce it.

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s, Susheela's voice, said to be as "sweet" as *tēn* (honey) or *amutam* (nectar), with its high pitch and open timbre, was the voice for almost every "good" woman in Tamil cinema. The term *kuralini-mai* (voice sweetness) was used repeatedly in descriptions of her voice during this time. The term referred not only to a particular vocal timbre but to its unwavering constancy across different characters, taken as a sign of the singer's modesty, her refusal to act or disguise her voice in any way. As a poem written about Susheela by Tamil writer and FM radio personality Yazh Sudhakar put it:

*T. M. S. mātiri nakṣattiraṅkaḷ ērpa
kural mārrī pātateriyāta kuyil!
ellōrukkum orē kural tān!
ānālum, ātātu acaiyātu ninru pāṭiyapaṭi
Paṭmini pāṭuvatu pōlavum
Savitri pāṭuvatu pōlavum*

She is a sparrow who does not know how to change her voice for different stars like T. M. Soundararajan does; for all it is the same voice only! Even so, without dancing or moving as she stands and sings, it is as if Padmini is singing, as if Savitri is singing . . . [names of actresses].

This quote, like the phrase "duplicate Latas," encapsulates several of the most important aspects of playback singing as a cultural phenomenon and, in particular, what it meant to be a respectable female playback singer in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. The implication is that while male actors/characters were individuated by different voices, actresses stood in for a general type who could always be given the same unvarying voice. The comparison of Susheela to a bird suggests an absence of intentionality, the "naturalness" and innocence of a voice that "does not know how to change," paired with a body that does not perform, echoing earlier discourse about female classical singers (Weidman 2006, 121). The different standards of authenticity applied to male and female singers are apparent here as well. As we saw in chapter 2, T. M. Soundararajan, who sang numerous duets with Susheela, was well known for his ability to "become the hero" by changing his voice, depending on whether he sang for Sivaji Ganesan or M. G. Ramachandran. Susheela was praised for exactly the opposite: an apparently effortless constancy both in voice and bodily comportment.

The idealized and unwavering consistency of female playback voices was structurally supported by practices within the industry that promoted the monopolization of available singing roles by a handful of singers. While a variety

of men and women were employed as playback singers in the 1950s, by the mid-1960s this variability had given way to the domination of T. M. Soundararajan for male roles and P. Susheela for female roles.⁹ The resulting ubiquity of a very few particular playback voices was enabled by these choices and practices, but my point is that it was not a mere outcome of them. Rather, the ubiquity of these voices, which lent them an almost divine inevitability, was elaborated and aestheticized as an ideal in itself. While the domination of TMS over male singing roles was tied to the consolidation of male star power as an element of Dravidian politics in the 1960s, Susheela's, and later Janaki's, monopoly over female roles was based on the idealization of the unchanging female voice and its replicability. It became customary to note the tens of thousands of songs these singers had sung over the course of decades-long careers; whether the numbers are accurate or not, they point to an ideal that the same voice *would* be used for so many characters across so many films across so many decades. For female singers, this ideal was closely linked with the expectation that their voices would remain consistent over time, despite age or changing life circumstance.

MANAGING PUBLICITY

Susheela, Janaki, and others of their generation grew up hearing the film songs of Lata Mangeshkar on Radio Ceylon in the early 1950s on a film-based radio program called *Binaca Geet Mala*. With its emphasis on listener participation, *Binaca Geet Mala*, and Radio Ceylon more generally, "provided film stars, directors, music directors, and playback singers with the opportunity to listen, speak to, and imagine an audience" (Punathambekar 2010, 192; Alonso n.d.). Their own voices, and those of numerous other South Indian playback singers, would later be broadcast over the Tamil commercial service of Radio Ceylon, which was established in the late 1950s. The Tamil service, under the leadership of a set of dynamic and creative announcers, provided an astounding range of programming based on film songs throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, attracting a large and devoted audience from all over South India. Sri Lankan Tamil radio announcers such as S. P. Mayilvahanam, K. S. Raja, and later B. H. Abdul Hameed developed a way of speaking with a distinctive cadence that imprinted itself on listeners' memories.

