

SLUMMING FOR SUCCESS

Even the Mangeshkar singers can't claim this achievement – an Oscar for playback singing. **SAM LAL** profiles one man who can: Sukhwinder Singh.

Even if it weren't for the fact that he's sitting at the top of the charts with the enigmatically titled "Dhan Ta Nan" from the forthcoming Vishal Bhardwaj movie, *Kaminey*, Sukhwinder Singh has ensured his immortality in Bollywood's annals for all time to come. He is, after all, the only playback singer in Hindi cinema's long history who has won an Oscar (for *Slumdog Millionaire's* ubiquitous anthem *Jai Ho*) and if that doesn't make him an outstanding talent, surely nothing else will. Typically, the man, while recognising the importance of an Oscar golden man in his kitty, chooses to be a little nonchalant and prefers to put the music ahead of the accomplishment. "I had no idea that it was to be featured in an international film," he says. "It really doesn't matter which medium we're singing for."

At the stature that he currently commands, Sukhwinder Singh can afford to downplay the extent of his various successes. He doesn't need to talk about them. All the charts, FM channels and music TV programming do that for him. Take a look at his hit parade – "Marjaani," "Haule Haule," "Dil Haara," "Dard-E-Disco," "Chak De India," "Fashion Ka Jalwa" – there are very few playback singers in the Hindi film industry who have displayed such consistency and who have scored massive hits with such a varied bag of songs. It is the variety that has become Sukhwinder's calling card and it is for that reason alone that one

of his personal favourites is "Fashion Ka Jalwa," a slick contemporary tune, very different from the rootsy, son-of-the-soil singing that has been his trademark till now. "I had never sung such a stylish song till 'Jalwa,'" remarks the singer. "Now, I begin my shows with 'Jalwa' and the mood for the rest of the show automatically sets in. It has instilled a flirtatious quality in me."

Born in Amritsar, Punjab, Sukhwinder Singh has been singing on stage since the age of seven but the phenomenal range

"'Jalwa'... has instilled a flirtatious quality in me."



and the instantly recognisable vocal texture didn't come till much later. Singh's career started, as indeed a lot of careers do, with a Punjabi pop album called *Munda Southhall Da*, after which he joined composers Laxmikant-Pyarelal's troupe and began to work as a music arranger. His first movie break came with a few vocal lines in Anil Kapoor's 1986 flick *Karma*, which were followed up by a proper song in Madhuri Dixit's drama *Khilaaf*.

This was also the point when Sukhwinder's voyage of artistic self-discovery began. Deeply dissatisfied with the way he sounded on record, the singer packed his bags and headed west to America and the UK to try and develop the nuances which would convert him from an adequate singer to an outstanding one. It worked because he was soon to make the transition from an also-ran into one of the bastions of Bollywood playback singing.

Sukhwinder Singh's soaring, heaven-bound vocals first broke upon India's musical consciousness when he sang for Mani Ratnam's 1998 movie *Dil Se*. The song was called "Chaiyya Chaiyya" and for more than a year it was tough to walk into any event that had music playing and not hear the track within three minutes of going in. The song fetched him a Best Male Playback win at the Filmfare awards and since then there really hasn't been any looking back for this extraordinarily talented voice.