

# **Bhangra In Birmingham Ltd**

**Birmingham International Bhangra Capital** – the Bhangra Industry in Birmingham is renowned around the world in leading the way in the development a Punjabi art form into a global Industry. It has the potential to become Birmingham's leading, innovative and unique specialist knowledge-based industry, that has the potential to be Birmingham's next mass export industry, which employs locally.

## **Introduction**

Asian music in the UK has grown and developed as the Asian population in the UK has grown and developed. The first immigrant families coming from India/Pakistan were predominantly from the Punjab region of India and Pakistan. The Punjabi community whose roots lie with Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims is a majority amongst the Asian community in the UK. These immigrant families settled in areas of high employment, these being mainly the Midlands and the South East of England, which are still populated and influenced by the Punjabi culture and heritage. The early settlers in these areas worked in the smoke filled steel factories doing the manual work that other communities were not willing to do. Asian businesses have grown to serve their needs for food, clothing and entertainment. The sense of belonging to a community gradually made the Asian community want to make a mark and be a part of the community this dream gave rise to the food and clothing businesses, once catering for Asians now catering for the whole community with shelves in major retail outlets. One of these needs was the need to have their own entertainment which was in the traditional form of Punjabi folk music known as Bhangra. Beginning as a form of lively folk music performed at harvests in the Punjab and the motions from the dance and songs captured the family rejoicing o the harvest. Bhangra has evolved remarkably over the past five hundred years. The music now fully represents the culture of the Punjab region, and the struggles of its people in their long and storied history. Moreover, the music still evolves today, incorporating elements of many different kinds of music from around the world, while still existing in its traditional form. Thanks to this diversification, Bhangra now reaches a larger audience than ever, all over the world, and we can easily expect Bhangra to continue its movement into mainstream culture well into the next century.

The UK Asian music industry has grew from the basic rule of supply and demand, similar to many other Asian industries such as fashion and food, all of which have been recognized by mainstream UK markets. The UK Asian music industry has become a major Asian market and has continued to evolve outside the mainstream music industry, like the reggae industry in the early 70's. Now the reggae industry has given rise to Hip Hop, Soul and American R&B to be prominent in the mainstream industry. Bhangra is an icon of Punjabi culture in the UK to both Punjabi and non Punjabi music fans. With the emergence of so many talented Bhangra artists, integrating Bhangra folk songs and musical instruments with Western music, enthusiasm for Bhangra has developed to become an important part of mainstream music and the UK's arts industry.

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Birmingham has been without a doubt the hub of UK Bhangra and home to some of the most influential bands and promoters of the music.

Bhangra music and dance has evolved into many forms and guises but still retains its influences from its roots, which is the unique element creating the fusion between young and old generations. The definition of “Bhangra” is a popular energetic form of 'folk dance' of the people of Punjab, which has developed into a label for a popular style of music combining traditional Bhangra music and songs with modern Western instruments and rhythms. From originating in Punjab it has been popularised by the Punjabi community in Britain. This popularity has spread to all Punjabi communities worldwide. Bhangra can still be accessed in its traditional form, dancing, music and song, which is performed at weddings, parties and Vaisakhi. Bhangra has now two forms, the traditional art and the contemporary commercial industry but they are both seamlessly linked.

It is also important to recognise that Bhangra is not the only form of Punjabi music, but it is the one most commercially recognized. The other more classical Punjabi music and art forms have all influenced traditional and popular Bhangra, but also UK Asian music.

