

Asian Allstars

words: Rahul Verma

Bhangra has enjoyed a resurgence over the last decade as musicians from the South Asian diaspora have fused it with contemporary musical styles like hip hop and ragga. Modern bhangra has proved so popular it's now being re-exported back to India, and most of it comes from the UK



KRAY TWINZ PICTURE: courtesy Kray Twinz

In 2003, Panjabi MC's *Mundian Te Bach Ke* — aka the Knightrider-sampling bhangra-hip hop mash up — became one of the most successful singles of the new millennium. Like Beyoncé's *Crazy in Love*, 50 Cent's *In Da Club* and Gnarls Barkley's *Crazy*, *Mundian Te Bach Ke* not only transcended genres and international borders, but was just as likely to be heard at a wedding reception as in bhangra and hip hop clubs.

It acted as an equivalent tipping point to the Sugar Hill Gang's *Rapper's Delight*, which in 1979 opened the ears

BRITISH ASIAN MUSIC IS NOT JUST ABOUT BHANGRA AND BOLLYWOOD

of the world to the music being born on the streets of the South Bronx district of New York — hip hop. Similarly, *Mundian Te Bach Ke* acted as a catalyst, opening eyes and ears to hip hop-bhangra, something that young British Asians had been partying to for a decade. It could only have been born in the UK: *Mundian Te Bach Ke* wasn't traditional bhangra — the music of rural Punjab celebrating the annual harvest and fertility of the region's land — but a contemporary urban take on bhangra and influenced as much by hip hop as Punjabi folk music.

Recognition came in the shape of BBC Radio 1 (the BBC's most popular radio station aimed at an audience of 10 to 30 year-olds) scheduling a programme dedicated to British Asian music in October 2002. Presented by the effervescent Bobby Friction and Nihal Arthanayake, it's risen through Radio 1's schedules to occupy a primetime slot (Wednesdays 9pm).

Nihal, 34, is ideally placed to provide an overview of the genesis of this strident and innovative 21st century music

form. 'The first thing to realise is British Asian music is not just about bhangra and Bollywood. There was a huge initial excitement about bhangra hitting the mainstream with Panjabi MC,' says Nihal. 'But for any music to impact on the mainstream in a language other than English was always going to be very difficult. With artists such as Jay Sean we saw British Asian music exported all over the world and it joined the MTV generation for the first time. This was urban British music, not traditional Indian music or the leftfield underground, and the slickness of the videos meant that they would be shown in America, Thailand, Dubai and India.'

As Nihal touches on, *Mundian Te Bach Ke* wasn't the first time music produced by British-born Asians impacted on mainstream Britain. The late 90s saw the "Asian underground" emerge, with artists such as Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawhney and Badmarsh & Shri. Singh scooped the coveted Mercury Music Prize in 1999, but the musical movement was largely esoteric and experimental and, over-hyped by the media, proved to be a false dawn.

Many of its key players never lost faith and are now as integral to the brave new world of British Asian music as the hip hop-bhangra of Panjabi MC. Bobby Friction, Nihal's partner in crime on Radio 1 and one-time resident DJ at London club *Swaraj*, and electronica duo *Sonik Gurus* are a case in point. Ash Chandola promoted *Swaraj* in the late 90s, and is now one half of *Sonik Gurus*. 'We don't just make Asian sounding tracks. The Asian element in our music is not the only element,' says Chandola. 'Our music has worldwide appeal — we think globally not locally,' adds Ranvir Verma [no relation to me], the other *Sonik Guru*. 'We like to work with artists from abroad. We were in India over Christmas, we go every year, and worked with local musicians — it makes our voice, and the palate we use to paint soundscapes, more diverse, and the more diverse the artists and instruments involved the better.'

Sonik Gurus' "global village" perspective has seen Chandola and Verma work with the British Council. In 2004 they were in Caracas, Venezuela for a series of gigs and workshops, which has resulted in Venezuelan rapper 1Chot guesting on their forthcoming album *Sound and Culture Clash*. The LP also features Randolf of Indian rock band Pentagram, Dhruva of San Franciscan collective Dhamaal, and tumbi [a traditional Punjabi stringed instrument] virtuoso Bee2, all of whom will be joining the Soniks at Mexico's Cervantino festival — again thanks to the British Council — in October 2006.

At the other end of the spectrum is another duo, Kray Twinz. The Sikh brothers from Coventry produced Panjabi MC's *Mundian Te Bach Ke* and have continued to pursue the hybrid of hip hop and bhangra. Jat and Jas Singh are advancing the urban Asian sound in America, working with many of hip hop's leading artists, such as multi platinum-selling A-list rapper Jay Z. Their forthcoming LP *Indian Summer* stars Kanye West-collaborator Twista, rapper DMX, Dr Dre-endorsed R&B singer Truth Hurts, renowned dancehall artists Gappy Ranks and Elephant Man, and Matt Goss from 80s boy band Bros.

'American hip hop has been sampling Asian music with Missy Elliot, Timbaland and Truth Hurts, which is all good,' says Jat. 'But a lot of the sampling has no meaning to the song — the sample will be a Bollywood love song and the hip hop track is about killing people, so it's out of context. We're not going to use Asian samples just because we're Asian. If we're going to use Asian samples then they will be relevant and make sense, because we have that understanding of its origins.'

Despite mainstream hip hop's familiarity with Asian influences, the Krays aren't resting on their laurels and sticking to a formula, but are stirring the melting pot even more by adding a sprinkle of dancehall and a dash of British hip hop or grime. For Jat, it makes sense because they're kindred genres. 'Dancehall is bhangra. It's uptempo music with energy and gets you hyped the same as bhangra,' he explains.

'We put Asian influences in our ragga and dancehall tracks when it needs to be used, but the Asian influence has existed for years in dancehall with the Diwali riddim [instrumental] and Bollywood riddim.'

Despite their Asian background and obvious pride in it, the Krays want to succeed in mainstream, rather than niche, terms. 'When we put out the single *How We Do* in 2005, we had a hot hit record across the board — it was big on everyone's mobiles, hip hop clubs, Asian clubs and in the charts, both in America and the UK,' says Jat. 'That for us is success, a pop record that goes off everywhere it's played.'

Nearly four years after its inception, the significance of Bobby & Nihal's Radio1 show cannot be understated: it's become the definitive guide to a sound and mindset that extends far beyond the UK, with artists from America, