

IV Themes

The Media: magazines/ publications/ radio/ newspapers

Despite bhangra's growing popularity with Asian youth, during the 70's and 80's, and its resonance for the older Asian community, it was failing to enter into mainstream public consciousness. Those listening remained predominantly Punjabi as the mainstream media failed to pick up on this music led sub-culture. Few radio DJ's featured bhangra on their shows, with the exception of John Peel and Andy Kershaw, and initially there was even little capacity on local radio. Mainstream newspapers and magazines rarely – if ever - covered events, or reviewed albums, singles or bands, acting instead as if the bhangra movement didn't exist.

Consequently, an underground infrastructure of pirate radio stations, magazines and distribution companies began to emerge. These included the 24-hour Asian Sunrise Radio in London, initially starting illegally, the radio station went on to be granted a license to broadcast legally. 'Boy Chana' was also part of the pirate radio network when at Apra Radio and he recalls busts frequently taking place, until he began to DJ for what was Choice FM – now Galaxy – and Radio XL. Prior to this he also played out on community radio 'Fusion FM', on air 3 till 5pm on Saturdays from October 1994. Birmingham wasn't alone in having community and pirate radio stations, they were also to be found in Nottingham with 'Dhamaka', Derby's 'Aajkal' and Manchester's 'Pataka'.

The bhangra scene developed due to word of mouth networks and live events taking place at birthdays and weddings. As is commented in the video, "The only way we could promote ourselves was by doing any gigs that we could do ... for the first 3 years we didn't charge at all, the only way was by word of mouth." The structure was already in place and it was the mainstream that was missing out on this vibrant sub culture. People heard about events through aunts, uncles,

cousins, sisters, brothers and friends and attendance at events grew as the scene itself grew - without any mainstream media attention.

However, slowly, a whole new media developed which was formed out of Asian communities desire to see themselves and their culture represented. This media subsection sought to reflect and represent the culture of Asian communities in Britain and once again Chana was part of this movement. "I started working as a freelance journalist, promoting Bhangra, for Britain's biggest Asian weekly newspaper, Eastern Eye, in 1988 - coincidentally the year of the very first mela held in Nottingham - and continued to do so up until the late 90's."

Today, there's a long list of newspapers and magazines that developed due to a demand from the UK's Asian communities – this demand is equally reflected in the number of bhangra based websites. Media contacts include BBC Asian Network; Radio XL; Radio Sabras; Galaxy FM; Eastern Eye (in particular the Spice section); Asian Leader; Asian Times; New Nation; Asian Bride; Snoop Magazine; Desi Magazine and Asiana Magazine amongst many others, as well as countless websites. The success of such 'alternative' media, encouraged mainstream media to re-examine their attitude towards the bhangra scene and gradually local BBC radio started to develop a growing network of Asian music shows across its stations throughout the UK. Specialist music papers and magazines began to acknowledge what was classified as the 'New Asian Kool' an expression that became a frequent term throughout the early 90's, although opinion was mixed as to its real value in representing Asian communities.

By 1994, Apache Indian had become the first Asian radio presenter on BBC Radio One. His show featured ragga, reggae and bhangra tracks. He was soon followed by one of very few female DJ's, DJ Ritu on London's KISS 100 and with the Bhangrabeat series on BBC World Service. On TV, the arrival of ZEE TV (24-hour Asian programming) finally enabled greater bhangra exposure in this country as well as abroad. Bhangra had finally found a full set of media outlets.

Breaking into the Mainstream Charts

A key question often asked is why was it so hard for bhangra to break into the mainstream charts when units – Bhangra tracks - were selling at such a rate. In the 90's bhangra tapes, with 5+ tracks on, would sell, on average, 150, 000 copies, sufficient to go gold and often more than 5 times enough for a number one single.

One major factor that is often cited as the reason bhangra failed, despite record sales, to break into the mainstream charts, was due to the method of sales and distribution as well as the economics attached to these. Most acts distributed music primarily in the form of tapes, through an informal network of Asian stores. Sales were cheap and didn't register on chart records, hence for over a decade, bhangra albums, on tapes, were sold for just under £3. In the early 00's bhangra albums sold for approximately £5, far below the approximate £13 it costs to buy most other – chart - albums. Subsequently, Asian audiences are invariably unwilling to pay the prices charged by mainstream retailers.

