

MIGRAINES can be such an anti-social ailment. If it was not bad enough that I was driving back from the usual school run on a Friday afternoon in traffic hell, I was doing it with a head about to explode. To add to that, I had booked tickets for the Abida Parveen concert that evening for my mother, my aunts and myself and it looked as if I was not going to have the pleasure of an evening with Ms. Parveen. I arrived home and made the announcement that it was going to be impossible for me to be able to attend the function. We were supposed to leave at a quarter past six and I sat forlornly watching the clock ticking away and the rest of the group getting dressed to leave. At ten past six I realised that I could actually move my head without feeling like there was an earthquake around me and showing last minute bravado, took a hasty decision to accompany the others. I think I gave Superman a run for his money no I did not rush into the nearest phone booth as bespectacled Clark Kent and reappear as hair slicked back underwear clad superman! I was referring to the speed at which I transformed from languishing invalid to concert going enthusiast.

For once we arrived at the venue, in this case the Barbican Centre, with adequate time to spare and as luck would have it, being a *deshi* concert we were told that it was going to start a little later than scheduled. So we sat and waited and finally were informed that we could take our seats. When we were seated inside the auditorium and the lights dimmed, I got my first glimpse of the queen of *Qawali* in person. She looked exactly as I had seen her on television. Clad in a black *shalwar kurta* and cotton "*chador*" (shawl), she greeted the audience with an easy grace and modesty and sat down to start her performance. From the moment she began to sing till the end of her renditions, all I can say is that the rest of the auditorium disappeared and I was left sitting in a world of my own enveloped in the mesmeric and incredibly powerful voice of Abida Parveen. If music is a form of worship then for a while the entire hall full of people was privy to an uplifting and intense spiritual experience. Her music was not just exquisite to the ears, but also food for the soul.

For almost over a decade the beautiful voice of Abida Parveen has swept audiences into a trance with her scintillating and rhythmic renderings of mystic poetry of the Sufi poets. Curious to find out a little more about this woman with such an astounding voice, I learned that Abida Parveen was born in Larkana, Sindh, Pakistan, where her father, Ghulam Haider, ran a music school.

The Hypnotic Voice of Abida Parveen

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Her family was also near to shrines of Sufi saints and she was brought up in an environment where deep mysticism, poetry and music of Sufi saints were prevalent. She learnt music initially from her father and then from the famous singer Ustad Salamat Ali Khan. But to all intents and purposes, her singing career took off after marriage to Ghulam Hussain Sheikh, senior producer in Radio Pakistan.

Abida Parveen seems to have carved a unique niche for herself, performing all over the world to a diverse audience. As I looked around me, although the majority of people were Asian, there was a significant part of the audience that were not. As a female Muslim singer of devotional music, it is laudable that she is the only female allowed to sing at the shrines of the Sufi saints. Abida herself said "I have turned to Sufis because they have spoken to God and Man through the language of Music - Sufism and music are inseparable and their message of love

and peace is universal". Her songs are mainly in Urdu, Sindhi, Punjabi, Seraiki and Hindi, but her intense and exhilarating concerts transcend the need for language, her voice able to portray emotions behind the text that even words cannot at times. In fact according to The Daily Telegraph (UK), 'Abida Parveen is one of the world's great singers - even if you can't understand her' and when her album '*Visal*' was released in 2002 the BBC's Peter Marshall wrote that, "Parveen could sing a shopping list and have an audience weeping". I did not understand all the songs myself but the raw emotional power behind her singing was enough to touch my soul.

During one of her songs, we were rather surprised to see a man from the audience get on stage and start dancing. He seemed to be in somewhat of a trance, quite oblivious to the attention he was creating. From where we were sitting it looked like the security men were asking him to leave the stage but the organisers of the concert thought otherwise and allowed the gentleman to carry on. As unnoticeably as he had walked on stage, he left without creating any scene whatsoever. In fact by the end of the concert when the first few lines of "*O Laal Meri*" rang out, everyone one was up and clapping and singing "*duma dum mast kalandar*". Had I been nearer to the stage I would have probably been up there myself. I think we all came out feeling exhilarated and in a haze of well being. All I can say is that I was grateful to my migraine for giving me a brief respite and the opportunity to be part of such an incredible experience because the moment I stepped through my front door the earth started shaking...