



Wool blend turtleneck,
price on request,
Michael Kors

About

a boy

*Under that wired, expansive, neon exterior, **Ranveer Singh** is earnest, secure and operating in the zone, finds **Neville Bhandara***

Photographs **ABHAY SINGH** Styling **PASHAM ALWANI**

Art direction **RESHMA RAJIWDEKAR**

The first time I met Ranveer Singh was on the day we shot him for ELLE. His managers glided in and out of the studio as they shuffled to and from Singh's vanity van, answering phone calls and making sure everything was ready. Eventually, the door opened and in he strutted, framed by the glare of the harsh afternoon sun that shone through the door. His hair was coiffed and teased, and he was dressed in the first look for the day. In his hand, he carried a retro tabletop Marshall speaker that blared music as he swaggered up to us, and then rather

anti-climactically, shook hands with and introduced himself politely to everyone in the room.

I watched as he posed for the camera: smiling, scowling, pouting—a sharp contrast to the rather private man I would later meet at his home. It's like Singh is drawing a line in the sand with all his theatrics. He's marking where public territory ends and where you may not trespass.

Other than a growing unease with prying eyes, Singh doesn't betray many other similarities with his peers. He doesn't seem constrained by the trappings of

lineage or custom. He brings a refreshing realness to his work that his fellow actors seem to struggle to do, and at any given time—both on and off screen—Singh is constantly trying to narrow the gap between his audience and himself.

He never overplays his masculinity, but he doesn't shy away from it, either. He's carved a little niche for himself that's made him not only the most sought-after actor of his generation, but perhaps the most likeable too.

Fast-forward to a month later and I'm in an elevator, racing up the belly of the high-rise Singh ▶

Cotton T-shirt, ₹ 2,299, **Kenzo x H&M**. Denim jacket, price on request, **Levi's**. Cotton blend trousers, ₹ 16,500, **Rishta by Arjun Saluja**. Velvet loafers, price on request, **Christian Louboutin**

STUDIO - 8



STUDIO - 8



calls home to interview him. I put my game face on, assuming that as an actor he'll have his on, too—in hindsight, I realise I couldn't have been more wrong. I enter to find that Singh decided to make the best use of time by squeezing in a workout at the gym downstairs and will be back soon. I'm asked to sit and make myself comfortable. Plump, colourful macarons are set out on the large coffee table and the air-conditioning is a respite from the heavy, noisy traffic outside. The room is all white walls, with floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the city, the familiar retro Marshall speaker on the table next to me and the biggest flat screen TV I've ever seen on a wall to my left. There's also a large treadmill. No room for lazy Netflix weekends when you have a body-fat ratio to guard.

Eventually, the door opens and Singh walks in. We shake hands and he sinks into a plush armchair. "Why are you late, dude?" he asks. I apologise and mumble about the traffic, feeling horribly awkward. "Don't worry, I'm just kidding," he replies, with a grin. I'm immediately at ease, much like I was after his warm greeting at the shoot. He's had a full day of meetings, and though it's 8pm, he's got a few more after ours, so we get right to it.

"I grew up as a '90s baby," says Singh, "very heavily influenced by the Indian music and movies of the time. There was never any doubt in my mind about what I wanted to do." He zips up a hoodie over his gym tank and guzzles a pale green juice set in front of him before going on. "I was obsessed with Hindi cinema. I wanted to be the quintessential hero, like my idols—

Mr Bachchan, Anil Kapoor, the three Khans and Akshay Kumar."

As fantastic as the dream was, Singh had no illusions about the odds against him. "The industry was very nepotistic at the time. All I saw were sons of stars, producers and directors getting breaks. There were no examples that gave me any courage or hope, so I dropped the idea and pursued creative writing for four years. In my second year of university in America, I was late to register for extra classes and everything except Acting 1 for Non Majors was full, so I signed up. In that first class, when I got up on stage to perform, I felt a rush...the kind I hadn't felt since my drama and elocution days in school. That's when I knew that what I wanted more than anything else in the world was to be an actor. I called my dad and told him. He said, 'Boy, you'd better finish your degree.' So I did."

Singh returned to Mumbai, emboldened. But it wasn't easy—the recession had just hit and there weren't too many movies being made, even fewer with new faces. For a few years, he dabbled in theatre, took acting classes and assisted directors as he went from one office to the next with his portfolio. Six or eight months into the ordeal, he got a phone call: Yash Raj Films was looking for a fresh face. Singh went in, auditioned and ultimately bagged the lead role in what became *Band Baajaa Baaraat* (2010), along with a three-film contract. "I couldn't believe it," he says, recounting the experience. "My knees went weak. I slumped to the floor. I had wanted it so bad, for so long."

After the critical and commercial success of the film, Singh's rise was meteoric: overnight stardom; a host of 'best male debutant' awards; congratulatory messages from industry veterans. "It was surreal," he says. "Even Shah Rukh Khan called me." It's not easy to deal with overnight stardom, though, and Singh admits that he struggled. "You don't know who to be, what to say, how to dress, how to behave. It's very confusing. You're very vulnerable at that time, especially if you don't have anyone around to tell you what it's like. So I had to hit the ground running and learn as I went along. It took me a year or two, but I got the hang of it as I did more work."