Unsurprisingly, such figures impact on the pay available to musicians, producers and singers. Bands and artists mentioned in the exhibition continued to work in full or part time jobs, working full time as a bhangra artist just wasn't a financially viable option. Artists were paid a set fee per album or track, employed frequently as session musicians and singers, most albums were recorded for less than £10,000 to cover all costs. Artists rarely saw the profits of any high selling albums. Most earned far more at live performances, where money would be paid directly to the bands and singers.

However, being un-represented by the larger retail companies meant that bhangra artists were also over-looked in accounting the mainstream sales charts, specifically the Top 40. Bhangra acts, whilst selling in the thousands, were never

present in the charts. There was ignorance and racism within this. The major labels were uninterested in finding talent from within the Asian community whilst the media was unconcerned about the complete lack of presence of Asian music within mainstream music.

Furthermore, the Gallup poll that collated the figures for the Charts required the use of bar codes. Unfortunately, the tapes and CD's sold in local Asian stores were never bar coded, even whilst 90% of bhangra sales took place within Asian stores. The figure is so high partly because the major chains rarely stock Asian music, so the choice where to buy is limited from the start. In the early 00's some attempts were made to fit bar codes within a number of Asian music stores, however these met with mixed success. Storeholders were suspicious of the audit thinking it would add to their workload and tended not to maintain records – the years of being ignored having set in place a culture of distrust and indifference towards the mainstream infrastructure.

Apache Indian is an interesting example of one of the few artists who have managed to crossover into the UK Top 40. Perhaps because his music draws on such a range of musical styles – mixing bhangra, reggae and ragga, for example with his 1993 release 'Movie Over India'. The track included singing and toasting in Punjabi, Hindi and Jamaican Patois and caused a stir amongst both the Asian and Caribbean diasporas.

However, he really is the exception, since whilst Bhangra continues to outsell most 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, as well as its machismo image, Bhangra has largely remained a significant subculture within the Asian community.

The Day-timers

In the 80's young Asians would put on their uniforms and leave for school, once there they would change into their club gear, shalwaar kameez or Western dress and head out to a 'day-timer'. Here they could indulge in checking-out the most promising DJs like x-cutive Sounds and Hustlers Convention who served up the latest bhangra beats mixed with soul, disco and hip-hop tracks. Boy Chana was very much a part of the movement, his first day-timer was at the exclusive venue of 'Bonkers' in Birmingham, an event for which he skived off school for.

DJs like x-cutive Sounds produced the X-tra Hot series of best-selling remix LPs through Multitone, mixing existing bhangra tracks and adding house or hip-hop beats plus extra voice samples. Well-known bhangra and Western tracks were worked together, produced for a wider, younger audience. A particularly successful album, 'Wham Bam', appeared in 1990, a collection of remixed material from Bally Sagoo, a highly sophisticated production that caused a stir, merging classic bhangra tracks with a wide range of dance beats exclusively for the disco floor.

Day-timers began as large birthday parties, originally they were held in pubs with young people bringing tapes, then came the stereos and then as the events grew they moved onto clubs. They began as a rare opportunity for young Asians to go out, listen to bhangra and meet up and in their early years, they were celebrated as a new cultural meeting space. Day-timers developed from recorded music to live performances from all of the great bhangra performers. At a day-timer one could listen to Alaap, DCS, Heera, Apna Sangeet amongst many many others. Meanwhile, The Sahotas started to mix reggae rhythms with their bhangra sound whilst the 'great Punjabi hope' Malkit Singh kept his music strictly traditional.

For Chana, these first day-timer events were awe-inspiring. As he recalls, "at that time it was amazing to see so many Asian kids in one area and in a

nightclub! It was an entirely new experience, bringing for many a real sense of belonging, the buzz of being there was sufficient.”

The day-time concept came about for a number of reasons, firstly it was difficult, to say the least, for Asian promoters to access large club venues at nights. They were already booked out playing a range of music, but never bhangra. Club owners weren't keen to risk a night's takings on a new, unheard of, cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, Asian youth, particularly females, weren't encouraged to go out to clubs, they experienced considerable pressure to remain within family circles. Day-timers offered them an opportunity to meet and socialise in a new environment, one away from the community view.

Achanak, a Birmingham band, set up by tabla player Ninder Johal, had always been progressive with their state of the art synthesiser sound, now they initiated a revolution in dress code by declaring medallions and flares out – Armani suits in!

Day-timers spread and promoters were making large amounts of money on huge attendances at regular events. This, however, became their downfall. As attendance grew, school attendance led records to be questioned and parents, who'd been successfully kept in the dark as part of the day-timer concept, started to discover where young people had been spending their time – and it wasn't in school.

