

WHAT MAKES SHANTANU HUDLIKAR... SHANTANU HUDLIKAR!

More than three Decades of Craft, Candour, and Uncompromising Standards



Shantanu Hudlikar has just been named the **IRAA 2027 Awards Director**, the latest chapter in a 36-year career spent behind consoles at some of the best studios in Mumbai including the iconic **Yash Raj Films Studios**, recording some of the most legendary names including the likes of **Herbie Hancock**, **Lata Mangeshkar**, **Zakir Hussain** and **Chaka Khan**. He is also, by his own account and everyone else's, one of the most unfiltered voices in Indian sound engineering, saying what he believes in rather than what's comfortable. In conversation with **PALM Expo Magazine**, he uncovers how a biochemistry postgraduate ended up defining a generation of Indian recordings.

Trading the Microscope for the Microphone

Sound engineering was never part of **Hudlikar's** original plan. In the mid to late 1980's, he was pursuing a PhD in Biochemistry and Genetics, fully expecting a future in academia. Music was a passion, not an ambition. While many of his closest friends were musicians, Hudlikar was the devoted fan who spent countless hours around bands, rehearsals, and gigs.

"It's so strange that you asked me this question because this was not my chosen first thing ever," he says. His focus was firmly on academics—completing his master's degree and doctoral research while charting a path toward a career in science.

Though he never played an instrument, he became deeply embedded in Mumbai's music community through friendships forged over years of travelling and working alongside bands as part of their road crew during college. The turning point came when funding shortages repeatedly stalled his doctoral research, turning progress into a frustrating cycle of interruptions. Seeing both his passion for music and his academic qualifications as a backup safety net, friends **Ehsaan Noorani** and **Kalyan Pathak** encouraged him to explore the music industry.

Their advice led him to Mumbai's **The Music Room**, owned

by **Soli** and **Piya Dastur**, where chief engineer and close friend **Nakul Kamte** opened doors. Hudlikar joined The Music Room as Kamte's assistant in 1990, intending only to see where it might lead. "I decided to try it out in 1990, and here I am still doing the same thing today."

The PhD remained unfinished, despite having reached its final stages—but a chance opportunity in a recording studio had become the foundation of a career spanning more than three decades.

Learning Beyond the Classroom

Hudlikar entered the profession without any formal training in sound, a fact he acknowledges candidly. "I've not had any formal education in sound, which I feel sometimes I lack. I should have," he says. But then again when Hudlikar entered the field, structured audio education in India was scarce. "At that time there was absolutely nothing. There was **FTII**, I think, with a three or four-year program. I didn't want to give up my academics and go into another four years of not being sure what I want to do. I learnt on the job and thankfully, I had very good influences, very good mentors," he says.

Among the influences, none proved more important than the records he admired. He and his peers would comb through album credits, tracking details behind the projects they loved. "We used to get albums or CD's, and we used to look at all the credits and say, 'Who's done what?' And then we used to follow those particular engineers and producers and see what they did."

That pursuit eventually led Hudlikar to meet legendary American engineer **Al Schmitt**, whom he still regards as his most important influence. "My biggest mentor, and the person I have the utmost reverence and respect for, is Al Schmitt, one of the most brilliant engineers I've had the pleasure of knowing," he says, adding "When you surround yourself with excellence and greatness, it rubs off. I wouldn't say I am what I am today because I did it. No. It's because we all did it together. It's what I took away from it."

The lesson extended far beyond technical proficiency. "It's not just a question of being good at your craft and art. It's important to better yourself as a better human being as well."

Hear First, Mix Better

One piece of advice from a mentor has remained central to his approach for decades, "Hear the band, the orchestra, the soloist—hear what is happening in the room, then come back and make it sound better." At first, it seemed impossible. "How can you make something already good sound better? How can I make **Lata Mangeshkar** sound better than Lata Mangeshkar?"

Over time, this evolved into a personal benchmark system. "If there's a tabla, it needs to sound like **Zakir Bhai**. A great sitar sound? **Ravi Shankar**, **Vilayat Khan Saab**, **Niladri Kumar**."

For Hudlikar, engineering has never been about imposing his own sound—it's a constant pursuit of excellence, guided by the musicians and mentors who shaped his ears.

Learning the Craft in Advertising

Before the albums, artist collaborations and studio partnerships that would later define his career, Hudlikar spent his formative years in the demanding world of advertising, which shaped his approach to recording, particularly when it comes to speed, preparation and efficiency.

"I started off my career doing advertising," he recalls. "On an average, we used to do three jingles a day and did this for about five years." Recording multiple commercials every day required decisions to be made quickly and sessions to run with precision. Looking back, Hudlikar believes those years provided an education that few formal programmes could match.

The discipline he developed in advertising remains the benchmark against which he measures much of the industry today, particularly when comparing independent music projects with mainstream film recording sessions. "Bollywood, unfortunately, there's a lot of wastage of time - actors would come, the stars would come - '*Achha, gaana suna do*,'" he says bluntly. In his experience, film sessions often move at a slower pace, with artists and stakeholders spending considerable time listening to songs, discussing arrangements and settling into the process before recording properly begins.

