

Dissident Sounds: Mapping British Asian Music
By Ashwani Sharma

Sounds of migrancy

Music has a special place in the lives of migrants, a site for the continuous reinventing of an imagined home, and has played an important part in the everyday cultural and political struggles of Asians in a hostile and violent metropolitan environment. From its deep historical roots in the subcontinent, Indian music has travelled and accompanied South Asian settlers, contributing to the creation of a distinctive cultural presence in the West. While the subcontinent has remained the musical source, over the last 50 years, as the material and symbolic presence of Asians has increased, a distinctive British produced variant of Asian music has emerged. What is quite striking is how this music, while still having close connections to the subcontinent, has been mutating, constantly producing innovative forms of hybrid expressive culture, and persistently challenged the hegemony of white cultural supremacy.

Ravi Shanker and Co.

An important component in the historical establishment of South Asian music in Britain has been Indian classical music. Although principally restricted to concerts and private consumption, a significant proportion of formal music training in Britain has been in the classical traditions. Indian classical music provides a unique, culturally specific, theory of music and performance that inspires and acts as a foundation to the new British Asian sounds.

Although classical music is seen rather problematically as an exotic, authentic, traditional Eastern cultural form, classically trained musicians have themselves been open to western and other global music, and have openly worked with European classical, jazz, contemporary and pop musicians, to produce a complex and challenging hybrid music. Major figures such as Ravi Shanker and Zakir Hussain have gained worldwide recognition not just as classical performers, but also as musicians who have constantly experimented and improvised with the parameters of Indian and western rhythms and harmonies. One of the defining features of the developments in British Asian music, especially since the 1970s, has been the fusion of classical rhythms and melodies with various forms of pop, dance and jazz musical genres and electronic production technologies.

Bombay pulp fiction

The sounds of Bombay commercial cinema, rather problematically labelled 'Bollywood', would be the other key source in the development of the music. From the 1950s and 1960s, in the form of records and visits to the cinema, to the rise of the audiocassettes in the 1970s, and the video in the early 1980s, we have witnessed the rapid integration of film makers into British culture. Playback singers such as Lata Mangeskar, Asha Bosle and Mohammad Rafi are virtually household names in Asian Britain. Bombay film music has always been an eclectic mixture of Indian classical, folk and European classical, jazz and pop musical aesthetics, instrumentation and technologies- there has never been a pure form of film music. From Urdu poetry to Disco, all forms have been absorbed into this unique genre of Bombay pulp fiction.

The popularity of film music has risen, especially with younger audiences in the 1980s, with the increasing remixing of well-known Bombay tracks, largely aimed at the club dance floors

as well as in greater collaborations between westerns and Asian producers. The acclaimed Indian film composer A.R. Rehman's music for the Andrew Lloyd Weber produced London musical *Bombay Dreams* is one example of increasing presence of Bombay music production globally.

Bhangra - a new British sound

The key development in British Asian produced popular music has been the rise of Bhangra music. Emerging out of the Asian wedding circuit and private parties, in (sub)urban areas such as London and Birmingham in the 1970s, pioneering groups such as Alaap, Heera, Golden Star, DCS and producers such as Kuljit Bhamra reworked this traditional Punjabi folk music with new electronic production technologies and techniques. This new metropolitan Bhangra was a result of processing traditional dhol and drum beats and Punjabi folk melodies with synthesisers and samplers, with a heavier bass line and mixed with western pop and black dance rhythms. Cheap audiocassettes, and the rise of Asian DJs, sound systems and a remix production culture, made this genre popular, especially with British Asian youth. In an act of claiming a specific Asian cultural form, the music acted, for the youth, as a unifying point of identification across subcontinental religions, national and ethnic differences and as a way of challenging the 1980s new racism and the notion of English culture as exclusively white.

The Midlands based DJ and producer Bally Sagoo was one of the celebrated figures in the scene. Drawing upon his soul, reggae and dance background, Bally Sagoo created a funky brand of electro-bhangra. His remixing of Bhangra, as well as Bombay film music and Qawwali, for the dance floor in the 1980s and 1990s illustrates well the dynamic range of this new Asian music.

Although Bhangra continues to this day to outsell all forms of western pop music, it has never achieved official mainstream pop recognition. Partly because of this, as well as its idiosyncratic and culturally specific Punjabi lyrics, and rather kitsch machismo image, Bhangra has largely been a significant subculture within the Asian community- probably has claim to be called the real 'Asian underground'.

New musical encounters

If Bhangra has been largely limited to Asians, the figure of Apache Indian was one of the first Asian crossover pop figures. His 1993 release 'Movie Over India' - a fusion of Bhangra and Reggae, surprisingly reached the UK Top 40. His singing and toasting in Punjabi, Hindi and Jamaican Patois caused a stir amongst the Asians and Caribbean Diasporas and he eventually became the big name in Jamaica and the Indian sub-continent. His innovative cross-cultural call and response, with a linguistic authenticity and humour in Punjabi, as well as Jamaican English, captured a particular experience of being British Asian- at once at home in the urban sounds of the African Diaspora, as well as Asian and white Britain.

Apache Indian was not the first artist to consciously create a pop cultural fusion. In the early 1980s Sheila Chandra and her brand of 'Indo-pop', with the group Monsoon, was an early attempt to produce a distinctively Asian pop sound. The single 'Ever so Lonely' was an interesting experiment, mixing Chandra's evocative voice on simple electro-pop rhythms. The 'Indo-pop' sound never really established itself with a broader audience, but Sheila Chandra herself has continued her vocal experiments with various forms of folk and global music.

