

OPINION by Shyam Bhat

They just can't kill the beast

I went to a pub recently after a long hiatus, and they were playing the same songs that I got drunk to in my turbulent adolescent years in pubs all along MG Road.

"Retro night?" I asked the bartender. He shrugged and smiled enigmatically. I contemplated the possibility that a compilation of these songs had been handed down from pub owner to pub owner, that these songs were not really popular with the public. But I heard the songs again at another establishment on another occasion, and then again at a karaoke night in another restaurant recently, where the most popular songs were these same old favourites.

As James Bond observed, "Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action."

Conclusion – Old rock songs never die; they go to Bangalore and live forever.

Of all the rock and pop songs ever recorded in the western world – and who knows how many there are? – about a dozen are perennial favourites in Bangalore, songs that were already classic rock when they were first popular in Bangalore in the 1980s and '90s and are positively ancient now, but, it seems, loved by all.

The playlist includes Clapton's "Cocaine", Queen's "We Will Rock You", Guns N Roses' "Paradise City", The Scorpions' "Rock You Like a Hurricane", Bob Marley's "Buffalo Soldier", some Pink Floyd and The Doors for the more psychedelic minded, and inexplicably, Bryan Adams' "Summer of '69". Inexplicable, because despite its all-American lyrics, we seem to love singing along to, "Bought my first real six-string, at the five and dime". Must be all the *Archie* comics we read.

But the song of all songs in Bangalore, a song that for many of us I suspect was the first song we actually learned the lyrics of, is "Hotel California". Oh God, I have started to pray recently, spare me... please spare me this song.

On that karaoke night, when I heard the opening chords of that

dreaded song, it came to me that "Hotel California" might forever haunt Bangalore.

"On a dark desert highway," she sang and even young college students sang along with an enthusiasm that reminded me of my own college years, when we sang these songs as if the lyrics contained hidden but barely detectable profundities.

"Cool wind in my hair," sang a young man at the next table. He had as much hair as I do (see pic), but his sincerity and his passionate commitment to the song made me refrain from joking about it.

But it's been a while now and it's time to lay this tired playlist to sleep.

These old rock songs, it might be argued, are the staple of classic rock playlists on radio stations all around the world. That's true, but in the rest of the world, the classic rock devotee tends to avoid other genres; not so in India.

In other parts of the world, the Jay Z enthusiast is not down with Dire Straits, and the Lady Gaga fan thinks Deep Purple is a totally cool hair colouring choice. But for the young Indian music fan, eclecticism is the norm.

The same girl who goes to sleep with a photograph of Justin Bieber under her pillow lets out a scream of delight when she hears the opening chords of "Cocaine". The same guy who head bangs to Lamb of God roars in appreciation when he hears the opening bass line of "Comfortably Numb".

So okay, the songs are still popular in Bangalore. But why? Why is "Hotel California" still Bangalore's most popular song ever?

In order to answer that, we have to first delve into history.

All through the '80s, western rock music was popularised by local talent. They were amateurs in the truest sense – they didn't play for the money; in any case, there was little money to be made.

In many cases, those old Bangalore cover bands were far better live acts than the original bands themselves. I have no evidence for such a radical statement of course, save for the anecdotal and empirical: I was at one of Iron Maiden's concerts in Bangalore not long ago, and everyone who had seen the old Bangalore based Iron Maiden cover band Millennium agreed – the lads from Leyton performed like untalented understudies for the boys from Bangalore.

But if the bands were stellar, the fans were no less committed to the music. They had to be, by natural selection, the most enthusiastic of listeners. Save a few music stores on Brigade Road, and a few stores in that egregiously named paradise of cheap imports and pirated goods, the Burma Bazaar, there was no western music to be had anywhere.

We stayed up one Thursday night a month to watch a smug looking man from Delhi play five music videos on Doordarshan on a show called "Hot Tracks".

It took real sweat to source and to own music, pirated cassettes and bootlegs and gifts from visiting relatives from the US copied late into the night on a twin cassette deck, in real time.

Before long, everyone's favourite playlists were similar. The revolution was not televised, but it sure as hell was recorded and distributed. And if you ever made a mix tape for someone, you were a part of the process.

Bangalore had the perfect storm – local bands that covered the greatest western rock songs with a rabid ferocity, supported by a small but intensely dedicated tribe of fans.

And so, ladies and

gentlemen, boys and girls, it came to be that these songs became a soundtrack of our generation, and then the soundtrack for this city. The appreciation for this peculiarly narrow selection of songs were passed on from senior to junior in college and school, between friends, and acquaintances; and because these songs were propelled by intense fandom, they continue, to this day, to be a part of everyone's all time favourite songs.

But it's been a while now and it's time to lay this tired playlist to sleep. What I really want is to be able to go to a pub in Bangalore and have a beer without having to listen to "Hotel California". Is that too much to ask?



Inflation watch Bottle gourd Sept ₹12.50, Oct ₹14.90; garlic Sept ₹146.50, Oct ₹175. All prices per kilo.