# "OUR COMMITMENT TO THE MUSICIAN WILL ALWAYS REMAIN DEEP ROOTED"

Says Sudeep Audio's Aditya Mehta as he recounts the company's journey through the years, the driving forces that influenced the company's goals & vision, and the key factors that will continue to motivate Sudeep Audio well into the future, in a candid chat with Pro Sound Systems' Elton Noronha.

1977 witnessed the founding of 'Sudeep', a name that would one day become synonymous with music production in India.

## THE STORY - HOW IT ALL BEGAN

With not much more than a profound knowledge of electronics, and an inherent passion for everything music that drove him to become a 'self-taught' audio engineer (and a good one, might we add), Nikhil Mehta setup Sudeep Studio in the then quaint suburb of Andheri in Mumbai.

Having designed the studio by himself, and having almost hand-picked all the

**Nikhil Mehta - the man behind 'Sudeep'**

equipment that would eventually adorn the studio space, Nikhil's involvement in his dream project was more than just 'personal' - he gave it his everything. The studio was setup in a week, which was, and still is, quite a matter of prestige. And to think that the seed to the entire project was the almost passable event of a family friend having to record his album at some studio that backed out at the last minute due to some lame excuses, makes for quite a surreal yet true fairly tale of sorts.

## SUDEEP STUDIO

Nikhil named the studio, "Sudeep" - not as namesake to one of his kin (as what people used to, and still do to this very day) - but because 'Sudeep' in Hindi means 'pure light'. Nikhil's philosophy being 'to do whatever it takes to help others within the music fraternity, with the studio standing tall as a beacon - a guiding force'.

Back in the 1970s, Mumbai had very few recording studios for album recordings, with almost all of the big studios tied up with film work. So it could be thought that the setting up of Sudeep Studios came up in the right place at the right time.

With half of his bungalow being converted into a studio space where even family members helped out in some way or the other, Nikhil introduced some very basic recording equipment to the studio, which only grew and expanded from thereon with his nephew, Sunil, making trips to Singapore and Dubai to import better gear. Import duties were wickedly exorbitant (around 300-400%) in the 70s and 80s, yet somehow the studio flourished with the help of an exorbitant bank loan, and witnessed an almost regular upgrade in terms of the technical gear. Additionally, as the studio was in essence an extension of his own home, Sudeep Studio began gaining a reputation for being a professional facility where artists and engineers alike could feel at home - a place where you could take time out to catch up on the iconic Mahabharata serial on Sundays, and then get back to recording!

In terms of the work done, music for plays (theatre), private albums, jingles (TV/radio commercials) were the highlights for coming to Sudeep Studio. Many famous TV shows like Kachchi Dhoop, Chanakya and the likes were recorded at the studio. The only film project that was commissioned at the premises was "Kabhi Ajnabee The". And with time and the increasing amount of work commissioned at Sudeep Studio, musicians built on their package of wonderful memories of recording at the facility - enjoying its famous delicacy 'puri-bhaji' and a lot more.

In the early 90's however, as Nikhil crossed the age of 60, he felt the urge to leave his ancestral home in Mumbai to a more peaceful life in Ahmedabad, away from the hustle and bustle of Mumbai city, yet not at the cost of letting go of his passion for music and the studio. Hence, the facility was shifted to Ahmedabad, with the studio consequently handling archival projects and conversion of original and rare recordings of classical musicians into digital formats. Over 1200 hours of recording, cleaning and editing was commissioned at the Ahmedabad facility for "Sangeet Kendra", owned by late Geeta Sarabhai (sister of famous scientist late Vikram Sarabhai). Meanwhile in Mumbai, Sudeep Studio remained a sweet memory in the minds of musicians, engineers and record companies alike.

But out of sight is out of mind - right?

## SUDEEP AUDIO

In 2001, Nikhil's son, Aditya, found his calling - to forgo a comfortable career in a corporate environment, and carry on his father's legacy of passion and commitment to music production in his own special capacity. So with this objective in mind, he started a simple one page website - www.sudeepaudio.com - with the confidence of reviving the Sudeep Studio charm and more importantly, creating a platform for musicians to interact candidly. Being a self funded initiative, Aditya did have his fair share of challenges, but the passion to keep "Sudeep's" legacy alive kept egging him forward.

