

OUR LAND OF HYPOCRISY

SUNIL PERERA ON POLITICS, MIDGETS AND BATHROOM BRAWLS

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Timothy and I met Sunil at the Torana recording studio in Nugegoda.

While waiting for him to arrive, we considered the merits of taking photographs of a serious, almost regal-looking Sunil in keeping with his new socio-political subject matter.

This plan was short-lived, because Sunil turned up in a pair of shorts and a t-shirt that read 'Trainee Gynaecologist'.

Before the interview, Timothy and I shared cigarettes and a bottle of ginger beer. I looked for a place to stub my cigarette out and spotted an incense stick holder below

a mural of Saraswati - the Hindu Goddess of Music. I dismissed the thought of ashing in it as mildly sacrilegious, and went in to the next room to find a dustbin. When I came back, Sunil was casually ashing in the incense stick holder. That was the first of many times during the afternoon with Sunil Perera that

I thought to myself, "I am not in control of this situation".

Jehan Mendis: Your early music has very basic subject matter. Tell us about that

Sunil Perera: Our forte was humour, because to tell you frankly: love songs also I tried, but the thing is - look at me

- frankly, I don't have a good voice. I don't have good looks. I don't have enough height -if you ask me "What would you like to change about yourself?" I'd say "God should have given me at least bloody two inches more than this".

"WHAT WE DO, WE DO IT FOR THE CAUSE OF ENTERTAINMENT...NOT TO SLING MUD AT ANYBODY."



Sunil Perera is the leader of the Gypsies. For the past three decades, the country has sung Gypsies songs on trips, danced to them at parties and watched their music videos on television. Regular foreign tours, several hit albums and sell-out concerts have made the Gypsies Sri Lanka's biggest musical franchise.



"...THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN SRI LANKA IS LIKE A TOILET. I DON'T LIKE TO LIVE IN THERE. GET YOUR JOB DONE; GET OUT..."

Sunil wears a hat in most publicity photographs he's in, so I had the impression he was much taller. Still, I thought he was being far too hard on himself. Maybe I should have said something reassuring.

JM: You are talking specifically about your height?

SP: [Sunil laughs his deep booming barrel-drum laugh] I wish I was at least two inches taller than this. Then at least I would have been more presentable. A woman looking at me would be impressed ... but still, I managed to get my message

across because I had a lot of humour in the songs, not because people like me for my looks, or my voice ... but I still have some material which is very very catchy, which is very very humorous, and also [people] think that it is part of their life as well.

When you write something about your life, that relates to a lot of people. And that is one of the reasons that, I guess, people took a liking to the

material that we wrote. People like humour. People are fed up with all this serious stuff.

The Gypsies' are holding a series of concerts this year promoting their new album Ai? I Don't Know Why. I had been informed that the concerts contain skits featuring several Sri Lankan political figures, George Bush, Tony Blair, Prince Charles, Camilla Parker-Bowles and Michael Jackson. The highlight at a recent gig was a midget dressed in red referred to as 'Sahodara' (comrade), holds on to the end of the saree of the actor playing President Chandrika Kumaratunga and refuses to let go.

Sunil says that they write about social issues partly because the country is in decline and they are disgusted by the situation. "Totally pissed off", he says, "That is one of the reasons why we are compelled to write. Not that we think about writing seriously about any particular issue. Certain things just come out without your knowledge."

JM: So how did you come to write it?

SP: I was having a discussion with a friend. We were going on, and trying to argue. Some try to defend the system... When you're in a situation like that you get into... I like to... when I'm having a drink I always want to talk...

JM: Debate?

SP: [animatedly] Ah. Debate. I want to argue. All the time. And, what I hate most is when I'm in

a conversation with somebody - even at a party or something like that - somebody - here we're having a nice conversation - of course some may agree, some may not - but still, we're having a nice discussion, ah? Trying to, sort of, reason out why this is like this, why is it like this. From nowhere comes somebody and says "Why don't you sing a song?"

That kills it. That kills the whole scene. By the time I get back, the whole thing is dead. You can't start the whole conversation all over again. You can start it, but you can't get back to the point where you were.

