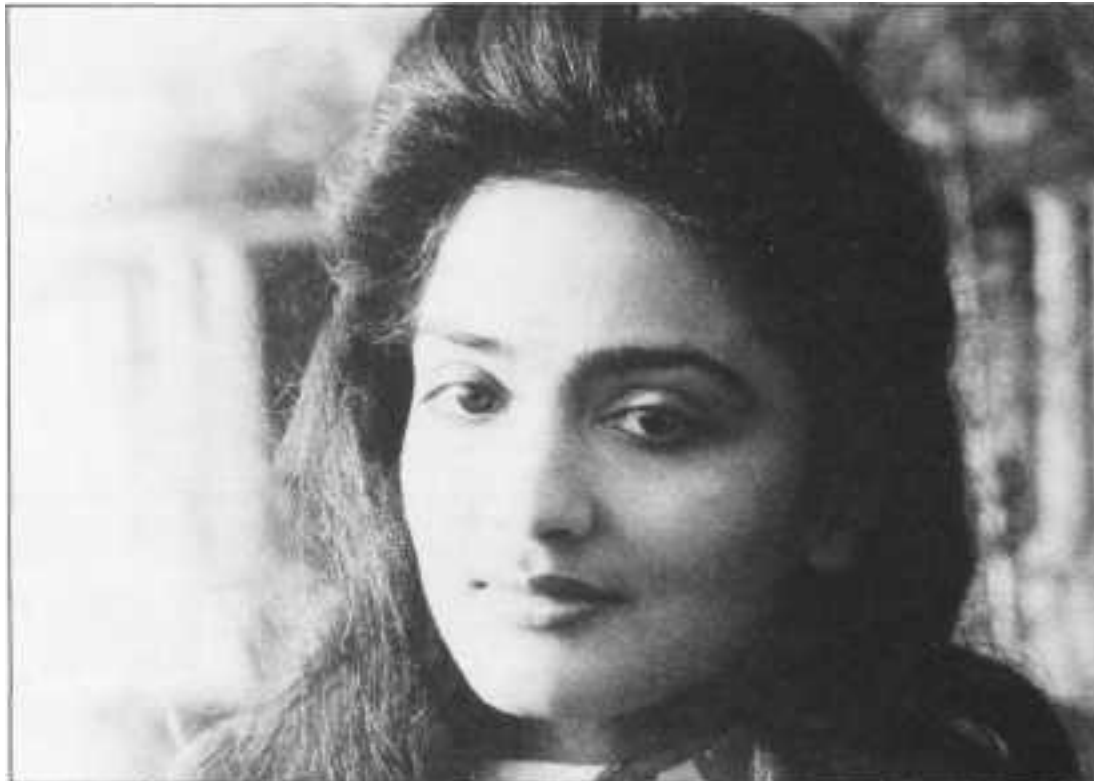


CHANNEL 5



Najma Akhtar: An elegant apartment block in central London, with exotic touches like a fountain in the vast marbled foyer, is a fitting location for a meeting with the fast-rising British Asian singer Najma.

On hearing her pure, melodic voice it's difficult to believe that four years ago Najma Akhtar was 'just a bathroom singer!' The turning point came when she started lessons with an Indian singing teacher in Leytonstone, east London, who recognised Najma's talent and persuaded her parents to let their young daughter enter the annual Asian Song Contest in Birmingham. Despite their initial reservations, they realised Najma's love of singing was 'more than just a passing phase' when, against the odds, she won the competition. As a result she abandoned her plans for a career in chemical engineering in favour of recording an album.

Qareeb (meaning 'nearness' or 'closeness'), on Triple Earth Records, has been praised by the critics and received extensive airplay on Capital and Radio 1 - Andy Kershaw is a particular fan - which she finds amazing. She also has a song featured in Hanif Kureishi's

new film *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*.

The stuff of fairytales perhaps, but things have not been quite that simple. The Muslim religion views singing as a morally dubious profession, especially for women, and Najma has had to rely on the support of her mother and her own strong will to overcome family disapproval, especially amongst her relatives in India. However, her parents have become increasingly liberal in their attitudes and no longer impose restrictions: Najma can wear skirts, go to discos, and sing if that is what she wants to do. Marriage and children will happen sometime, she hopes, but it won't be an arranged marriage.

Najma's plans for the near future are firmly career-based. The reception for *Qareeb* coupled with her intelligent realism makes a solid foundation for her ambitions.

Her band comprises West Indian, Indian and English musicians who help to create the unique mix of Western pop and jazz with an Indian feel. Future projects will build on this, with Najma continuing to sing *ghazals* (traditional Indian love poetry; 'ghazal' means 'word addressed to women') but in a

style that incorporates ideas inspired by listening to African and Arabian music.

Although she has always lived in England, Najma's roots are extremely important to her. She hopes that her success will not only inspire other young Asians to sing but will also encourage them to learn their own language. She thinks that the tv programmes made for the Asian community play a big part in this: 'Young Asians are very Westernised and want something modern, but I feel the programmes should include a section in Urdu. People like myself are a true mix - I've got so much of the East and the West; tv should reflect that mix.'

On the occasions when she has been interviewed for tv and radio, Najma admits that she has never been exactly lost for words and would relish the chance to present a programme herself.

It has also been suggested that she takes up acting, but, she says, 'My parents might see that as going overboard! Anyway, I love what I'm doing now.' •

Kate Rock

On March 1st Najma Akhtar will be appearing at the Birmingham Women's Festival.