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## HERSTORY

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# Rock concert initiative WE, led by 19-year-old Mrinalini Somani, raises over Rs 70L to help underprivileged youth

In 2013, Mrinalini Somani decided to use her passion for music to make a difference and pitched a joint charity musical rock concert from Salaam Bombay Foundation. Since 2013, WE has collected over Rs 2.7 crore to help the cause.

By **Rekha Balakrishnan**

WE, a rock concert, kicked off in 2013 by **Mrinalini Somani, a young musician/activist, with 26 children from The Cathedral and John Connon School, Mumbai**, has raised over Rs 2.7 crore in funds till date for the **Salaam Bombay Foundation**. The initiative plans to use the funds to enable more than 2,500 children to acquire training in dance, theatre, and music.

**On June 13, WE involved young artists from universities in the US and the UK, where Mrinalini is now based, in a performance streamed on Facebook.** The initiative raised over Rs 70 lakh to help close to 500 families supported by the Salaam Bombay Foundation.



Mrinalini Somani

WE initially performed at the Blue Frog for four years. The next two years, students from 13 schools across Mumbai performed to packed audiences at Royal Opera House. Last year, WE rocked at NCPA with students from 17 schools from Mumbai. The concert is a mix of rock, pop, and jazz western pieces and has a popular Bollywood section.

**The children helped by WE live in extreme poverty and are in “at-risk” environments. The municipal schools they go to do not have the resources to give them individual attention, career guidance, or access to activities that stimulate the mind.**

*In an interview with **HerStory**, Mrinalini Somani speaks about the initiative, her musical influences, and her future plans.*

**HerStory (HS) Tell us a little about yourself.**

**Mrinalini Somani (MS):** I'm 19 years old and I started WE when I was 12. When I started the show, I was in The Cathedral and John Connon School. I completed high school at Sherborne Girls, a boarding school in the UK. I'm now at Vassar College in New York, but I'm currently in Mumbai. I came back when the lockdown started. But I feel like London, New York, and Mumbai are all my homes.

**HS: Tell us about your foray into music and your early musical influences?**

**MS:** My family has always been very encouraging, and I've been singing since I can remember. I was jumping around performing since I could walk. I have had various teachers over the years and learnt different styles of music - from hindustani to western pop, rock, jazz, musical theatre, and classical styles. And now in college, music is a big part of my education as well and I'm being able to approach concepts in a very different way from a new perspective.

## **HS: Tell us about WE and your work with Salaam Bombay Foundation?**

**MS:** The story of how WE began goes back to 2013. I had volunteered with the Salaam Bombay Foundation and realised the children were just as talented and just as passionate about arts. All they lacked was opportunity. That is when I decided to use my passion for music to make a difference to their lives. I pitched the idea of a joint charity musical rock concert with the children from Salaam Bombay Foundation to some of my friends. That is how WE began.

**Since its inception, WE has raised over Rs 2.7 crore in funds, enabling more than 2,500 children from Salaam Bombay Foundation to acquire training in dance, theatre, and music. What binds us all together is our passion for the performing arts, and there are some of us who have been a part of the concert since it began.**

## **HS: Tell us all about your rock concert for a cause. How did you think of the concept?**

**MS:** In 2013, I asked my friends what they felt about the idea of a music concert to help children from the Salaam Bombay Foundation. They loved the idea, and we all felt this is something which can be worked upon. With support from them, I embarked upon this journey, and the show has actually grown a lot in the last seven years.

**It's easy for us to ask our parents for money to donate, but that doesn't involve any effort on our part. I wanted to do something with my time and talent because those are my assets as a student.**

So, we were 26 7th graders from Mumbai who began WE, and today we are 150 from all over the world, not counting our Salaam Bombay participants.



**HS: Who are you helping with this initiative?**

**MS:** With this initiative, we are reaching out to underprivileged youth from Mumbai's slums who are being supported by Salaam Bombay Foundation. We have had a fabulous run as we managed to raise as many as 2,500 scholarships through WE.

The training provided at Salaam Bombay Foundation's academies is very intensive in nature so that the best talent can be brought out among these children and adolescents. WE has played a significant role in involving more and more children in such vocational trainings.

**HS: Tell us about this year's concert.**

**MS:** Considering the current situation, the show was performed online through Facebook LIVE and YouTube. This year, we are happy that a whole gamut of new opportunities opened up for us to do something which we had never done before.

We had close to 192 students participating, out of which 150 were from private Indian and international schools based in Mumbai, the UK, and the USA, and 42 children from Salaam Bombay Foundation.

**This year, the funds raised through WE2020 will help Salaam Bombay students by catering to their immediate need for essential supplies and allow them to continue creative (music, dance, theatre) and vocational skill development through various learning opportunities.**

**HS: Tell us about about WE's musical repertoire...**

**MS:** At WE, we do a mix of performances, which includes dance as well as music. For dance, we have taken TikTok videos and mash ups, and for music we have rock, jazz, pop, and Bollywood hits from the 80s, 90s till present. Right from the Beatles to the 21 Pilots, we have it all. While normally we have 20 to 25 performances, this time we had 50 performances. The concert will be the same length, but this year we had time for more performances because of logistical convenience with bands/groups not required to change stages, etc.

**HS: What kind of music interests you?**

**MS:** My music tastes and influences have evolved a lot over the years, especially since the start of WE. From listening to pop artists like *One Direction* and Selena Gomez (who still have a fond place in my heart), my taste matured to artists like Michael Bublé. But my favorite bands right now are *The Wombats* and *All Time Low*. So I guess my music taste is all over the place.



## **HS: What are your future plans with WE, and personally?**

**MS:** This is such a great question, but also such a hard one to answer. I am asked this question so often and I never know what to say because this show surprises us every year. I never thought WE would be at Blue Frog or Royal Opera House or NCPA and now streaming worldwide! I just hope that WE keeps inspiring people, bringing joy to people, and bringing us all together. I'm so grateful for everyone who made this show possible. Personally, I have no idea what the future holds. I've just completed my first year of university (college), but I'm excited to see where my path will take me.

*(Edited by Megha Reddy)*

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