### **Bhangra Industry**

The “Bhangra Industry” has been known as an industry since the early 80’s when the news media created in London took notice of the noises being made in Birmingham. There is no formal identifiable asset that can easily be recognised as being ‘the industry’ but the “Bhangra Industry” is an industry, as it creates, performs, promotes, and preserves music. A general understanding of ‘an industry’ is it is a grouping of businesses that share a common method of generating profits, from Bhangra music. Within the area of Bhangra music in Birmingham the following areas exist, but are still hugely fragmented:

- musicians such as singers
- composers and songwriters
- record producers
- record companies
- record labels
- record distributors
- band managers
- tour promoters

It may not have a definite infrastructure or meet the mainstream standards, but for an unregulated and virtually invisible industry to the UK investors and music industry, the UK Bhangra industry has created a worldwide appeal and an international export market. The industry has been an underground industry since inception. Many of its sales were not recorded and were not through

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recognized through mainstream outlets. In the early years the Punjabi folk bands would club together for a recording session and pass their 7" records through the pubs. It has been estimated that many of the songs produced and sold could have entered on the mainstream charts based on unit sales. The industry is still invisible and remains underground, but is slowly moving into the mainstream, through its ability to influence other music forms. Bhangra has no age limit be it the audience or those employed by it is like any other creative/music industry it is run by those who are passionate or interested by it.

Historically, and still to this day, it remains a "cash in hand" business; as many of the investors in these musical projects are investing their own personal money with the intention of securing a quick return. The industry in recent years has been dominated by the distributors and music labels, in many cases the same company, using external production companies. There is now an increase in production companies who in many cases are sourcing their own talent, producing the records and then distributing them into the international market place. Not only is it now easier to produce and distribute music due to technological advancements and the advent of the world wide web, the growth of the Asian media is also helping to form the industry. Today's young producers are becoming record company bosses and using skills from Business Studies and Computer Studies to create micro companies to push their culture albeit with hip hop beats. It has been estimated that many of the songs produced and sold all over the U.K could enter into the mainstream charts based on unit sales. The industry whilst still invisible remains underground, but moves into the mainstream, through its ability to influence other music forms. Bhangra has no age limit be it the audience or those employed by it is like any other creative/music industry it is run by those who are passionate or interested by it.

The growth of the Asian media industry is also helping to form the industry with an 'unofficial' UK standard mark. 20 years ago the mainstream media, press, and radio would feature Asian music once a year, if that. Today Asian music and entertainment have their own media and the mainstream want to be a part of the global empire, in its own country. Cinema halls catering for Asian families have taken off over the past five years and those showing Bollywood films have targeted their programming to appeal to the Asian market place with great profitability. The cinema media has given the whole entertainment industry the potential to obtain both critical and commercial acknowledgement. BBC Radio 1 DJ's Bobby Friction and Nihal play a variety of Asian music with their two hour show aimed at those who appreciate Bhangra music as well as music that is labeled leftfield with 700,000 listeners each week from across the world, there is growing widespread appeal.

While this industry is steadily maturing and influencing other musical styles, to continue to grow and achieve a sustained level of success the industry it needs to develop the basic functions as recognized by the mainstream industries, which will then provide support and regulation to a complete industry.

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## Birmingham

Birmingham is a locus of ethnic community-based economic networks, its economic position can be viewed as constructed through, and interwoven with, numerous ethnic networks, some more visible than others. Birmingham's ethnicity-based economic networks are growing through particular commodities that have become associated with (minority) ethnicity. For example, spices and pulses were commodities which were imported into the U.K and Birmingham to accommodate the needs of the growing Asian community. Today it is music whose rich heritage which lies in the sub continent is attracting attention at the moment, British made Bhangra music, is one commodity attracting attention at the moment. This is a product based on the fusion of Punjabi sounds with western and broader styles of music, (such as ragga, reggae, soul, jazz funk, rock, hip-hop, pop), that is making the big producers in the States and Europe listen attentively to catch a new style. Due to the large concentration of Punjabi's in Birmingham, it is also home to many classical Punjabi music forms, which has influenced many a Bhangra musician. Also Birmingham and its suburb of Handsworth has been the training ground for many Bhangra musicians to be born in the area or emigrate from other parts of the UK and the World.

Bhangra has come a long way in the 21st Century and has recently taken the entertainment industry by storm. In the 1970s and 1980s, many Punjabi singers from South Asia and the United Kingdom emerged, setting the stage for Bhangra to become a hot new trend in dance music. Modern Bhangra artists, in addition to recording and performing traditional Bhangra, have also fused Bhangra with other music genres, such as hip-hop, reggae, house, and drum-and-bass.