Along with this distinctive sound was an enthusiasm for Tamil film songs and a general irreverence toward the rigid opposition between categories of "high" and "low" culture that defined All India Radio's programming strategies (Alonso n.d.).¹⁰ Several different programs introduced the singers, music directors, and lyricists to audiences, providing details about them and their lives while playing their songs. One program would select a particular singer and focus on his or her songs, allowing listeners to hear the voice in different contexts. When playback singers came to Sri Lanka for light music performances, Radio Ceylon would take

the opportunity to interview them and broadcast it as a special program. Details about singers' lives would be announced as news.¹¹

Radio Ceylon emphasized listener participation, and this became a key way that film songs, and the voices of playback singers, generated affective and emotional responses. The announcers became beloved personalities whose own thoughts about film songs were featured in the programming. Many programs were designed to be sensitive to the different kinds of people listening, whether farmers or housewives, choosing songs that pertained to their concerns. In these ways, Radio Ceylon was a key mediator of relations between stars and fans (Punathambekar 2010, 189; Alonso n.d.). It excited listeners' imaginations. It was a form of publicity that rendered playback singers' voices mobile, enabling them to be associated with different stories and with the emotional lives of listeners and announcers.

Controlling the associations with their voices and the affective response they generated became a prime concern for female singers of Susheela's and Janaki's generation. As their voices gained mobility in the 1960s through films and the circulation of recordings, opportunities for playback singers to present themselves offscreen, outside the context of films, also increased. Singers began making live stage appearances in the mid-1960s. Throughout this period, film magazines, which published interviews, photographs, stories of life in the studios, and readers' letters, were another medium for presenting playback singers to the public to interact with fans. These became a crucial means of managing the expanded publicity produced by radio and stage appearances by offering a behind-the-scenes or offstage glimpse of the singer as a regular person.

Biographical articles on Susheela and Janaki from the late 1960s uniformly remarked on their modesty [*aṭakkam*: literally, containment] and their *kuralinimai*, as though these two things necessarily went together and were equal elements of being a playback singer. Speaking at an award function for Susheela in 1968, Lata Mangeshkar said, "When I first met Susheela she wasn't so famous. But, seeing her modesty, her demeanor while speaking to me, and her *kuralinimai*, I knew that she would soon be a famous singer" (*Bomma* 1970a, 43).

Part of the emphasis on modesty entailed inserting the singer into a world of domesticity and kin relations. Articles on Susheela and Janaki took care to mention that each was married, placing their professional success side by side with their role as good and submissive wives. Toward the end of a two-page feature on Susheela, the writer stated, "Susheela is a married woman. Together with her husband, she has spoken about and trained in music. He's a doctor. Whatever he says—sometimes she says 'ok' and sometimes she says nothing—bowing to her guru she will not speak back" (*Bomma* 1966, 34). After remarking on Janaki's fame throughout Tamil Nadu and her ability to sing in eight languages, a feature on the singer ended with the detail that "Janaki is married and is living at Mambalam [a Chennai neighborhood], and in her remaining time she goes to sing playback. She is the very mirror opposite of arrogance, always giving the impression of

amicableness and modesty [*samukamākavum aṭakkamākavum kātci tarukīrār*]” (*Bomma* 1967b).

These bits of extratextual knowledge about the domestic lives of female playback singers were central to the kind of affect generated by their voices, which were often described through the desexualizing idiom of kinship as having a “sisterly” or “motherly” quality. Consider this letter written about Janaki from a female fan in 1967:

Janaki’s voice has captured me. . . . I first swooned over her honey voice in the Tamil song “*Siṅkaravēlanē Tēva*.” When my swoon-praise reached her in the form of a letter, she immediately wrote me an answer, which was unforgettable. The reason was this: the letter I got from her was dated Sept. 6, 1962—my wedding day! Now every year when celebrating my wedding day I think of Janaki! “Dear sister”—when she begins the letter like that, my heart fills with happiness. . . . The reason: my three siblings are brothers. I would always long for a sister. . . . She writes to me about herself and her family and always enquires about mine. “Is Valarmati well? Is she doing lots of mischief?” When she writes this, asking affectionately about my children, the quality of motherliness inherent in womanhood [*peṇmaikkē uriya tāymaip panpu*] shines through. . . . Besides Janaki’s outside-world accomplishments, her character [*kuṇam*] of being devoted to her family is what has really attracted me (*Bomma* 1967a).

