

Kuljit Bhamra

Kuljit Bhamra is a self-taught composer, tabla player and record producer with an extensive musical repertoire. His name has become synonymous with vibrant percussion performances, and his company, Keda Records, is the pioneering name behind Britain's largest contemporary Bhangra record label.

Born in Nairobi in 1959, Bhamra moved with his family to Southall, West London in 1961. He learnt to play the tabla by imitating his father as he accompanied Kuljit's mother, singer Mohinder Kaur Bhamra, who performed devotional songs at local Sikh temples. Bhamra discovered he possessed a natural talent for the tabla, and soon took over his father's role. Bhamra and his two younger brothers, who played the accordion and mandolin, also performed extensively alongside their mother at private parties at weekends and at religious occasions across the country.

As a teenager, Bhamra's musical influences included Led Zeppelin, and the Bee Gees, global pop music as well as Indian film music, later to be branded as 'Bollywood' music.

After years of performing at community events and weddings, Kuljit Bhamra and his family had recognised the lack of contemporary Punjabi dance music available to the diaspora community. Seizing the opportunity to use his skills, Bhamra endeavoured to combine the traditional folk rhythms of Bhangra with a more contemporary, dynamic music beat in order to create dance music for the community. He studied western and eastern rhythms, instrumentation, production techniques, composition and lyrics. As Bhamra recalls, "*...my bedroom was cluttered with recording gadgets, synthesisers, drum machines and a reel to reel tape recorder to slow down recordings so that I could analyse the songs.*"

However, Kuljit Bhamra's father maintained music should remain a hobby and that his children go on to university and gain professional qualifications. In 1982, Kuljit Bhamra graduated from Middlesex University as a civil engineer, and went on to work for Richmond Council as a Highways Engineer.

In 1983, Southall based singer Premi asked Kuljit Bhamra to arrange and produce his album. Bhamra relished the opportunity to expose his production skills and soon afterwards decided to pursue his passion for music production professionally.

Bhamra's production career reached a turning point after the great success of the single 'Rail Gaddi' (still the most well-known party Bhangra track) for the Chirag Pechan Group. Having worked for several recording companies, he felt frustrated by the lack of concern other record companies showed for their artists. So, in 1986, along with colleagues Essam Rashad from Egypt, David Knowles and Alan Heaton from England, Bhamra established his own label, Keda Records, through a determination to provide a quality service to artists. (The company name is an acronym of the founding members' names). The Keda team aimed to create music which incorporated Indian, Egyptian and British influences to appeal to a very wide audience.

By applying heavy bass lines, synthesisers and remixed samples and techniques to traditional Punjabi folk rhythms, Keda Records became a unique record company; selling South Asian British produced music, nationally. Bhamra has launched and composed for artists such as A S Kang, Heera and Gurdas Maan. He co-wrote and produced the famed single 'Patel Rap' by Bali Brahmhatt.

By the late 1980s, Keda Records had a significant presence in the music market, selling thousands of high quality recordings by local and international singers, within the UK's South Asian communities. During the 1990s, Bhamra worked with international singers and musicians, including the late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Jagjit Singh, Zakir Hussain, Sultan Khan, Hans Raj Hans and the Sabri Brothers. Bhamra produced individual tracks and albums and also accompanied them at live performances in the UK and abroad.

After the Bhangra craze peaked, Kuljit Bhamra stepped aside as an instrumentalist and worked on several collaborative productions as a composer/producer. Bhamra's first on-screen experience was alongside nine other Indian drummers in a scene of 'Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom' (1984). Then in the early 1990s, Bhamra began composing musical scores for film, theatre and television including Gurinder Chadha's award-winning film, 'Bhaji on the Beach' (1993) and was soon commissioned for the films 'Little Princess' (1995), 'Bend It Like Beckham' (2002) and 'The Four Feathers' (2002).

In 2002, Bhamra was headhunted by director Andrew Lloyd Webber and renowned composer A R Rahman for their jointly produced West End musical 'Bombay Dreams'. He has spent the last two years appearing as an on-stage percussionist in the musical to great acclaim. In his most recent role, Bhamra appears as a drummer in Oliver Stone's film, 'Alexander the Great' (2004). Bhamra feels his extensive experience with both Indian and Western musicians have contributed to his reputation as a flexible musician. He explains, *"...this is unique because of the very different approaches to music in the two cultures: Indian musicians are trained to be masters of improvisation whereas western musicians train to play music which has been written by another composer. It is very difficult to find Indian musicians to work in a western context, especially in a West End theatre context...where you are playing the same thing eight times a week"*!

In 2004, Bhamra established his own band 'Taala', consisting of musicians from different cultural backgrounds. The performances comprise a fusion of musical styles including jazz, classical music and Bhangra pop styles.

Kuljit Bhamra is also involved in education work delivering interactive lectures and is currently composing music for a theatre production entitled 'Deranged Marriage', produced by The Reduced Indian Film Company. His second solo album, at 'Melting Point' has just been released and an autobiography which looks at the British Asian music industry through first-hand anecdotes is near completion.