This is now so popular within Birmingham that the city is recognised as the centre for Bhangra music in Britain. Although this music genre is enjoyed by numerous British South Asians in other cities (especially London), Birmingham is by far the cultural capital for Bhangra music. This can be seen in terms of the large number of bands in the city, several recording and distribution companies, the steady production of new albums, and the growing number of live DJs.

British South Asians are not restricted by genre or ethnicity, and Bhangra reflects this.

This collection of artists, musical talent and expertise, as well as the increasing live performance of British Bhangra at gigs, private celebratory parties and international recognition and success, helps to constitute a unique form of cultural production and music industry. The close suburbs of Birmingham make the artists accessible to the producers and the whole industry accessible to each other without the worry of tailbacks or an large motorway to drive on to get to the South of Birmingham from the North.

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Birmingham is home to approximately 50 international performing Bhangra acts, which include DJ's, live acts and dance teams, there are also over 10 international producing record labels.

At present as the industry is very much “unregulated”, it is estimated it has created an economy which is has a potential worth several millions of pounds and has created employment for hundreds of local people. It is home to many entrepreneurial individuals who are constantly exploring and challenging new limits. Below is a snapshot of the industry in monetary terms, but this is a “guesstimation” due to the nature of the business in its present state, the figures below are conservative figures:

<b>Number of records sold</b>	<b>Sales</b>		<b>No.releases</b>		<b>No.labels</b>	<b>£</b>
<b>Present</b>						
12 records a year	5000	30000	12	360000	10	3600000
						0
licensing income						0
India	2500	15000	12	180000	10	1800000
Middle East	1500	9000	12	108000	10	1080000
Canada	2500	15000	12	180000	10	1800000
Europe	500	3000	12	36000	10	360000
						<b>8640000</b>
<b>Future</b>						
12 records a year	5000	30000	12	360000	10	3600000
						0
licensing income						0
India	5000	30000	12	360000	10	3600000
Middle East	3000	18000	12	216000	10	2160000
Canada	2500	15000	12	180000	10	1800000
Europe	5500	33000	12	396000	10	3960000
						<b>15120000</b>

***Above is assumed on typical sales for any given year.  
There is a growing market in USA which has yet to be fully explored and exploited.***

Bhangra in all its varieties has growing international appeal, with a potential market of 100-120 million Punjabis worldwide, which can extend to other communities. There are additional sales opportunities that exist with the licensing of Bhangra products within the various interactive formats. There is also potential to increase income through technology advancements allowing digital sales, publishing, merchandising, etc. With mainstream music exploring live music as its main generator of income, Bhangra artists are also exploiting live performance opportunities and touring. There is a major export potential of live acts around the globe which will lead to employment and future training opportunities for

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musicians. Markets of the Far East and USA are potential growth markets which have yet to be fully explored or exploited.

There is a whole educational and training economy with the international and national recognition of Birmingham being home to Bhangra. With investment and endorsement the industry can be recognized as offering a variety of “proper” jobs, covering all aspects of the industry and giving individuals transferable skills. There is already acknowledgement from the University of Central England which has created a postgraduate course for community musicians to teach within the community. The newly formed BBC Asian Network, who has a responsibility of lifting the British-Asian music scene across all its genres, has been based in Birmingham’s flagship The Mailbox. This rides along with the Midlands first ever 24hour Asian radio station based in Birmingham, Radio XL and a host of record labels scattered across the Birmingham conurbations:

- NACHURAL RECORDS – SMETHWICK
- ORIENTAL STAR AGENCIES – MOSELEY
- ENVY MUSIC – HANDSWORTH
- MUSIC WORLD – HANDSWORTH
- AB RECORDS –HANDSWORTH
- MOVIEBOX – SMALL HEATH
- REALTONE - NEWTOWN
- KISMET – SMALL HEATH
- CYBERPHONIC RECORDS – MOSELEY
- ROMA RECORDS – HANDSWORTH
- SHAANTI PLAY – SMETHWICK
- PRANAY RECORDS – HANDSWORTH
- GOLDMIND RECORDINGS – ASTON