As Danny from DCS comments “We played at the day-timers in the beginning but that was to support bhangra, now we don't agree with them. Youngsters started messing about and skiving school. I don't think anybody realised the effect it was going to have. But the loss of them has also affected bhangra; when day-time shows were going on there was a lot of force and excitement which seems to be lost now. I think it has affected the whole industry.” (Spice, 8/1/91)

There were also frictions between groups, erupting into violence based on religion and territory – both geographical and female. The Sikh's from Handsworth formed the 'Shere Punjab' gang, whilst Muslims took ownership of Aston with the Panthers – the gangs existing today came a long time after these groups were active. The Dome in Birmingham was one of a number of venues that regularly hosted day-timers, however after numerous fights and considerable opposition from the local Asian community they stopped them, as they comment "They used to be very popular but we stopped them about a year ago [in 1990], because the police were always turning up."

Ultimately, pressure was put on live acts to stay away, the pressures frequently coming from places of worship. Religious elders from a range of religions and places of worship visited day-timers, along with local authority officers and the growing issue of day-timers even became a subject for the mainstream media, such as with Ed Doolan's radio programme. The backlash reached a peak in the late 80's and early 90's that saw day-timers gradually dying out and slowly being replaced by night-time events.

Fortunately, however, the end of day-timers didn't spell the end of bhangra or Asian music events. Promoters and club owners had seen the potential and were now far more open to hosting such events – although it was never easy. In 1993 Bombay Jungle opened at the Wag Club in London, where swing, soul, hip-hop ran downstairs and upstairs DJs played bhangra, ragga and swing mixes. Weekly clubs emerged in key venues throughout the UK, including Birmingham and these were accompanied by one-off large-scale events at 5000+ capacity venues in Birmingham, Bradford and London.

Bhangra – A new British sound

The changes enabled a new breed of artists to arise. Outcaste Records, formed in 1994, began to nurture Asian artists not producing bhangra, but exploring a

fascinating mix of Eastern-ness and Western-ness within their music. Artists such as Nitin Sawhney with his critically acclaimed album 'Migration', tabla, jazz piano, Spanish guitar, flamenco, and classical Indian and Asian vocals into a perfect East/West blend was just one example of this. Outcaste – the monthly club – promoted this underground fusion receiving rave reviews. The following year young tabla prodigy Talvin Singh set up his OMNI label, and in 1996 he launched the Anokha club at London's Blue Note. His 1997 'Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground' compilation CD cemented 1997 as the year of British Asian Underground.

Other 'alternative' groups also began to appear, the New Conscious Kaliphz (later renamed Kaleef); all-girl band The Voodoo Queens; the KKKings who baffled everybody musically but charmed the media into dubbing everything that was going on as 'New Asian Kool' (see above); and Tejinder Singh's Cornershop formed out of the uprising in fascism, going on in the 1990s to great success as that rare breed: an Asian band on the rock circuit.

Conscious Rhythms & Bhangra Aid

Bhangra has also operated on a rarely publicised social/ political level. Examples include the conscious lyrics of a number of bands and sound systems as well as Bhangra Aid, the fund-raising event, hosted by the BBC, that took place the same year as Live Aid on Sunday 6th September 1985 at the Odeon on New St in Birmingham. The event featured numerous well known artists and groups such as Apna Sangeet, Alaap, DCS, Premi, Azaad and AS Kang. Yet there was little if any publicity from the mainstream media for this sell out event, a problem typical, as we have seen elsewhere, of the situation facing bhangra artists as well as the Asian community generally. It seems that people were far too willing to see the so-called problems associated with the Asian community but rarely the contributions that they made to society.

Bhangra and the sub-culture it generated provided a clear site for creative intervention within the culture and society at the time. Many of the contemporary emerging groups and artists began to utilise their access to audiences and the possibilities generated through music to create and develop a conscious debate within their lyrics, highlighting the empowering role that music and creativity can play within the social sphere. Groups such as Joi Bangla, Asian Dub Foundation and Fun-da-mental were at the forefront in instigating creative forms of music which have at their heart a political beat and conscience, challenging the inequalities of racism in music, culture, society and politics.

The Joi Bangla Sound System (later renamed Joi) was drawn out of the East London Bengali youth movement and became a focal point in the 80s for numerous forms of Asian led anti-racist resistance. Their music centred on racism and poverty within the East End. Their fresh mix of club sounds, traditional Bengali instrumentation with folk lyrics and vocals and break beats produced a distinctive new sound – implicit within this was their social and political commentary. By the mid-80s, a sizeable underground Asian rap scene had emerged with Osmani Sounds and The State of Bengal swiftly following Joi to introduce conscious rap.