To greater critical and public acclaim in the 1980s and 1990s was the music and performances of Najma Akhtar. With her roots in the semi-classical Ghazal form and Punjabi music more generally, she produced a wide and subtle range of compositions, working with a number of different types of Asian, African and western, especially jazz musicals. In many ways Akhtar was a forerunner for the more recent Asian musical experiments.

A further element in the development of British Asian sounds was the popular genre of Qawwali. Remixing and collaboration in the British context enabled Qawwali to rework this Sufi inspired music to a new urban context. In particular, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan has been an important figure in exposing Qawwali to the west. With over 100 albums in Pakistan, he began in the 1980s to mix and perform live with western musicians, producers, rhythms and beats. It was Nusrat's collaboration with Peter Gabriel's Real World Label that produced one of the classic tracks of the new Asian music. The 1990 Massive Attack remix of Nusrat's 'Must Must', with its haunting reggae baseline and ecstatic vocals, was to push Nusrat into the edges of the Western mainstream. Qawwali artists such as Abida Parveen, Aziz Mian and Sabri Brothers have been an important inspiration and source of reconnecting the emerging British Asian musicians to the traditions of the subcontinent, through their performances and musical experiments in the west.

Militant rhythms

Urban Asian music's centrality in social life is manifested in the crucial role it has explicitly played within community and local organisations, providing an important site for creative forms of interventionist politics. Groups such as Joi Bangla, Asian Dub Foundation and Fun-da-mental have created imaginative forms of politically conscious music, as well as challenging the inequalities of racism in the music, cultural and social spheres. Early pioneers Joi Bangla Soundsystem emerged out of East London Bengali youth movement and became a focal point in the 1980s for various forms of Asian anti-racist resistance. Their mixing together of club sounds with Bengali instrumentation and vocals produced a distinctive new sound. Similarly Asian Dub foundation (ADF) with their roots in community music training and direct political action, have been a catalyst for the racially and socially excluded young people to enter and make an impact in the mainstream music industry, without compromising their social criticism. ADF's anarchic, reggae influenced, punk ethos blended with Asian beats and sounds have been crucial in challenging the persistent stereotyping and marginalization of Asian musicians. Similarly Fun-da-mental, with their in-your-face style of political Rap, sampled by Asian rhythms, Arabic sounds, Islamic chanting, reggae and funky hip-hop in an orgy of militant sound. Drawing upon and evoking a political brand of Islam, the group through the music, has challenged various forms of oppression. As with ADF they have enabled new artists to enter the industry through their Nation Records label.

The Asian Overground

The late 1990s saw the establishment of an Asian club culture, as an integral part of the mainstream metropolitan music scene. The Outcaste club nights in 1995 in Central London provided a key moment in the Asian Club culture- bringing together bhangra, Asian beats, as well as soul and black dance music in the West End, they attracted a young, fashion conscious, racially mixed crowd, and helped launch the Outcaste record label.

This DJ/Producer centred music culture juxtaposed a multitude of Asian influenced sounds with all forms of technological black dance music. The *Anokha* club night, under the direction of Talvin Singh, became an important mecca for the Asian scene in East London- a must go place for local Asian youth, as well as for the trendy London media crowd. Talvin Singh, a classically trained Indian table player, from East London, brought the 'Asian street style' to the London club scene - quickly labelled 'the Asian Underground' by the hungry metro press looking out for the latest ethnic fashion. The now classic 1997 collection 'Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground' is an important document in the history of Asian dance music capturing well the innovative and energetic sounds of an embryonic music culture.

Talvin Singh is now a major recording artist with albums that circumnavigate the global and musical spectrum. His 1998 OK Album was produced in Bombay, Okinawa, Madras, New York and London, with a host of diverse musicians, illustrating the increasing influence of the Asian diasporic sound on the world, and an indication of the increasing globalization of music culture.

The club scene has provided a crucial site for the development of diverse performers and audiences. Nights such as *Shakti* and *Club Kali* with their lesbian and gay focus, have been important in the creation of the diversity in the metropolitan music culture. Female performers have been seriously marginalised in the music scene, but at the same time been central to the scene. DJs such as Radical Sista and DJ Ritu, younger performers like Amar and Hard Kaur have all created a unique sound and presence. Club nights such as *Raha*, organised by Purple Banana, with their mix of DJs, Poetry, live performance, film, visuals, speeches and dance, and their commitment to overtly political causes have kept visible, the largely ignored links between music and social issues that have been so central to the development of British Asian music production.

The diversity of contemporary Asian music is well represented by the figure of the critically acclaimed Nitin Sawhney. Classically trained in Indian instruments, as well as the Spanish guitar, Sawhney's blend of jazz inflected, soulful Asian sounds highlights a music inspired by turmoil, struggle and joy of British Asian life. In a series of noted albums Sawhney has infused the scene with a contemplative poetic aesthetic, unique and challenging to the machinations of media hungry for easily digestible, ethnic exotica. Also evidence of the increasing presence of Asian music in the mainstream are bands such as Cornershop, with their Asian influenced sounds and themes, topping the mainstream pop charts.

In many ways Nitin Sawhney's music reflects the diversity and style of contemporary diasporic music. In a similar vein, the acclaimed Badmarsh and shri-DJ and Indian classical musician respectively- have created a unique blend of contemporary global Asian music. Their 2002 collaboration with the junglist UK Apache, in a soulful reggae track, 'Signs', exemplifies the eclectic and difficult to categorise mix of different Asian forms and musical genres. British Asian music is at the heart of a cultural globalization where greater levels of interaction and hybridity create new forms of artistic expression, while at the same time the music provides a particular history of racial and social change.

Useful background reading

Hutynek, John, Sharma, Ashwani and Sharma, Sanjay, eds., *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, Zed Books, 1996