

Album sleeves



THE COVERS of British Bhangra albums are not only visually stunning and eye-catching they are also produced at particular moments in the development

of British Bhangra's musical history. As such, a closer look at the some of the sleeves in terms of their images and how they might be understood are telling of the ways in which British Bhangra's story can be told not only through the lyrics and the music but equally through its accompanying visuals and motifs as well.



Alaap - 'Dance With Alaap' - (1982)

Here, members of the London-based Alaap group stand proudly together fronted by their main singer Channi Singh. Alaap are considered by many as one of the early pioneers of the British-based bhangra sound: incorporating traditional Indian percussion instruments and lyrics with Western synthesized sounds and modern rhythms. Their track 'Bhabhiye ni Bhabhiye' (Sister-in-law oh sister-in-law), an ode by a younger brother-in-law who playfully pleads with his brother's wife to find him a marriage partner, has become an oft-requested classic at wedding parties.

By the early- to mid-eighties British bhangra albums were being sold in their thousands through specialist Asian music and video shops that were predominantly located in multicultural high streets of urban British cities. Album sleeves of the 80s were about marking

presence and announcing one's arrival on the British bhangra music scene. The images of these early eighties' album covers can be characterised in two ways. First, they can be contextualised as following in a line of post-war Black British portrait photography that marked the arrival of Black and South Asian settlers to Britain as securing paid jobs and accumulating material goods. (The photographs by the Handsworth-based artist Vanley Burke are a good example of this kind of Black British portrait photography, a collection of which is housed in the Birmingham Central Library.) Secondly, that the album covers are telling of the moment – they are witness to the emergence of a section of British South Asian youth culture that engages with modern times.

In this sleeve, then, the five men are smartly dressed in suits or waistcoats and trousers. They are wearing a dress code that is identifiable as Western and modern. The lead singer, Channi, strategically shows off his gold chain and medallion and his silver watch. The uniformity of the men's attire also gives them their group identity – as the band Alaap. The sleeve has also captured a snapshot of the workings of the British bhangra music industry. Often band members would prove mobile, moving between different bands to assist with different musical productions, or to form new bands of their own. In the top left of the image we see Manjit Singh Kondal who after his time with Alaap when on to lead the group Holle, Holle as their main singer.



D.C.S.

RULE BRITANNIA

HMV
PRICE
£2.99



DCS - 'Rule Britannia' - (1982)

With 'Bhangra fever' gripping many South Asian youth across the country by the late 1980s, many bands attempted to crossover into the mainstream charts, including Birmingham's DCS with their 1989 track *Rule Britannia*. The song was a call for national racial unity: 'We all live under the same sky, the same moon, so let's dance to the same old tune'. Such endeavours were unsuccessful, primarily because of the

'We all live under the same sky, the same moon, so let's dance to the same old tune'

cultural racism encountered by British Bhangra artists when faced by the mainstream music industry. Their albums sold in thousands,

mainly through South Asian music retail outlets. Yet the sale returns from these smaller stores weren't included, or even acknowledged, in the make up of the British pop charts of the time. This is still the case.

In spite of the set backs faced by British bhangra artistes during the eighties, they continued to thrive as a sub-culture in relation to the mainstream pop charts. The music and lyrics of this period provided a source of alternative and additional popular cultures and politics from which sections of British Asian youth drew their inspirations and contributed to. Yet, the seventies and eighties was rife with debates in the mass media and at social policy levels about British Asian youth as 'caught between two cultures'. An implied tendency within this discussion was that these youth were unable to decide whether they were British or Asian and hence caught in between two cultures. However,

the production, listening to and dancing, of British bhangra suggested other fluid possibilities for South Asian youth in Britain. The music, combined of mixed heritages and a variety of black, Asian, and Western music genres, indicated that these youth were able to manage a number of different cultural referents and identities at the same time.

In this context, the album sleeve for DCS's *Rule Britannia* captures a sense of the music, its producers and audiences as collaborating in the call for a belonging to notions of Britishness with aspects of their South Asian cultural heritages intact. The image is a reworking of the three colours from the Indian national flag – the orange, white and green in horizontal layers. Imposed upon these colours is an adaptation of a poster that was very popular during the inter-war years – 'Your Country Needs You' (originally designed by Alfred Leete) – which called upon British service men and women to actively partake in the war effort. Yet, the image of the central figure has been revised by identifying him as a British subject with South Asian roots – he wears a turban that is emblazoned by the Union Jack. On either side of him we see the outlines of buildings, again marking different geographical areas from across the world. On the left is an illustration of what appears to be Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, and on the right hand side there appears to be an image of domes and spires that suggests these buildings are from Asia more generally. Taken together, the sleeve draws upon a series of connected histories and identities and offers them in the context of late eighties British South Asian youth culture. This culture, then, is not only a production of the


