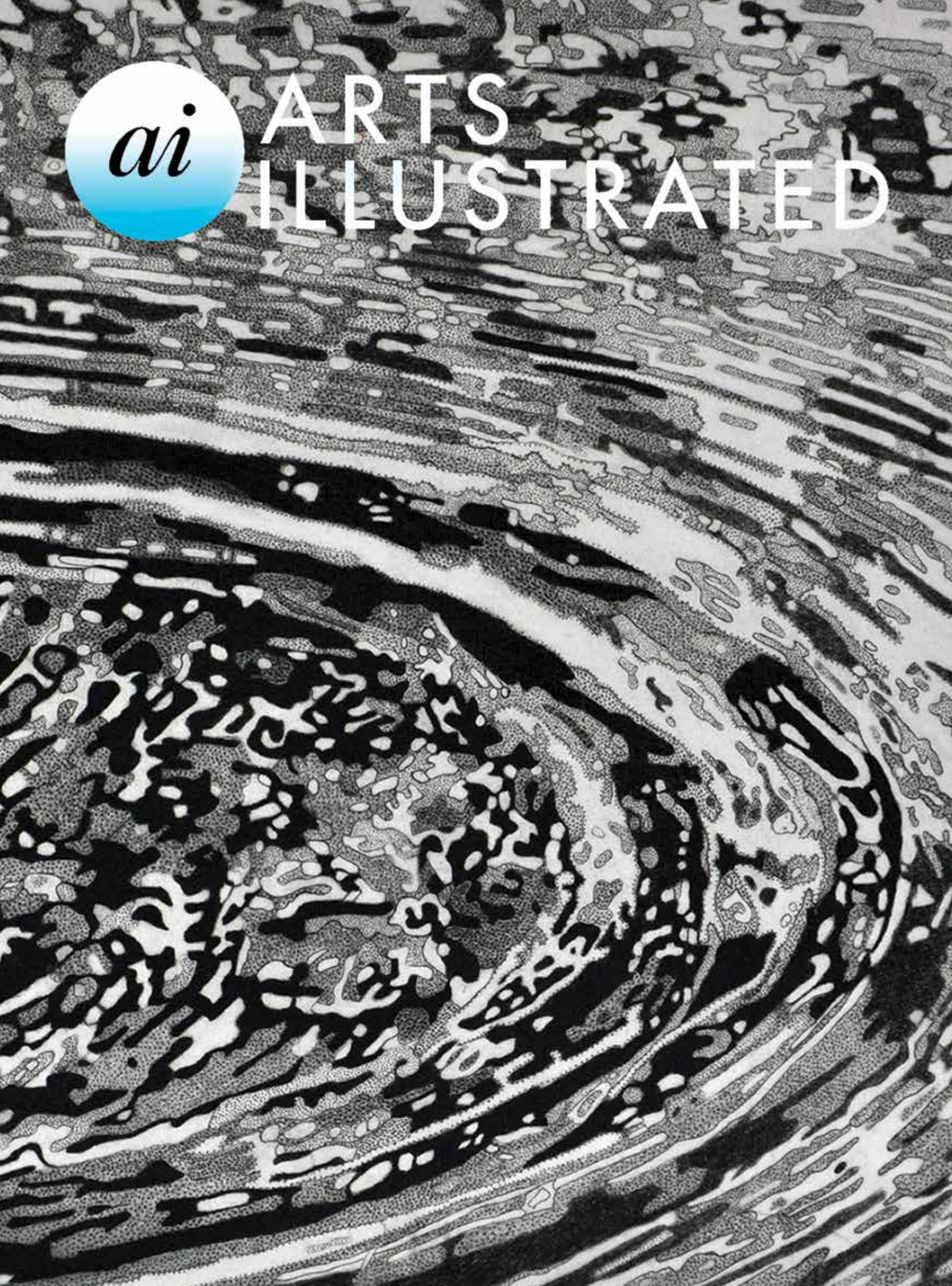




# ARTS ILLUSTRATED





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*Editor's note*

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At the time of working on this issue and discussing the cover with Parvathi Nayar – on the solo power of water and its environmental implications in a development-hungry country – relentless waters with another kind of hunger devastated the entire state of Kerala. It made Parvathi's cover for this issue frighteningly relevant and our theme that wanted to look at the beauty of solitude, the aesthetic of isolation, and the beginning of things, where one is followed by two, where many drops begin with that first one, always. The Kerala floods reminded us that perhaps destruction too was tied into the idea of solo, a precursor of what is to come, a full stop for the next sentence to begin.

This issue we found that solo resided in each one of us, in its many-hued splendour. It reiterated the fact that just by virtue of something being 'single' or 'alone', it did not do away its complex layers, its narratives and stories and its constant need to dialogue with the world, so something new could then walk its path. Even a literal interpretation – a movie named 'Solo' or a solo road trip – brought with it a surprising charm of its own, unpredictable in where it takes us.

But, perhaps, the one thing that really stood out while we put this issue together and one that truly resonated with the theme for me was the Supreme Court verdict on September 6 that finally scrapped Section 377, an archaic, pre-colonial law that criminalised same-sex relationships, allowing the colours of the rainbow to reclaim its rightful place in the sky.

Our pages, too, this issue, bring a piece of that rainbow – resplendent in its alone-ness, multi-layered in its manifestation, and full of shining light for the future. And a reminder that every journey begins with someone, somewhere, over the rainbow.