**Aditya Mehta with Ray Williams (founder of IMSTA)**

In 2002, Aditya received an email requesting him to collaborate with a Switzerland-based company called Swar Systems. Soon enough, the founder of Swar Systems, Mariano Etchepareborda met with Aditya at Pune, and almost instantly Aditya became a part of the Swar team. He beta-tested the products with several composers in India, and worked on graphical feedback, with Mariano and another colleague in Delhi, Ranjan Sharma who handled the recordings. During this time, music producer duo, Salim - Sulaiman gave a lot of support to the Swar initiative and helped Aditya whole-heartedly (In 2007, Salim, Sulaiman and Aditya formed Philtre Labs to create authentic Bollywood sample libraries and apps).

But 2003 was the year that defined the destiny of Sudeep Audio (SA). The use of software in music production was growing across the world, yet there was hardly anyone in India representing, promoting or actively marketing original software. At the same time, even the plug-in market was surging. So seizing the opportunity, over the next few months, Aditya set out on a mission which involved collaborating with key software manufacturers from various parts of the world. The top condition of the partnership was for software manufacturers not to expect high volumes from India right from the word go, and also to provide the Indian market with a special pricing structures. Several companies obliged, and thus started SA's journey into the future.

While SudeepAudio.com helped promote talented musicians from the Indian scene and gave them greater exposure, that too for no charges at all. The company also tied up with GiveIndia.org (and NGO) wherein for every software purchased, translated into a contribution of a small portion (about 3% to 5% of invoice value) for a charitable cause. The donation was (and still is) made in the name of the buyer, while Give India replies to the donor (the software buyer) about how the donation money was used with name of beneficiary, address, etc.

Support to SA came in other forms as well from the local distributorship network. Companies like Promusicals (Chennai), Furtados (Mumbai) and some others supported SudeepAudio.com by granting them permission to sell their wares online. All

**Build My Studio & SA Packages feature on sudeepaudio**

this added to the confidence to go on, even though the numbers were not large enough. And by now there was no alternate source of revenue either.

To further the effort, Aditya went from studio to studio and door to door, to musicians' homes and their studios, giving demos of various software packages. Over the next few years, the team started building up for delivery, accounts, after sales support, website maintenance and more - many working part time and some only to help! Thym Infoware, a software development company based in Ahmedabad, designed the website back-end systems, and their selfless contribution helped SA become a proper webstore.

## THE CHALLENGES

Though things at this point were looking positive, challenges weren't far away. As Aditya mentions "Some shops called and threatened to take off pricing from the site! There was a practice being followed by some dealers to decide pricing based on who the customer is!! For example, if the customer is a famous guy, then he gets charged a high price. If he has come from Pune, then another price; if he is from Gujarat then a third price, etc. etc. When we put up the list prices, we got threatening calls. In 2004, one dealer I met at his shop told me something I will never forget: 'You are new and starting off afresh in this line. I am the king of Mumbai. And Mumbai is a sea. If someone like you comes and takes away a bowl of water, it will not affect my business.' I had gone to see if we could collaborate and sell his stuff online, as no one else in the country was doing it. And the experience I had was almost like it was out from a Bollywood movie script. It's a different matter that this same 'king' has nearly shut shop today."

At the same time, software piracy was another major problem that threatened to thwart everything that SA stood for. "Software piracy, which was gaining momentum when SA started off, had reached its all time high during this point where even professionals resorted to it. Looking at it objectively, no one could be blamed as the market was in quite a slump, and these software pirates were just exploiting the situation to their advantage. So sustaining business during that period of time was a major challenge. However, my industry has always come through for its people, and it did so for me as well. Sudeep Audio decided to wage the battle against software piracy, and over a period of time industry professionals joined in with full support. Now, I believe that software piracy has reduced to a big extent."

## HONOURS

Aditya and the SA team's efforts did not go unrecognized, as soon enough the industry - both nationally as well as internationally, started to take notice. The International Music Software Trade Association (IMSTA), a Canada based not-for-profit organization appointed Sudeep Audio as their brand ambassadors in India.