While these representations worked to anchor the sound of playback voices in licit domestic images and contexts, the singers themselves also employed certain discursive strategies to contain the meaning and associations of their voices as they traveled through the media of film and radio, exciting listeners’ emotions. “Your kuralinimai invites me into a world of imagination [*kaṛpanai*],” wrote a male fan to Janaki in 1980. “Since *Anakkili*, your voice is heard in film after film, like sugar poured on honey. It makes me very happy. I feel as if I am hearing my own voice.” Following this was his list of nine questions for Janaki, and her answers, most of which were short. One question, however, provoked a lengthy reply: “When you are singing, like TMS do you adjust your voice lower or higher for different actresses?”

Dear Brother, Vanakkam. I am happy to see your letter. God has given me one gift [*pracātam*]: this voice. I always sing in the same voice. My voice is suitable for various actresses and characters. Only in some songs when the music director has told me specifically, I have sung as an old woman or a young child. . . . Whatever kind of expression the song requires, I will sing that way. I’ve sung all different kinds of songs found in a movie—love duets, happy time songs, sad time songs, or praying to God. But when the song is being recorded, shooting for several different movies is going on. So I never know who will act for my songs. Sometimes they select an actress, and later it will change. I don’t like to lie to rasikars by saying that I sing “suitably to the artist.” And another thing—you’ve heard my songs on radio, right? When the song is coming through my “voice” [*vāyc*], do you hear Janaki’s voice [*Janakiyin kural*] or do you think of the actress who acted in the role? If the song is good and sweet, rasikars like you will say, the singer’s voice [*pāṭakaran kural*]. Are you too thinking that way? (*Bomma* 1980, 9–10).

Janaki's switch here to the English word *voice* (vāyc) is telling; it describes the sound of the voice in that liminal moment when it has been relayed through radio but not yet properly identified with the singer. Whereas *kural* connotes a known, familiar, identifiable voice, *vāyc* suggests an unanchored mobility that no respectable singer would want to prolong.

But anchoring the sound of a voice to one's own person was also fraught with danger. Though they valued voice recognizability, singers like Susheela and Janaki made every effort to separate the sound of their voices from their bodies in performance, as we saw earlier, and they did so through discursive means, as well. In an interview with TMS and Susheela from 1970 (*Bomma* 1970b), Susheela repeatedly redirected TMS's questions away from the slightest suggestion that listeners would identify the onscreen character or action with Susheela herself, even if they recognized that it was her voice:

TMS. We've sung duets in so many films. When I see those films, those song scenes, your form [*uruvam*] appears before me. Have I appeared to you like that too?

SUSHEELA. When I see a film, the places that are lacking in the songs stand out to me. I think of how I could have sung them better, and sometimes the thought [*eṇṇam*] of you comes to me.

Not only should Susheela's songs not evoke her own *uruvam* (physical form), but it was essential that when she listened to the songs, only *eṇṇams* (thoughts) about the technicalities of the music and not *uruvams* of actors or other singers occur to her. The only time Susheela lost sight of this was when she sang devotional music.

TMS. Is there any song that while singing it you forget yourself, or become overcome with emotion?

SUSHEELA. I am overcome with emotion when singing bhakti songs.

As is clear from these excerpts, the point of the interview was not simply to listen in on a conversation between TMS and Susheela but to play up the contrast between them. TMS's swagger provided a meaningful contrast to Susheela's modesty. Each time TMS attempted to get Susheela to name a favorite kind of song or an actress to whom her voice was particularly suited, her reply was noncommittal: "I like to sing all kinds of songs," or "I try to sing suitably to all actresses." As befits a proper conduit, all—but, importantly, none in particular. Susheela's discursive strategy was mirrored in her sartorial code:

TMS. I have been working with you for fifteen years. You are always wearing the same kind of white sari with a red border. What's the secret of this?

SUSHEELA. There's no secret. I like all colors. Isn't white the symbol [*cinnam*: sign, marker, badge] of purity? I especially like white.