Something that I really enjoy is having a drink and sometimes you get into tough situations also where you try to argue with people and you know they say "No - why do you say that?" and they don't want to discuss. This is why I say this country will never come right.

JM: Never come right?

SP: Never come right, because most leaders think of the vote in whatever they do - not about the country. In the back of their mind, they want only one thing ... If they are going to lose with regard to elections, even if it's a good move, they don't want to go for it.



JM: What is the biggest problem that this country faces?

SP: Law and order. Number one: law and order. We have all the laws, but they are not implemented because leaders themselves - when they are in a situation - they break the law.

So when the top people do that you can't expect the *podis* to follow [the laws].

JM: What do you think about the recent copyright enforcement that has taken place?

SP: That will never materialise here because before

introducing the copyright thing, the basic structure with regard to law and order should be done. That should be implemented. Otherwise it will not come right. How can you have law and order only in one particular area? No. The whole system is totally mismanaged and it is so dirty. *Eka vennyay na*. [It won't happen].

JM: Have you thought about going into politics yourself?

SP: No. To me, politics is like a toilet. Lets put it this way: when you want to answer the call of nature, you got to go to the toilet. You got to go. When you've got to go, you've got to go, but we don't like to live in there: the toilet. I might have to use the loo to do my job and get out, but you don't like the environment in there. To me, the political situation in Sri Lanka is like a toilet. I don't like to live in there. Get your job done; get out. Nobody likes to live in there. It's in such a pathetic situation.

While I was digesting this Timothy, unable to restrain himself in the face of Sunil's manic energy jumped in to ask if Sunil had ever been approached by political parties. Sunil said that they had,

"... I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WAS HAPPENING. I MEAN, YOU GOT TO SORT OF KNOW WHY YOU'RE BEING ASSAULTED, NO?"

but that they do not want to align themselves to any party.

SP: You've got to be independent. A lot of artists, singers, film actors - they have gone into politics. But eventually what happens is, you

lose a certain percentage by doing that ... If you are an artist, you should be catering to everybody. When you put your views across saying that this is the party who is right, there may be so many fans who support the other side also. So they may not like it.

Timothy Seneviratne: Have you had problems with regard to your songs or lyrics? Have there been any clashes?

SP: The only thing is songs have been banned by the state media. That is the only thing. That's okay. I mean, any party coming into power will do that ... What we do, we do it for the cause of entertainment. Nothing but entertainment. Not to sling mud at anybody ... Might get the wrong message to the top people. Last week there was an interview of mine. All of a sudden they... [makes slicing motion with his hand]

JM: They censored it?

SP: They censored it. I mean it was a very abrupt ending. Even I was wondering what the hell was wrong. It wasn't a live thing. It was a recorded thing. Then, I called the producer and asked, "What

happened? Why did they chop it abruptly like that?" He said that while the thing was on there was a call from one of the top fellows to stop them.

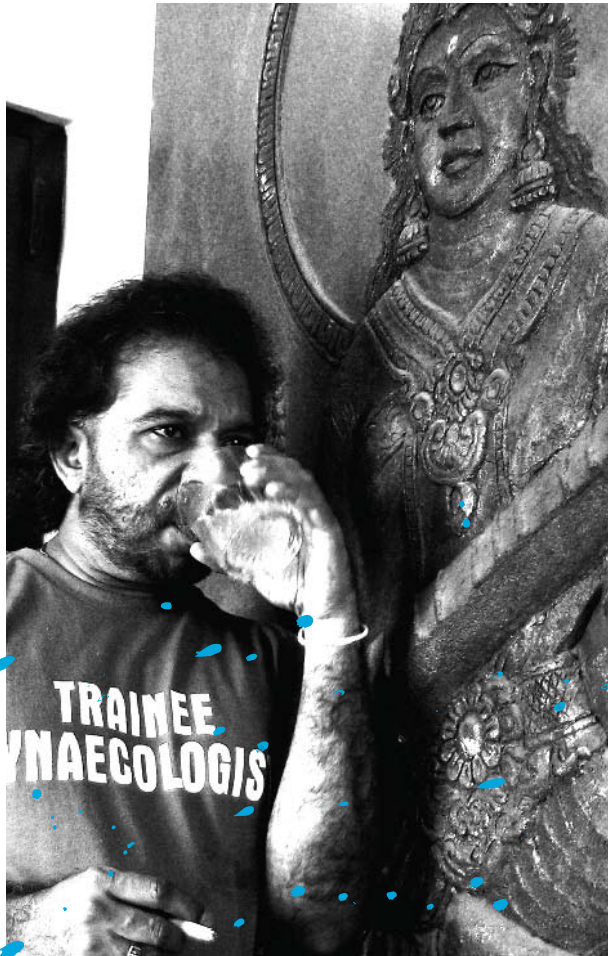
The *Sunday Observer* had reported recently that "the UNP had tried to use two of the latest songs of Sunil and the Gypsies with a sound-alike voice of Sunil and words to suit the UNP's propaganda". Sunil says that the words of the songs were changed to defame the president, and that he had no idea about this until a friend asked him about it.