Independent music, by contrast, operates in a very different rhythm. "With independent music, you walk in at 10, start recording by 10:30, and finish when you're tired—no shifts, no clock-watching. Bollywood is all about shifts.

Goes into overtime and all that kind of nonsense."

His criticism is not directed at the music itself but at a production culture he considers inherently inefficient and incompetent. More than three decades after those advertising sessions, the lessons remain unchanged: preparation matters, momentum matters, and time in the studio should never be wasted.

Truth Over Diplomacy

Hudlikar has long been known for speaking his mind, a reputation he neither denies nor apologises for. Yet he rejects the common characterisation that he is blunt, arguing that there is an important difference between bluntness and honesty. "I've not been blunt, I've been truthful." "I've always spoken up when I felt something could improve the music I'm working on. It's not personal. So, if it's bad, well, I'm going to say it."

It is an approach that may not always have worked in his favour, but one he has never been willing to compromise. "Maybe I lost opportunities; I don't know, but at the same time, I'm happier that way." That contentment stems from a deep sense of pride. "I take pride in my work. Immense pride."

The same directness extends beyond the studio. Hudlikar acknowledges that his unwillingness to tell people what they want to hear has shaped his personal life as much as his professional one. "This is why I probably don't have too many friends, and I don't want too many more friends, because I already have the friends that I want. I'm not here to impress anybody, and I'm happy with the way things are for myself."

The standard he applies to others is one he willingly accepts himself, relying on a small circle of trusted people to keep himself in check. "My wife and friends are my harshest critics. If they question my work or call me out, I take it seriously."

Choosing Craft Over Commerce

When asked about the most challenging aspect of his career, Hudlikar does not point to a difficult recording session, a demanding artist, or a technical obstacle. Instead, he speaks about the realities of navigating the business side of the music industry.

"I found working in Bollywood extremely challenging—not that it's bad, just different. The biggest challenge wasn't the music itself, but dealing with non-musical, non-artistic, non-creative people in a business meant to be built on craft and artistry. That remains my biggest challenge."

Over time, that frustration prompted him to distance himself from mainstream film work. "I've pretty much weaned myself away from commercial Indian cinema because in the end, it's got nothing to do with the art and craft. It's all got to do with numbers."

Same Process, Different People

The fundamentals of recording rarely change—what changes are the people. "The processes are pretty much the same. It's the personalities that differ. Working with **Shankar Ehsaan Loy** is a different vibe than an **Indus Creed** or a **Ranjit Barot**. They're all friends of mine, so it's about dealing with different personalities. Through the years you learn how each one likes to work, and you adapt."

That adaptation is central to the job. Every artist arrives with a different temperament and creative rhythm. The engineer's role isn't just technical—it's understanding the person on the other side of the glass. "It's how you deal with each individual—their personalities, egos. And not just theirs—my ego too. I'm no saint."

While many relationships have grown into friendships, he acknowledges not every project carries the same connection. "Some music directors are just that—music directors. I have no great love for them, but it is work. That's when I call it work, because my profession isn't really about work."

The YRF Chapter

Hudlikar's years at **Yash Raj Films** remain the high point of his career—not for the film credits, but for what he built. With YRF he returned to recording music that he'd fallen in love with. "I started doing all the orchestral work. Bringing back the art of recording acoustic music gave me tremendous joy. If there's one thing I miss today, it's that."

Under **Yash Chopra**, he found freedom to pursue work beyond the studio's

core mandate. "It was outstanding. I had the time of my life. Yash Ji was probably the nicest boss I've ever come across. Really incredible human being and he trusted me."

"That trust gave Hudlikar institutional latitude. He opened the studio to non-film projects, though management grew increasingly disapproving, he admits. "Almost ten years ago, I proposed focusing more on independent artists and nurturing them as I believed they had more to offer than the usual film music directors. Much to my chagrin, I was turned down, almost disdainfully, with the justification that independent music had no future and there's no money in that music," rues Hudlikar.

Ironically, YRF announced its independent music arm - **Raah Records**, in August 2026.

The YRF chapter didn't end cleanly, and management ultimately didn't approve of his direction, though he remains guarded about the specifics. Still, he hasn't fully walked away, as he occasionally uses or recommends the YRF room for his projects.

Chosen, Not Assigned: Why Independent Music Matters More

He speaks about independent music with a warmth noticeably absent when discussing Bollywood. "The good thing about working with independent musicians is they seek you out. At YRF it was default. I worked with people who probably didn't want to work with me but had to because they were at YRF."

His proudest work reflects that preference: projects with bands like **Soulmate**, **Indus Creed**, **Advaita** and **Warren Mendonsa's Blackstratblues**, as well as **Shankar Mahadevan's Breathless** and ongoing collaborations with Ranjit Barot, **The Light Years Explode** and some international indie artists. "I'm proud of working with all my independent musicians. Most have been friends. We've hung out socially."

Film music recording and mixing work has largely fallen away—a shift he attributes to the industry changing around him. "Most film work has dried up. People don't want me anymore. Music producers are doing everything themselves—composing, writing, mixing. They're not hiring engineers."

