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## 'Slumdog' Fusionist in Oscar Spotlight

By BEN SISARIO  
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[A. R. Rahman](#) knows how big a deal it would be if he wins an Oscar on Sunday.



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

A. R. Rahman is one of India's most prolific film composers.

One of the most prolific and successful film composers in India, he has three nominations, all for "Slumdog Millionaire": best original score and best original song, for both "Jai Ho" and "O ... Saya," a collaboration with the Sri Lankan-British rapper M.I.A. (The film, by [Danny Boyle](#), has 10 nominations, and last month Mr. Rahman won a Golden Globe for best score.)

"It would be a great honor," Mr. Rahman said with characteristic diffidence in a phone interview this week from Los Angeles, where he was preparing to perform at the ceremony. "It would help me to do bigger things."

Ask him what those bigger things might be, however, and he grows even quieter. Naming some Western directors he would like to work with, he sounds distracted, almost bored, as if the future is just too abstract to worry about.

"[Baz Luhrmann](#)," he said. A beat, then: "[Ridley Scott](#). I'm a big fan of Ridley."

But when it comes to his music Mr. Rahman, who is 43 but with his cherubic cheeks could pass for less than 30, turns surprisingly chatty. His work has been in more than 100 films since 1992, and after scoring [Andrew Lloyd Webber's](#) Bollywood-themed stage musical "Bombay Dreams" in 2002 he enjoyed had a steadily growing profile in the West. One of the first major composers in India to embrace digital technology, he is in his natural habitat at the computer, and he maintains the manic, multitasking rhythm of a true 21st-century techie.

"I like to see a film and then start scoring it in my mind, while doing something unrelated," he said. "You just grasp a film and start working, and something unpredictable comes out from a third element. The mind, the more active it is, the more productive it is."

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A. R. Rahman: Audio Excerpts



The composer's "Slumdog Millionaire" soundtrack received three Oscar nominations, including two in the original song category.

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"Jai Ho"



▶ "O ... Saya"

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Monica Almeida/The New York Times

A. R. Rahman, in his natural habitat at the computer, works on five or six films a year, juggling several at a time. He is a kind of national hero in India.

Productivity, along with a gift for golden melody and a cosmopolitan touch that reflects the new, globally conscious India, have given Mr.

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Rahman, who lives and works in Chennai (the city formerly known as Madras), a kind of national-hero status. "Rah Rah Rahman," The Times of India proclaimed on its front page after the Oscar nominations were announced.

"He has a rapper from Tanzania working with him," Mr. Boyle said, "and fulfilled a mutual desire to work with M.I.A., part Sri Lankan, part London, part New York. Add the house-music disco beats sweeping Bollywood dance lately and you have a real moment of fusion."

Mr. Rahman works on five or six films a year, juggling several at a time in various stages of completion. While unheard of in Hollywood, that pace is common in India, and Mr. Rahman has made his share of modern classics, like "Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India" (2001), beloved by Indian and Western critics alike, and "Dil Se" (1998).

"Slumdog," Mr. Rahman said, was created in relatively luxurious circumstances: "I kept three weeks aside. I moved to London and did the whole score there."

Even by the musical-sponge standards of Indian film, Mr. Rahman has been an especially curious fusionist. The son of a film composer, R. K. Shekhar, he grew up with a record collection that included Indian music and rock; two favorites were the American country singer Jim Reeves and Walter Carlos's landmark electronic album "Switched-On Bach." (Born A. S. Dileep Kumar, he changed his name to Allah Rakkha Rahman when he converted to Sufi Islam in his early 20s.)

Mr. Rahman was playing professional sessions by age 11 and soon had a rock band. He received a scholarship to the Trinity College of Music in London, and upon his return to India began composing commercial jingles. His first film was "Roja," and his sophisticated approach quickly revolutionized Indian film music, said [David Novak](#), an ethnomusicologist at the Heyman Center for the Humanities at [Columbia University](#).

"He's sort of the Peter Gabriel of the Indian film industry," Mr. Novak said. "He shifted things from a simple East-West mode to a multicultural, global mode, where India and its regional musics are part of a palette of sound from around the world."

Mr. Rahman's crossover to Western audiences has not come without bumps. "Bombay Dreams" was a success in the West End, but on Broadway it closed in eight months and never recouped its \$14 million investment.

"I've long been impressed by his talent, and I'm so pleased that Hollywood has recognized it," Mr. Lloyd Webber said. "I'm just disappointed that Broadway didn't get it when he and I did 'Bombay Dreams' there."

An Oscar would certainly raise Mr. Rahman's profile in Hollywood, and commentators in India and in the West have said that recognition for "Slumdog" could help legitimize India's film talent in general. Only two Indians have received Academy Awards: Bhanu Athaiya won in 1983 for best costume design in "Gandhi," and the director [Satyajit Ray](#) was given a lifetime achievement award shortly before he died in 1992.

But Mr. Rahman said he does not view the awards as a referendum on Bollywood, and indeed wasn't getting his hopes up about the contests, in which his competitors include Mr. Gabriel, [Danny Elfman](#) and James Newton Howard.

He didn't have an acceptance speech ready, he said, and his days in Los Angeles before the awards were packed with activity, including a performance of "Jai Ho" on "The Tonight Show" on Thursday, meetings with various directors and record labels, and filming the video of a Pussycat Dolls remix of "Jai Ho."

"I like to work fast," he said.



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