The white sari, the outfit favored by Lata Mangeshkar, as well, operated as a sign of purity, not in the Western sense of virginity but in the Hindu sense of the ascetic, widow-like denial of sexuality altogether.¹² And it did so not only in the retrospective sense of a badge showing the kind of person its wearer was but also in the performative, entailing sense, like a “trademark,” as a later article about Sush-eela put it (*Bomma* 1982), guaranteeing the purity of whatever might come out of her mouth.¹³

SOUNDING SWEET

The female playback voice cultivated by Susheela, Janaki, and their contemporaries differed unmistakably from earlier kinds of female singing voices. Its high pitch and thin, childlike timbre distinguished it from classical, folk, and theatrical vocal styles. The timbre of this new female playback voice was notably smooth and highly regular. As Sanjay Srivastava has noted in the Bombay context, Lata Mangeshkar’s voice was characterized by a “stylistic homogeneity” that eliminated the nasality and “heaviness” associated with the voices of Muslim courtesans. In South India, the lower-pitched, throatier chest voice was associated with devadasi singing actresses who dominated Tamil films throughout the 1940s, before playback singing was fully institutionalized. The new playback voices also excluded any hints of the “folk” or “ethnic,” whether in pronunciation of words or in vocal timbre. From the 1950s on, songs that needed to evoke folk characters or village scenes were sung with these same female playback voices, using folk instruments, clapping, folklike vocables, and a particular kind of lilt at the end of phrases but never compromising the timbral purity of the voice.¹⁴

Apart from pitch and timbre, a quality of mobility and quickness distinguished playback voices from those heard on the classical or drama stage, which were too weighted down by tradition or the needs of projecting to the audience to be agile. The singer Vani Jairam, a slightly younger contemporary of Susheela and Janaki, described this to me in an interview as “throw,” a term I had heard several singers use:

VJ. Playback singing has to be sharp, that particular throw should be there. . . . Lyrical clarity is very important. . . . It’s the raga exposition [that’s important] in classical music, but film music has to have that particular throw. It has to be sharp, a playback singer has to maintain that.

AW. Can you explain what “throw” means?

VJ. If you listen to current songs, you will hear a variety of voice qualities. But back then—I’m talking about the 50s, 60s, 70s—the voices were very sweet and high pitched, and we all followed that. C-sharp had become the standard pitch [for us]. Throw

means musically articulating the words to bring out their meaning in the given context along with hitting the right musical note and pitch.

VJ'S HUSBAND. Like bhāvam?

VJ. No, no. This is for any number. You can't sing [demonstrates by singing a line of a song without throw] with such a dull [style]. You have to have that energy level . . . and you have to enjoy it. That's what I mean.

“Throw” is a quality unlike the gamaka-laden gravitas or bhāvam (devotional sentiment) associated with classical singing, as Vani's response to her husband's suggestion indicates. Cultivating “sharpness” rather than fullness or volume entails a timbral reduction of the voice that places it in a particular part of the frequency spectrum such that it can cut through the mix.

In Vani Jairam's explanation, *throw* also connotes a capacity to emphasize and give energy to particular words. Precisely because playback singers did not have to be concerned with the technicalities of raga exposition or devote energy to projecting their voices, they could achieve this distinctive dynamism.¹⁵ “Throw” is related to *lightness*, a term often used to distinguish film singing from the “heaviness” or “ganam” of classical singing. The “lightness” of “light music,” as film and other nonclassical and nontraditional music came to be called starting in the 1950s, not only described its nonseriousness in comparison to classical music but was also grounded in a proprioceptive sense of being weightless and mobile.

Crucially, this dynamism, this lightness, this “throw,” did not involve projection. The projected voice of a female singing actress like K. B. Sunderambal, with its loud, declamatory, theatrical style, suggested the presence of the singer's body in a public space and was always associated with older authoritative female characters of historical or mythological significance. The high-pitched, girlish voice that playback singers produced with the closely held microphone, by contrast, did not take up much “vocalic space”; it was suitable for female characters who moved through but did not command authority in the public sphere.¹⁶ This microphone voice, freed from the association with bodily presence, was thus freed also from associations with both womanly sexuality and womanly authority.¹⁷