SP: He thought it was me. So I had to tell the media [that I had nothing to do with it], because even the President might get the wrong impression. Today we are having a dinner with Mahinda Rajapakse - this evening - I'm going to tell him. I'm going to invite him for the show because he's also one of the characters that come in the show.

JM: How do you think he'll take it?

SP: The thing is some of these people they are very very open to a lot of these things, but all the *podis* - *oya innay gamay yakku* [these little village devils] - they give them the wrong messages ... and the sad situation is sometimes they tend to believe it.

I asked Sunil Perera about his much-publicised skirmish with Mahen Ratwatte, son of former Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte



"...HE TOOK ME TO THE TOILET AND ONE KANAY EKAK..."

at the Colombo Hilton. Sunil says that he had never met him before that night.

SP: I was getting some dinner when he grabbed my hand hard like this, and said, "I want to talk to you" ... he took me to the toilet and one *kanay ekak* [slap across the ear]. The second one, I didn't sit still because I knew he was out to hit me. And he

was going on ... "F***g LTTE bastard... blah blah". And I didn't know what was happening. I mean, you got to sort of know why you're being assaulted, no? I thought the music wasn't right or, but still, if the music wasn't right the organisers would have come and said, "I don't like the type of music that you play" or "The session wasn't right"

or something like that. But you won't hit, no? ... When I came out [of the toilet], I said "Rate-watte gahuwa. Mokada dannay na" [Ratewatte hit me, I don't know why].

It was later that Sunil says he realised that what would have probably upset Ratwatte was the line "helicopterayen usavi yang oi" ["let's go to court in a helicopter"] from the song *Ratay Minissu*.

SP: Then the UNP was in power. What the UNP did was - ara kenda kanda karanava vagay [like making a mountain out of a mole hill] - they blew it out of proportion. Why? Ratwatte was in the opposing party. The newspaper headlines said "Sunil Perera Brutally Assaulted". Brutally assaulted? He just gave me [a slap]. That was because the UNP was in power they carried the propaganda to put the Ratwattes down.

The May Day thing - the UNP altered the lyrics of the songs and slammed Madam... no permission, nothing. So when I told the media that I feel really bad about this, the government immediately gets the state media to communicate "SUNIL IS REALLY MAD WITH UNP".

[Sunil laughs]

You can't help that. Both parties they do that. Both parties have done it.

Sunil seems less upset at politicians throwing punches and misrepresenting him than at the rest of society.

SP: The country is screwed

up totally. You know in Sinhala films they won't let you ever hit a cop. Suppose you have story board where you have a cop taking a bribe? No way. They censor it. You can't show a cop taking bribe. In India you can do that. The buggers show them hitting the cops and putting the cops in the shed. In this country you can't do that. Why? Because we're hypocrites. Everyone knows that cops take bribes. So why can't you show it?

Sunil Perera is the face of the Gypsies. His personality has shaped both the band's music and their image. The subject matter of their songs can be as light as midgets from space (*Kuru Mitto*) and meeting a Veddah chief's hot daughter in the jungle (*Ojaye!*). So it is not surprising that Sunil Perera is not viewed as an agent of socio-political change. That is, until now.

We already knew the man was a great entertainer. After hearing what he has to say, you might even call him incendiary. Afterwards, we talked to Sunil about sex, religion and family. We hadn't heard the half of it yet...

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