This was soon followed by another pleasant surprise in 2009, when popular international music distribution brand Rebeat Digital acted out on their interest of partnering with Sudeep Audio. As Aditya mentions "We kept getting a distribution request from an unknown company for selling their software in India. At that point, there were no digital music stores in India (like iTunes), and releasing music by oneself was a relatively strange concept. With past experiences of low sales volumes in a 1 billion population that attracts investors and companies to India, we asked this company to come to India and test the ground reality for themselves. And they did! This was Rebeat Digital. Over the last 3 years, Rebeat has grown to become the software to own if you want to release your own music on digital stores worldwide! Some of the prominent names using the software are Daler Mehndi, S-E-L, Shubha Mudgal, Louiz Banks, Asli Music (KJ Singh), Vasundhara Das, Raghav Sachar, Niladri Kumar and many more."

## THE GIVE BACK

We learn from Aditya that in the initial stages, since not many people were comfortable using their credit cards to shop for pro audio equipment, this translated into a bigger skepticism in terms of using credit cards online to purchase even a Rs. 8,000 sound card! Over the years, however, Sudeep Audio's name and reputation grew, as did the industry's confidence in SA's correct pricing, timely deliveries and personal interaction value add.

When market conditions looked better, the company rolled out the 'Build My Studio' (BMS) web-store with help from Thym Infoware, featuring a secure payment gateway, adding further reassurance to the SA brand value, and helping it to acquire more online orders.

Introduced recently is the SA packages module on the BMS store which is mainly aimed at helping beginners select the best possible setup for a basic home/project studio. Says Aditya as he elaborates further on the SA packages module, "Though every customer's demands and needs are different depending on the studio size, purpose of building one, etc. we found a common thread in their lists. Hence the SA Packages module was formed for beginner, mid-size and professional setups - for DJs, music producers and recording studios. These packages contain a variety of products in every category covering an entire studio setup. Small town customers find this helpful to shortlist products for a full studio setup based on budgets and needs. Currently in its nascent stage, Sudeep Audio's technical team is working to make this a very powerful tool in online shopping".

Plus, to add to revenues SA have also setup a design office at the Ahmedabad studio premises. Here, the team designs and maintains websites for musicians and studios. Some of the clients for this service include MCAI (Music Composers Association of India), Shankar Ehsaan Loy, Philtre Labs, Clinton

**Aditya with the other winners of the IRA Awards 2013**

**Aditya Mehta with Guenter Loibl (CEO of Rebeat Digital)**

Cerejo, Sandeep Shirodkar, Purple Haze Studios, Amar Mohile, Ehsaan Noorani, and many more. App for mobile is another activity the company has ventured into. Along with Atul Shukla (Kollabia) and Hetal Trivedi (Thym Infoware), world-class mobile apps like Bollywood Masala and Bollywood Ragas have been launched for Philtre Labs.

Plus, as a show of respect to honour the support and appreciation received from their patrons and clients, SA also started a YouTube channel in May 2011, wherein every Friday, a video was (and still is) released showcasing a talent's journey in the world of music and/or engineering - young musicians have benefited by learning about the struggles of today's big names in music production in India. These videos also have the interviewee discussing tips and tricks of the art and craft that they have come to master over the years.

## THE WAY FORWARD

Talking about the integrity that Sudeep Audio maintains in its line and operation of business, Aditya mentions "Now that we are completing 10 years in business, we find many distributors have setup their own webstores. There are now a couple of more online stores selling products procured from a common distributor. Customer loyalty, now-a-days is gauged by whether we can sell something for Rs. 500 less than another dealer selling the same product. Such challenges come across in every trading business. The best thing is to ensure that we do the best in whatever we do. We know better ways of retaining customers. Plus, our customers and suppliers who have known us and understand our intentions have always stood by us, and their faith in us is what keeps SA going."

Aditya further mentions that the way ahead for Sudeep Audio is to ensure that the quality of support, correct guidance on what to buy and what not to, distributing unique software & plugins, and also developing more localised products (like Swar, Bollywood libraries), creating music apps and developing websites for musicians, at a steady pace. Recently, folk instruments for the forthcoming film "Ram Leela" were recorded by Nikhil (now, aged 78) at their Ahmedabad studio.

"We are not looking to call ourselves a number 1 company. It's just a number. Our customers and associates know who we are. Being recognized at the Indian Recording Arts Award (IRAA) at the PALM Expo 2013 as the best dealer in the country was a shot in the arm. Our commitment to the musician will always remain deep rooted, thanks to our strong foundation seeds sown and nurtured by Nikhil Mehta, since 1977" says Aditya as he signs off.