While we generally think of projection as the capacity of a voice to project outward from the singer's body, to fill a room or reach the ears of a crowd, the capacity to project also depends on the singer's allowing the sound to resonate in certain ways and places *within* her own body. It involves cultivating certain proprioceptive normativities (Harkness 2014, 39)—that is, learning to “feel” the sound in different parts of the body such as the belly and, in the case of operatically trained singers, shaping the cavities of one's mouth and throat into a cathedral-like space. By contrast, the “sharpness” invoked by Vani Jairam describes a proprioceptive sense of the tone being focused in the face. As I learned later when trying to reproduce

this sound with a Western classical voice teacher, the sound that these playback singers produced came not from using the cavities of the mouth and throat as resonators, as operatically trained singers are taught to do to produce a “round” or “open” sound, but rather by closing those spaces off and directing the sound as much as possible to the front of the mouth and nose. The voice that resulted seemed to involve a minimum of bodily involvement. It did not involve reshaping the oral cavity in any visible way (as is often the case with singers producing an operatic sound). And while much training and practice within Western classical and operatic singing focuses on artfully “blending” the head and chest voices, this is not part of the playback aesthetic. Being “just the voice” was thus not only about performing a specific and circumscribed role; it was achieved through phonic habituation, conditioning one’s body such that one could be “just the head voice.”¹⁸

PUBLIC FEMININITY AND THE TECHNOLOGICALLY MEDIATED VOICE

In addition to these elements of voice quality and performance style, an important aspect of the newness and modernity of the female playback voice was its perceived standardization and imagined durability. Just as consistency of timbre across characters and across singers was valued, so was consistency over time: the ideal of a voice that never changed, even as the singers aged. While notions of female physical beauty and actresses’ appearances certainly changed between the early 1950s and the late 1980s, what was valued in terms of the female voice stayed much more stable during this period. The idea of a singer’s voice maturing and developing was absent; female playback singers continued to voice the characters of sixteen-year-old girls even in their fifties. The cultivated and idealized eternal youth of their voices—often hailed as “timeless”—protected them (and their careers) from the ravages of time and change.¹⁹ While the female body on the screen might be consumed by fashion, sexuality, and the West, the female voice retained its purity, moving through different scenes, characters, and even decades, always sounding the same.

Far from interfering with that purity, recording and sound amplification technologies were seen as enabling and enhancing it. In fact, just as playback singing was inseparable from these technologies, so were the singers themselves intimate with the risks they posed and the affordances they offered. A contemporary of Janaki’s described learning how to sing into the microphone so as to avoid unwanted noise, making sure the microphone picked up a smooth, consistent voice: “Janaki taught me. You can’t sing facing the music director. You have to stand like this [demonstrates, with mic at an angle to her face]. That blow sound mustn’t come. Or that pop that comes if you sing straight. So, stand like this [at an angle], hold the lyrics in your hand, and sing. If you don’t, that blow will come, that spit sound will come. And gasping will come. Some people do this [demonstrates gasping inhalation] a

lot.” The goal was to produce a “continuous” voice without the sounds of spit and breath that might imply a physical body behind the microphone.

Not only these singers’ vocal sound but also their performing personae were products of the microphone, without which they would not have been audible beyond a close range. Onstage, the microphone enabled them to sing without projecting—that is, seemingly without putting their bodies into the performance. It enabled the association of a certain kind of voice with a supposed absence of bodily performance, an association that, as I suggested in chapter 1, was worked out onscreen in the decade before playback singing. It presented the possibility—essential to the phenomenon of aural stardom—of inhabiting the stage, and by extension the public sphere, as a respectable woman. In an even more directly physical way, the microphone became part of the singer’s enactment of codes of respectability. Holding the microphone close to her face with her right hand necessitated keeping her right arm close to her body, and could provide a convenient way for a singer to hold the end of her sari, pulled over her right shoulder, firmly in place.

While in American contexts of radio and stage performance, microphone voices were often perceived as more sincere, direct, or spontaneous than voices produced without a microphone (McCracken 2015; Frith 1996; Smith 2008), in this context, microphonic performance was not read as more direct or sincere. There was no suspension of disbelief, no illusion that these effects lent a greater “reality” to the performance or that they allowed listeners a more intimate access to the singer’s “self.” Properly used, the microphone was a tool of licit femininity, enabling female singers to keep their acting “all in the throat,” preserving the purity attributed to their voices precisely by reminding audiences that the singers they heard were *not* really physically involved, not really overcome with the emotions they were performing.

Just as these singers were intimate with microphones, so, too, were they intimate with sound recording technology. Recordings, of course, preceded live performance for these singers, both in their everyday work and in the trajectory of their careers; listening to sound recordings (played on the radio) was how they learned their craft rather than through direct pedagogy. But in an even more specific way, sound recording provided a model for a new kind of musician and performer: a model that stressed consistency, massive output, and the capacity for accurate reproduction over qualities of originality, creativity, or spontaneity. Rather than mastery of a single style, it was the singer’s ability and willingness to sing in different styles, accurately reproducing them without “mixing them up,” that was important. As one singer put it to me, “a playback singer is one who is expected to deliver any kind of music that is demanded. You can’t say, ‘I can’t sing that particular [type of song].’ You have come to the market; you have to be ready.” As a kind of sound reproduction technology themselves, playback singers existed on the unpredictable “open edge” of mass publicity (Mazzarella 2013).