Of recent there have been some major breakthroughs which further solidifies Bhangra’s growing popularity, such as:

- Punjabi MC – single “Mundian Toh Bach Ke” became a massive dance floor and chart hit throughout Europe with 450,000 registered sales in Germany alone.
- The Xbox game ***Project Gotham Racing 3*** includes songs from twelve Bhangra tracks, this includes artists from Birmingham. This is the first time that Bhangra tracks have been placed on any interactive game and endorses the mainstream opinion that Bhangra has finally arrived in the ever increasing music market.
- Birmingham is also home of International Bhangra champions Nachda Sansaar, who opened the G8 summit, Eurovision Song Contest and the Commonwealth Games.

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- The first artist to cross-over from 'Bhangra ghetto' to 'mainstream chart success' with Island records was Apache Indian who still lives and has his record company based in Birmingham
- The exhibition 'From Soho Road to the Punjab' charted the history of Bhangra music in Birmingham but was welcomed and toured nationally, it was featured on BBC Radio 4 women's hour, BBC Radio One and The Times Music supplement are following with an article in April 2006.
- Bollywood has also recognised the popularity of Bhangra and the soundtracks of the films have a Bhangra influence if not a song, many of these songs have been produced by UK British Asian artists, many of them from Birmingham.
- The stage of Live8 saw a team of dhol players (Dhol Blasters) represent alongside Birmingham biggest band UB40. An audience of millions.
- Birmingham based producers are now on demand to mix and remix mainstream chart acts from Britney to Jay Z.
- Birmingham has been recognized as a place for potential Bhangra artists to hone their talent, such as Jazzy B and Hans Raj Hans, before tackling the larger international market.
- Most fascinating is that Bhangra created in Birmingham is being exported back to its origins in the Punjab, India; supplying the needs of the market place internationally.

This snapshot shows the potential positive economic impact and contribution of Bhangra to the city, further supporting the fact that Birmingham is the Capital of Bhangra and with the right investment and support can become a major industry. At present much of the arts funding is going to South Asian Classical art forms and organisations, a local example being SAMPAD which is a regularly funded organisation, (RFO). Funds have been allocated in terms of fantastic venues and salaries for personnel to run the organisations. Support has been vast and has emanated from the Arts Council.

An investment in Bhangra and all the components of Punjabi music will not just be an investment for arts sake it will be an investment in a production industry which exports internationally, but employs locally.

### Conclusion

The evidence reveals a picture of economic activities drawing on networks, both local and global, to create unique and highly competitive products and services. These are not examples of unique ethnic entrepreneurialism but networks of increasingly **business as usual** enterprises in Birmingham. This is not 'third world comes to first' through ethnic entrepreneurial sweatshops; rather these economic activities should be framed within the literatures of economic geography concerned with 'new industrial spaces' and 'networks', and the production of new hybrid products, with very different geographies.

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The Bhangra industry has the potential of being the city's next revolutionising international industry such as the more widely celebrated success of the 'Birmingham balti'. Birmingham and the West Midlands region is now world famous for its balti which, like Bhangra music, is a hybrid product of early settlers from the sub-continent and fusion of British Asian cultures. There are endless arguments as to whether or not the the 'balti' as a product is 'authentic' to the West Midlands, Birmingham or the Punjab. What *is* significant is the fact that it is identified with a particular set of migrants to, and residents of, Birmingham and its region. These migrants have redefined this traditional "dish" into something unique that combines their ethnic roots with living in a Western city called Birmingham. This sets the precedence to help establish forms of Punjabi art be it classical or popular Bhangra dance teams, there will be a platform for Punjabi's to explore and evolve all art forms.

The Bhangra industry for Birmingham is a unique combination of intellect, education, culture and entrepreneurship to supply a global product. To create a sustainable and achievable industry there needs to be a collective movement between Marketing Birmingham and other RDA's, BBC Asian Network and us; the Birmingham Bhangra Collective consisting of production, record labels, and artists.