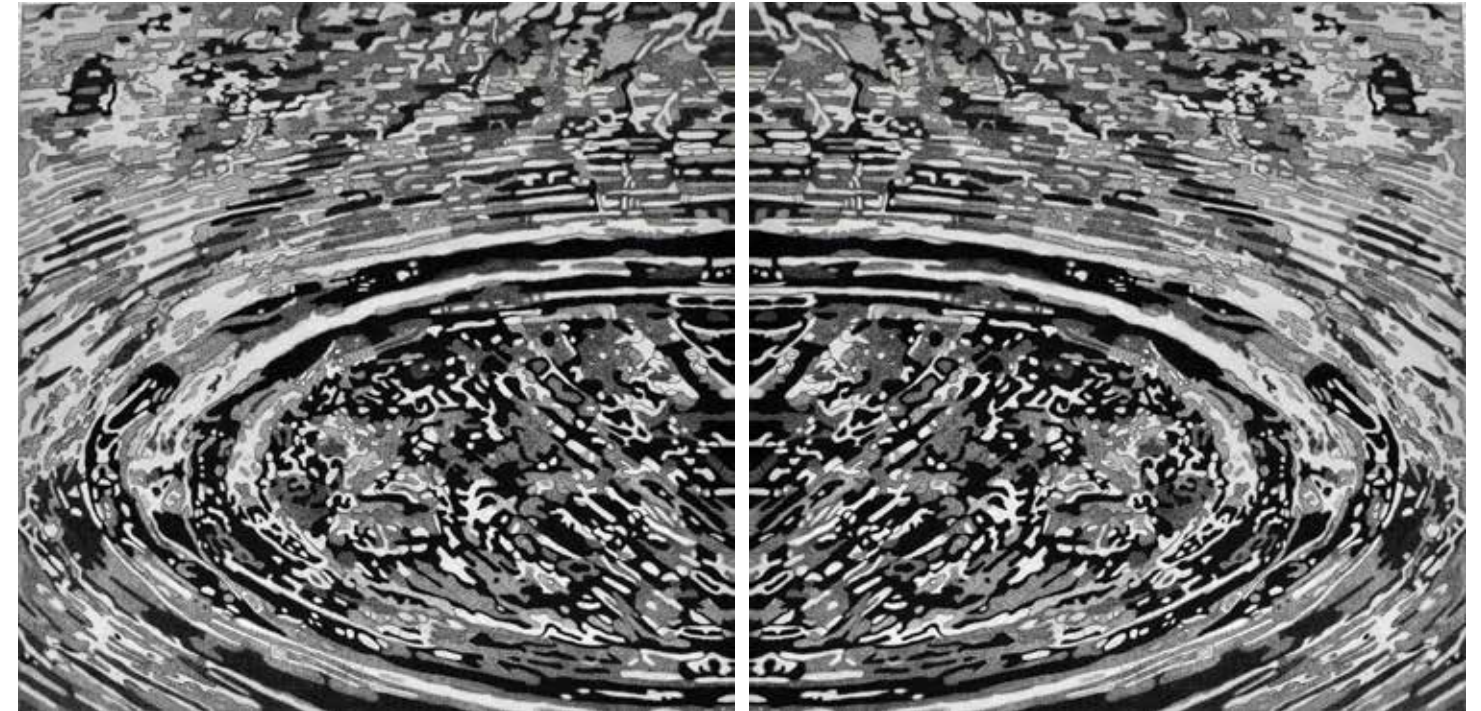


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*Cover Artist*

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The solitary event. A singularity from where life itself emerged. But equally, one pebble in the pond. Perhaps, then, another. And another. The butterfly effect. One event collides with a neighbouring one, influences that episode. And moves to nudge the next. A cascading series of causes and outcomes.

It's what I dream each drawing will do – be an idea moving outwards, whose form is both fluid and frozen, meaning one particular thing but also many different things. A ripple that will find new shape in the minds of its viewers.



Parvathi Nayar



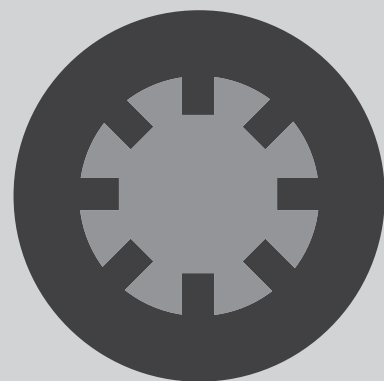


Cinema Q & A

# MIX TAPE

The complexity of a multitude of musical styles – filmmaker Bejoy Nambiar's forte – comes together as a single entity in the soundtrack album of his film, *Solo*

SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI



A scene from the song, *Sajan Mere Ghar Aaye* from the Earth sequence.

Goosebumps are a good indicator, a sort of physical manifestation of emotional resonance. And the song 'Bali' from Bejoy Nambiar's film *Shaitan* not only evoked goosebumps but it also shifted my perception of the Indian film soundtrack. Composed by Prashant Pillai, Bali incorporates an eclectic set of sounds, pieced together from disparate sources. At first listen, I picked up snatches of *Adhisaya Raagam* from the movie *Apoorva Raagangal* (Tamil, 1975) composed by M.S. Viswanathan; then a line from a peppy as-yet unheard Hindi song by Prashant Pillai called *Khwabon mein aate ho*, and the auspicious sound of the Nadaswaram that belonged as much in the song as the smattering of hip-hop. Bali was also about Hindi, English and Tamil, sitting companionably in one song, moving their heads in unison to an infectious musical hook. The screenwriter-director's movie soundtracks – from *Shaitan* (Hindi, 2011) to *David* (Hindi/Tamil, 2013), *Wazir*

(Hindi, 2016) to *Solo* (Tamil/Malayalam, 2017) – are more than just a collection of songs that fit his scripts. Nambiar turns the Indian movie song-and-dance routine on its head, to make the music more nimble in moving the narrative forward. And as standalone music albums, each of Nambiar's soundtracks whispers its own story.

But it is in the multiplicity of his film *Solo* that it finds a new kind of resonance, one so intensely complex that it becomes simply soulful listening. It is a bilingual in Malayalam and Tamil, featuring an anthology of four stories with the theme of the four natural elements (water, air, fire and earth), featuring a single lead actor, Dulquer Salman, in a contemporary take on four facets of the Hindu god, Shiva. The soundtrack only adds to the complexity – 17 songs, composed by 10 music composers. The soundtrack also brings together music by four popular contemporary Indian bands –

Masala Coffee, Filter Coffee, Agam and Thaikkudam Bridge.