Digital by Choice, Analog by Instinct

Hudlikar prefers a hybrid environment, and his reasoning has nothing to do with nostalgia. Where many engineers romanticise analog, he treats it as a tool with real limitations—admired but not missed. "There's nothing like good analog. Today's digital is mind-blowing. But I mix the two and I get what I want, a hybrid workflow. Do I miss tape machines? No, not one bit." What analog offers is character. "Analog has its drawbacks, and that's what makes it fun. The imperfections—that's what people call soul."

Forced to choose, the decision is immediate. "If you gave me only analog or only digital, I'd say digital. Only analog is a huge problem—fiddly, temperature-sensitive, inconsistent. With digital, it's the same 10 years later and within a day, I can do 10 sessions. With analog, I'd spend 45 minutes just recalling settings between sessions."

Where Artists Come First

For all his technical accomplishments, Hudlikar believes the most important part of recording has little to do with microphones, consoles or software. "One of the big skills of an engineer, is actually not only about his craft, but also how to make the artist comfortable." To achieve that, Hudlikar developed a habit of researching artists long before they stepped into the studio. "I used to do extensive research before working with an artist for the first time. I'd find out every detail: how they like their water, tea, or coffee; what chair they prefer; their microphone preferences—anything that makes them happy and comfortable. There's always an adrenaline rush, and there is that little bit of anxiousness and fear when you go in front of a microphone. The more at ease they are before they start recording, the better it is for the performance."

Great recordings are one reward; lasting relationships are another. "If *Didi* hears herself and says, 'Wow, is that me? I've never sounded this good,' she's only going to work with me, right?"

He recalls recording jazz legend **Herbie Hancock** during his Mumbai visit. Despite Hancock's stature, his humility stood out. "Such a gentle human being. For the giant musician he is, the humility was extraordinary.

I was nervous, but he just walked in, and his aura made you feel at home." The encounter left lasting impressions. "When he sits at the piano, it gets another life. Now every pianist needs to sound like Herbie Hancock in my head."

For Hudlikar, recording has never been merely about documenting a performance. It's about creating an environment where artists forget the technology, feel at ease, and give their best. The engineer's job is simply to be ready when that moment arrives.

A New Chapter at Sound and Vision

After decades at the centre of recording and mixing sessions, Hudlikar's role today is markedly different. As Technical Director at **Sound and Vision India**, he focuses less on day-to-day engineering and more on shaping technical direction—studio development, new technologies, training, up skilling and quality control. "My role is advisory: developing new studios, bringing in new technologies at various stages."

The responsibilities differ from earlier in his career but remain demanding. With facilities across multiple Indian regions and expansion underway, the focus is maintaining consistency across a growing network.

What Hudlikar appreciates most is the freedom to be selective. "I have more time to do other things—independent music, and music I choose to do." The shift to overseeing systems and standards has altered his work's nature, but not his relationship with music. If anything, it's allowed him to focus on projects that matter most.

Raising the Bar for IRAA

Hudlikar's trademark candour extends to his role as the newly appointed **IRAA Director**. When asked what he'd change about the awards ecosystem, his response is measured. Rather than identifying flaws, he sees opportunities to make the experience more engaging. "I don't think anything needs to be changed. We just need to make it more interesting."

His most ambitious proposal concerns the awards process itself. Rather than announcing winners in advance, he'd prefer preserving suspense until the ceremony.

"I would love it if winners weren't informed prior to the ceremony. I'd like it to be a surprise, so there's anticipation." He however acknowledges the practical challenges: "The logistics are crazier. I don't know if it'll happen within my tenure."

The benchmark is clear: "Something like the **Grammys** or the **Oscars**." Hudlikar sees scope for elevating production quality with additional funding. His vision for IRAA is rooted in refinement: improving execution, celebrating excellence effectively, and creating an experience worthy of the talent being recognised.

No Sugarcoating for the Next Generation

His advice to young engineers is as direct as everything else he says. "Hard work, perseverance, stick at it. I find a lot of kids today feel too entitled. They won't do this or that. They don't want to work the hours. There's a massive layer of mediocrity. Rise above that and excel—do the best you can. Don't compete with anybody on an artistic level, because it's not a competition. Just do your best, and don't bullshit."

His advice circles back to principles guiding his three-decade career: "Be focused, learn more, listen to good music, and get better at your craft."

The Legacy He Chooses

For someone whose career has been defined by candour, exacting standards and an unwavering commitment to the craft, it is perhaps fitting that his definition of success is far simpler than his body of work might suggest.

Asked how he would like to be remembered after more than three decades in the industry, Hudlikar doesn't mention awards, hit records or technical achievements. Instead, his answer returns to the values that have guided him throughout his career. "I'd just like to be remembered by and large as a good person, someone who is great to work with and a fun person to hang with."

After 36 years, he still continues in the pursuit of excellence, where it is not the recordings themselves that he hopes will leave the strongest impression, but the person behind them. "It's always about Rock and Roll!" as Hudlikar notes with conviction.