Similarly Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) with their roots in community music training and direct political action, became – and continue to be - a catalyst for racially and socially excluded young people to enter into and create an impact in the mainstream music industry, without compromising their social criticism. ADF have been seen as critical in challenging stereotyping regarding Asian musicians, drawing on reggae, anarchic punk as well as Asian beats, sounds and instruments, they have repeatedly challenged existing perceptions of all too often marginalised musicians from Asian communities.

Meanwhile Aki Nawaz, from Bradford, formed his band Fun-Da-Mental, to comment on social and political issues from a rarely heard musical and social

perspective. Fun-da-mental drew out Asian rhythms through complex sampling, bringing in Arabic sounds and beats, Islamic chanting, as well as reggae and hip-hop to produce a rare breed of up front political Rap. In a similar manner to ADF, they drew on the punk movement alongside an innovative mix of dub, techno and bhangra to shout out that there should be “no compromise in the fight against racism.” Drawing upon and evoking a political brand of Islam, the group through the music, has challenged various forms of oppression.

Their double debut album, released in 1994 ‘Seize the Time’, was a fascinating mixture of hard-hitting rap, hip-hop and dub alongside an intense mix of Bollywood and Indian classical samples and instrumentation. The track most publicised was undoubtedly ‘Dog War’, which utilised a voicemail left for the band from the British Neo-Nazi group, Combat 18. The contents of the album also commented on politics, racism and social history in contemporary Britain.

Nawaz went on to found Nation Records in 1989, signing unknown artists for their first releases. Today, the compilation album they produced is far more familiar, with contributions from Mahatma T. (real name Talvin Singh) and Pulse 8 (Jah Wobble and David Harrow). They’ve gone on to work with artists such as Transglobal Underground, Hustlers Convention (the world's first Sikh hip-hop crew), Asian Dub Foundation and TJ Rehmi.

Where were all of the women?

Much of the narrative surrounding bhangra is, undoubtedly, male dominated. Female performers have been consistently marginalised within the music scene and one would do well to ask where are the women? Women’s voices are to often forgotten when male representations are easily found.

Bhangra is not without its women however, examples of the early years, the 50’s and 60’s, saw singers such as sisters Prakash Kaur and Surinder Kaur who sang

of the challenges facing Asian women, whilst singers such as Narinder Biba and Jagmohan Kaur (also performing duets with her husband K Deep) highlighted hierarchy and community pressures facing many women. More recently, they have become increasingly central to the scene as DJs such as Radical Sista and DJ Ritu, younger performers like Amar and Hard Kaur have created a unique sound and presence.

Women are frequently represented within bhangra tracks, unfortunately much of this representation rests in stereotype with the village 'belle', and her fabled beauty as well as the pure, nurturing, mother figure. The role of women within bhangra is to often subscribed to as the male fantasy, selfless in support of the men in her life. Apache Indian's 'gal from Jullundar' in *Arranged Marriage* is just one example of such romanticisation. The females in bhangra are inevitably seen as a site where territorial claims are made and difference negotiated – defining and protecting community honour in a manner never seen in the role of men within bhangra.

Little has been done within the bhangra community to challenge the representation of women, although this exhibition acknowledges the difficulties, and wherever possible has sought to combat this. However, this is not an easy nor simple challenge, since documentation is vital and the contribution of women have, too frequently, been too readily dismissed. Today, artists such as DJ Ritu and Hard Kaur are doing much to challenge stereotypical views and take on the dismissive attitudes of some men, as is the growing musical fusion increasingly seen within bhangra.

Some producers and recording outlets, such as Birmingham based outlet, Nachural Records, are seeking to profile female singers, however they consistently experience considerable prejudice with predetermined notions of the ingredients that make up bhangra: namely male vocals. Subsequently, the majority of bhangra sales are from albums featuring male singers and

performers, when a woman is featured the single or album has considerably fewer sales.

Culturally, acceptability is also a factor, since women are frequently patronised or perceived by those working *within* the industry as inferior to men. Furthermore, sadly, many men within bhangra see women's roles and abilities as secondary within the music industry and as with many creative industries, much of the planning and development takes place on an informal basis, over drinks, sports, within the social sphere, arenas in which women are rarely welcomed.