Some songs, like the vibrant take on *Sajan More Ghar Aaye*, or *Shiva Tandav*, evoke the resplendence of Hindustani classical music and dance tradition, while *Singakutty* and *Roshomon* are all about the exuberance of youth. There is also the sensory nostalgia that only familiar Malayalam favourites like *Aalayal* or the *Boat Song*, can evoke. *Solo's* soundtrack has all the elements of a good personal mix tape – a multitude of song choices, the music and the lyrics coming together, and intended not just for personal listening pleasure but as a shared experience – with all the immediacy and intimacy of a love letter. But for goosebumps, dear reader, you would have to listen to it.

Bejoy Nambiar lays out the Side A and Side B about the *Solo* soundtrack, in this mixtape of an interview.



# Side A

**Track 1.** *I am curious to know about the influences that shaped your musical sensibilities.*

My elder sister is a classical singer who started performing songs at the age of 3. One of my earliest memories, is of her singing. She is my earliest inspiration; and because of her, I was exposed to a lot of music in the house and began developing a taste for good music. Thanks to her I listened to different kinds of music very early on. My father, too, had a great ear for music. He listened

to The Beatles, Rolling Stones and Phil Collins. Also, at that time, every Malayali household listened to Abba and Boney M! Michael Jackson was also a big influence. So, I had a good mix of both Indian and Western music when I was growing up.

Along with this kind of mix, I was also a big fan of Raaja sir (Ilaiyaraaja), and Johnson 'Master', and my love for their music came from the way it was used in films. I was a big fan of their background score

more than the songs – I loved the way music was used to complement the storytelling. At that time, there was no way to collect background scores – you had to actually record it from the VCR into the deck, and I used to go through all that effort just to have that piece with me, so I could keep listening to it.

**Track 2.** *Which necessitates a question about whether you owned a Walkman!*

Yes, of course! I had everything from the Walkman to the Discman to the MP3 Discman. In fact, I think I had an MP3 player – the Creative Nomad Jukebox – way back in 1999 when I think the iPod was yet to be released. I used to have all the latest players, because I was so obsessed with music; and I was thankful for a family happy to support that obsession.

**Track 3.** *From Shaitan to Solo, how much has the process of putting together a soundtrack changed? And what has remained constant?*

Among the things that haven't changed – I don't know when to stop. After a point, certain music composers tell me, "I think you have enough, you need to stop!" I tend to get greedy – this happens after I've collected all the music, I know where it is going to go, then, as I'm editing it, I find more places for different pieces to come in. I sometimes tend to go overboard, so I need to have some kind of restraint. *Solo* also has about 17 songs.

At the same time, what I like about the process is how, for every album that I've done, I've worked with some phenomenal musicians, even some new ones whom I would not have heard before; touching base with them, collaborating with them and convincing them to come on board. That part of the process is something I really enjoy. It's like I'm a fanboy, I love them to be part of my movie – it enhances my vision.

**Track 4.** *In the process of working on a movie, where does the soundtrack begin? In Solo, for instance, the levels of complexities are many. When you started writing the script, did the songs come to you within each segment, or did you place them after the entire writing was done?*

I actually try and write music cues when I'm writing my script. For *Solo*, I treated each story differently. For each story, we had a certain kind of sound scape. I didn't know all of it upfront, it happened organically – while putting together each segment, the sound also came together. I had certain sound cues in mind, and a certain kind of tone for that specific story. Keeping that reference tone in mind, I started collecting the music.

By the time the story was shot, we had a sound also ready for it. Then, when we moved to the next one, we started collecting the music, and recording the music that will suit it. And so on.



Dulquer Salmaan as Shiva and Shruthi Hariharan as Rukku in a scene from the Fire sequence.