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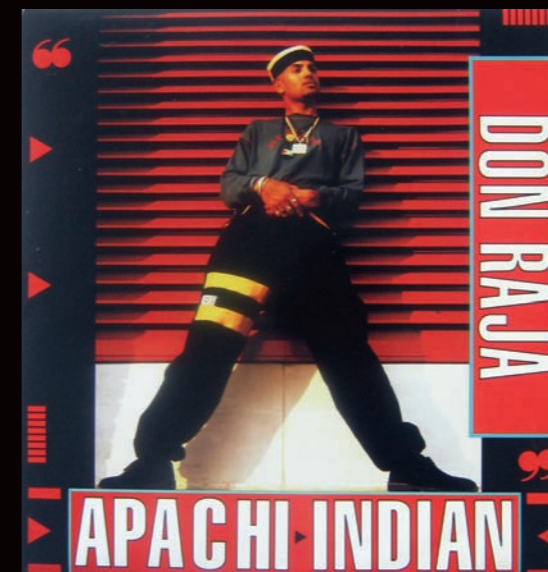


Surinder Kaur - 'Teri Yaad Aaye Ae' (Memories of You) - (1978)

Women artists have been present since the inception and development of British bhangra music from its folk derivations in the Punjab to its present status as an urban anthem in Britain. For example, the female singers and sisters Surinder Kaur (pictured above) and Prakash Kaur from India were immensely popular folk singers during the sixties and seventies, and even toured Britain on a number of occasions for stage shows. With their powerful voice tones and folk sonnets they often questioned the predicament of women in heterosexual love relationships in which men were primarily considered as the source of a woman's heartache. Other female folk artists of the post-war period included Jagmohan Kaur and Narinder Biba. Their songs often criticised family structures and politics in which women had to negotiate a number of

positions from housewife, lover, daughter-in-law, to matchmaker, and at the same time to create a space for themselves of their own. Their songs remain inspiration even for today's artists and bands and provide material for numerous cover versions. Admittedly, the histories and development of women's involvement in British bhangra music remains to be charted comprehensively.

In this album cover, for recordings of Surinder Kaur's live performances in Canada, Kaur is dressed in a traditional white Punjabi dress, the *salwar kameez*, which is embroidered with red and black floral designs. She stands, almost angel-like, half-smiling, looking out through a window and up towards the skies. This image presents Kaur as an artist who is associated with her melodic voice and folk lyrics as offering a space for the female point of view to air her highs and lows on life. Kaur is also stood on the inside of the frame of the window; she is in the domestic setting looking out. As is suggested by the title of the album she is perhaps contemplating memories of a loved one or even contemplating horizons anew. In this way, Kaur's album cover combines with the audience's knowledge of the lyrical content of her work as an artist that offers bhangra listeners outside of the Punjab an imagined connection with the motherland and, at the same time, new beginnings in the place of settlement abroad. In the seventies it was commonplace for British Asian men to be out working and women would predominantly work from home and/or attend to daily household chores. Thus, in this context, the female artist is celebrated and also



Apache Indian - 'Don Raja' - (1992)

Apache Indian (also known as Steven Kapur) was the first British South Asian artist to break into the British music charts, reggae dance charts, and the South Asian music charts simultaneously in 1993 with his single *Arranged Marriage*. This track enabled him to launch a successful career as an international singer.

Apache Indian cannot simply be classified as a British bhangra artist as his musical influences not only draw heavily on the bhangra beat but also on Caribbean derived ragga music. In several of his radio and television interviews during the mid-nineties he has stated that musically and commercially he does not want to be identified solely as a Bhangramuffin (the term given to the combination of bhangra and ragga music). The music of Apache Indian illustrates the complex and hybrid interplay of music styles, lyrics and cultural identities that constitute the

experience of young South Asians in urban locales. Apache's music in particular has its roots in the multicultural inner city area of Handsworth in Birmingham where he was raised; and like the diverse multi-ethnic make up of the place, his music is also combination of languages, rhythms and beats from across the Caribbean, North America, India and Europe. Apache's lyrics are rapped in the styles of Jamaican patois, Punjabi *boliyaan* (couplets), as well as in a culturally diverse urban street English.

In this album sleeve for his *Don Raja*, Apache is placed centrally within the image as a young artist and multi-cultural ambassador. Born of Hindu Punjabi parents and visibly identifiable as a young Asian man through his brown skin colour, Apache 'mixes' his South Asian identity and cultural heritage through his attire which draws on his musical upbringing and roots in Handsworth via Africa and the Caribbean. He wears a traditional African flat round cap, 'bling' gold and black lace chains which are adorned with different African and Indian unity symbols, and a slack, loose-fitting urban sweatshirt and stylish baggy trousers. His legs are astride and protrude from the image in the foreground as they form an A-shape that signifies his stage name – Apache. He casually leans back against a red and white background that together with the bold horizontal and vertical letterings and symbols, that display the names of his album and himself as artist, mark the sleeve as modern and contemporary within an urban context.