All the public approval propped him up till Singh found his feet, and by the time he became big enough to attract controversy, he had stopped looking outside for validation as much. Out of that, came empowerment and liberation. "Over the past three years, I have learnt that regardless of what I say or do, people are going to judge, so I live by a simple mantra: 'Let me be me.'"

Celebrity interviews can be cool, rehearsed, so no one reveals more than what's strictly necessary. Singh is different in this regard. He radiates genuine warmth. As he sits chatting in his gym shorts and a hoodie, it almost feels like this isn't an interview; it's a heart-to-heart. "I'm in a very comfortable space right now. Rubbish articles in the media don't bother me, rumours don't bother me, criticism doesn't

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Denim shirt, ₹ 3,500,
Levi's. Velvet jacket,
₹ 19,500, **Huemn**.
Cotton trousers,
₹ 9,000, **Sahil Aneja**.
Velvet sneakers,
price on request,
Ermenegildo Zegna



Cotton shirt, ₹ 24,000, **MSMG at The Collective**. Polyester jacket, price on request, **Hermès**. Cotton blend jeans, ₹ 18,000, **Armani Jeans**. Patent sneakers, price on request, **Christian Louboutin**

“THIS IS MY HOME. BUT SOMETIMES IT FEELS LIKE A GLASS BOX. CAN YOU IMAGINE IF YOUR HOME FELT LIKE THAT? HOW TRAPPED YOU WOULD FEEL?”

bother me. With every passing year, my learning curve spikes and my likes, dislikes and opinions become clearer.”

Considering the pride he takes in his outsider status, I ask if he would ever lend his might to an indie film. “No, I don’t think so,” comes the reply, almost too curtly. He’s probably been asked this before. “My favourite kinds of films are mainstream films, designed for a broad audience: entertainers and good, wholesome films. In six years, there hasn’t been any offer for an indie film that’s excited me.”

Singh’s step is surer now than it was when he played the guilt-ridden thief in 2013’s haunting film, *Lootera*. Nowhere is that evolution more obvious than in last year’s *Dil Dhadakne Do*, where he manages to make you feel real sympathy for a young, rich and muscular man-child. Even in Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s towering productions like *Bajirao Mastani* (2015), he holds his ground, bringing a manic energy and gruff affection to that larger-than-life character. It won him the second Filmfare Award of his career and most likely also sealed the deal on a third film with Bhansali, another historical epic titled *Padmavati*. He wouldn’t confirm it, but this is probably the film he’s referring to when he speaks of an upcoming project in which he plays the villain for the first time. All I can get from him is this: “Yesterday, I finished the first

schedule and it’s safe to say it’s one of the most exciting characters I have ever played.”

The college kid who once dreamed of becoming a star must be pleased at this turn of events. But the 31-year-old he is today sees that there is a price to pay—one that’s exacted by smartphones and their high-definition cameras. Singh struggles with being a private person in a public sphere. “I was playing a football game downstairs with the building kids today and there were people standing around taking pictures and videos. Did they even bother to ask if they could film me? I make it a point to educate people that it’s not cool to film me without my permission. Before football, I was lifting weights in the gym and there were people who were filming me doing that too!”

Part of the fascination with Singh is the story of his romance with co-star Deepika Padukone. They even have their own hashtag, and fans are very protective of #DeepVeer. But rumours of a break-up have been swirling around in the run-up to the release of his next film, Aditya Chopra’s *Befikre*, out this month, in which he and Vaani Kapoor seem to have sizzling chemistry. Since neither he nor Padukone have addressed these rumours, speculation runs wild and every citizen with a camera becomes the paparazzi.

“This is why I feel trapped in Bombay...in most parts of India,”

the actor adds, wistfully. “There are people in my building who take pictures of me entering the elevator. I’m not even doing anything remotely exciting. I’m going from point A to point B. And this is my home. But sometimes it feels like a glass box. Can you imagine if your home felt like that? How trapped you would feel? But I know there’s no way around it. So I try to focus on the good aspects. Fame, stardom, these are all frills—what lies at the core is acting.”

In private, the exuberance of Singh’s public persona is replaced with a quiet, intelligent dignity and an almost-painful earnestness. In public, he’s a charmer, a style icon, the guy who gives the audience what they want. He poses for selfies, hugs smitten fans and shakes every hand. He commands your attention when he walks into the room. But here, in his safe space, high above a city that thirsts for his attention, Singh is just another 30-something trying to keep it real.

“The things that people say ‘amuse’ them about me, these adjectives that I see attached to my persona—quirky, energetic—these are all just tags. I don’t subscribe to them. I don’t want to be put in a box,” he says. “Just let me be me,” he adds, before his entourage bursts into the room, and he goes back to being everyone’s favourite Bollywood star. ●

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: DARSHAN YEWALEKAR; PRODUCTION: PARUL MENEZES; ASSISTED BY: ANANYA MEHTA, NIKITA KATARIA (STYLING)