**Track 5.** *The Solo soundtrack brings together, in one album, an interesting array of music, from streams like folk, Carnatic, cinema and contemporary Indian rock. What were the backstories to the songs?*

I remember listening to *Aalayal* when I was 3 or 4 years old. It was sung by Nedumudi Venu in an old Malayalam film called *Aalolam*. Over the years it never got old. When I heard Masala Coffee's contemporary version, I loved it. I really wanted the song in the film. But the process of trying to get it was long; and since it was already done, I had to try and convince them to do it again for my film as a new version which will go well with the film.

It's the same with *Vanchi Paattu*, based on the famous boat song (*Kuttanadan punjayile*). Every summer when we visited Kerala, we used to hear these songs all the time. I think what I like, is how the band Agam retained the

essence and still has given it a new spin. There was a space to use these songs well in the film narrative, and it was my homage to all the music I grew up listening to, and loving.

I was working on *Katru Veliyidai* as an assistant director with Mani Sir (Mani Rathnam), and we were shooting in Serbia. The steadycam operator played me this Russian song when we were driving to the set. I was just hooked on to the song! I kept asking him to play it every time I had some time. That sound stayed with me, and initially, Prashant (Pillai) and I tried to source that song, and get the same musician who composed that song, to collaborate with us. It became a tedious process, and Prashant finally said, "I will compose something original for this." Then, he came up with *Roshomon*.

Dulquer Salmaan as Shekhar and Sai Dhanshika as Radhika in the Water Sequence.





# Side B

**Track 6.** For the 1979 musical hit, *Engeyum Eppodhum* (*Ninaitbaale Inikkum*, Tamil, 1979), M.S. Viswanathan created a spin on the refrain from that familiar Tamil song about snakes, *Nathar Mudi* (*aadu paambe*). To hear that riff slither right into *Tbaikkudam Bridge's Aigiri Nandini*, was nothing short of goosebump-inducing, especially in the way it anchored the entire *Fire* segment. At what point did the song meet the scene?

I think when I wrote the first line of the *Fire* script, *Aigiri Nandini* was there. It was intrinsically part of that story. As was the idea of mixing *Aadu Paambe* and *Aigiri Nandini*. I knew when I was writing it that this was the sound I wanted for the *Fire* story. I knew that even if I didn't add any other song in this story, this was going to be a big chunk of the soundscape.

**Track 7.** Tell us a little bit about your rapport with musicians like Prashant Pillai, Gaurav Godkhindi and Mike McCleary. You've worked with them in more than one movie, and they have stayed constant in some way to the soundscapes that you have in mind.

I think they are all very very supremely talented and gifted musicians. And they are very giving. It's not just about what they do and their work. Prashant, Mikey, Gaurav – they are so secure in their own space; at the same time they

are open to collaborating with new talent, and also encouraging of other musicians.

Prashant helped me put together the album for *David*, and even for *Solo*. Sooraj (Kurup), who composed the film's version of *Seetha Kalyana*, is a big Prashant Pillai fan. Prashant was so welcoming and helped him on how to go about things even before this song. Prashant was one of those guys who used to push him in the right direction. Govind from *Thaikkudam Bridge*, who did *Aigiri Nandini* and the entire score for the *Fire* chapter, chipped in and helped out for the *Water* soundtrack too. I could just pick up the phone and tell him, and he was more than happy to come, jam on it and help sequence some parts of it. That's the comfort I share with them, and I enjoy that comfort.

I feel I'm blessed that I'm able to work with such people, because it's people like them who make a difference to the

album. Their work stands out and at the same time, they make sure that the whole album works. They are very encouraging that way. That's what makes me want to go back to working with them, again and again.