Setting limits on their role afforded female playback singers the opportunity to carve out a space for themselves as professionals within the technological-modern imaginary of India's post-independence decades. A seemingly paradoxical combination of attributes allowed for these singers' tremendous vocal presence in the public sphere. Aural stardom and voice recognizability enabled a certain kind of female public celebrity who would hold sway from the 1950s until the early 1990s: one who could appear in public without being conventionally attractive, one who could command tremendous affect while maintaining perfect poker-faced poise. The respectable distance and detachment that these singers maintained in performance allowed for the indeterminacy of their relationship to the songs they performed by leaving ambiguous authorship and agency, intentionality and interiority. The notion of "singing in one's own voice" that these singers espoused did not carry the same connotations of intentional, authorly performance that Western readers generally associate with the term *voice*. While not changing one's voice, in this case, was equated with an *absence* of the kind of mannered performance required for "mimicry," it was not necessarily thus associated with expression, selfhood, or artistic agency. It was a concept of "voice" and "voice recognizability" defined with reference to technological dependability and fidelity rather than expressive subjectivity.

ON BEING AND NOT BEING "JUST THE VOICE"

Being "just the voice" was a complex act. As I have suggested, representing one's voice as nonbodily, nonagentive, and nonauthorial was an achievement attained through various labors of physical and emotional discipline: versatility without promiscuity; "doing justice" to the character without doing "mimicry"; staying true to one's "god-given voice" and in control of one's own body and emotions without getting "lost" in the character. These describe not only disciplines undertaken to conform to conventions of gendered modesty and respectability but a kind of ethical practice, an almost ascetic cultivation of the self. This limiting, this ascetic discipline, was also a sacralizing project. Indeed, as Emile Durkheim famously noted, surrounding an object, person, or activity with prohibitions and taboos is how sacralization works; the setting apart of an object or the restriction of a person's role through limits and prohibitions amplifies its power (Durkheim [1912] 1995, 36–38, 303–21). The restriction of the playback singer's role to being "just the voice," a nonauthorial, nonemotive agent whose labor was conceived of as confined to her voice, had the effect of endowing her voice with distinct affective power. It was precisely because she remained unmoved herself—bodily and emotionally—that she had the capacity to move others by her singing. Being "just the voice" was not simply a restriction of the singer's role or agency but a sacralized status to be attained.

Although playback singers were cast in a strictly reproductive role, as vocalizers of what others had composed, in reality their relationship to the songs was more complex. Playback singers played an essential role in the shaping and realization of songs that were often conceived with them in mind and given to them in only skeletal form during rehearsal and recording sessions. A music director who had worked with Susheela in the 1960s and 1970s recalled to me Susheela's ability to change the feel and meaning of a song by altering her melodic phrasing or treatment of certain words. Moreover, since the songs were recorded first and then "picturized," what the singer did with her voice inevitably would have influenced how the actress moved and emoted onscreen. Though for female singers of this period artistic and authorial intentions were not stressed, they were not simply puppets controlled by music directors. In fact, the singer's position "behind the screen" rendered her in some ways akin to a puppeteer who controls the movements of puppets while herself remaining hidden.

There was thus a gap between playback's ideology, its framing of female singers as "just the voice," and its pragmatics. But my point is not just that actual practice was more complex than the way it was discursively framed. Being "just the voice" was an aspirational ideal but an impossible one to realize. It was precisely *because* a singer could never truly be "just the voice" that the ideology was emphasized and discursively elaborated. Frames simultaneously generate and hold back performative effects. The frame produced both the potential stigma that would result if it were broken or exceeded and the reason for venerating—indeed, sacralizing—the singers who appeared to stay within it and thus control the stigma. Pragmatics and ideology existed within a complex semiotic economy in which the ideology of being "just the voice" both enabled and served to frame as licit and respectable a set of activities that—as we will see in chapter 4—had the potential to be just the opposite.