**Track 8.** What were the particular challenges in putting together this specific album?

It was a long process. A lot of times, a lot of songs got collected, but we had to redo it to suit the film – to record it for the film, to find the right voices, sequence it correctly. We were doing it chapter-wise. By the time we finished work on one chapter and moved to the next one, some work would be still left over. I would have already started the next one, but I had to go back to fix the previous one, again and again. It was quite an extensive soundtrack and I think, my most challenging one. *David* was there, but *Solo* is definitely a few notches higher in terms of challenges getting all these



Dulquer Salmaan as Rudra and Neha Sharma as Bhama in the Earth Sequence.



A scene from the song, *Seetha Kalyana* from the Earth sequence.

composers together on one album. It was not over till the last weeks, when I gave the print out. Until then, we were still working on the score, working on different pieces of the music.

Abhinav Bansal is a new guy that I worked with. He is a completely North-based guy but I had to get him to come on board for a South Indian film like this, getting him to fly down to Kochi, to record, get the lyrics right, and so on. But the good thing is that he was sporting enough to come on board to do something like that. All in all, it was good fun.

Aditi Bhagwat is a dancer, and her mother composed the song, *Taandav* for a dance performance. We were supposed to get that track so that we could use it to recompose it, but there were no files available. In the last minute, we had to recreate that entire song from scratch. Which means, contacting the singer who sang the song, getting the entire instrumentation to be done all over again, and so on – that took a long time. Govind did that for me.

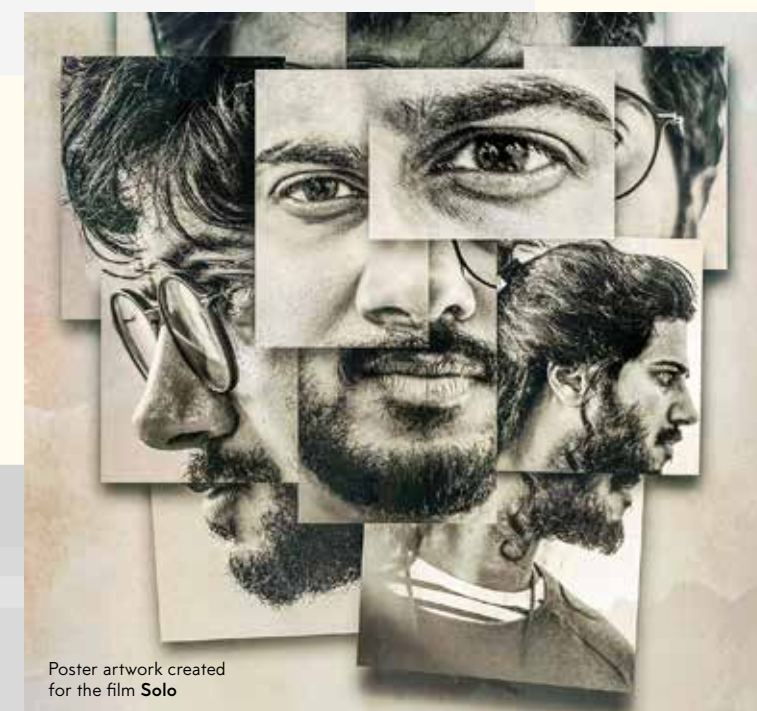
**Track 9.** Any moments of serendipity in the process of putting together the soundtrack for *Solo*?

Whatever fate the film had, I think music is something that will stay on. It has managed to find a good connect with the audience. I'm happy with the response that we got. I'm hoping that in the years to come, *Solo's* music will still find resonance with the audience.

Sometimes what happens is that we choose some pieces,

and then some music that I hear inspires me to write a scene for it which was not part of the original script. Like the sequence of *Sajan More Ghar Aaye* in the *Earth* segment; it was not there in the script. It was a simple single line in the script – that the protagonist rides his bike with his army friends to the wedding of the woman he loves. But when I heard this song, I was so enamoured by it that we shot an entire sequence, where there is a memory of her and him together, and there's the journey of him getting there. It's things like these that suddenly lift your material. You had not planned for it, but this kind of magic happens. I think that's the strength of good music.

All Images Courtesy of Bejoy Nambiar.



Poster artwork created for the film *Solo*





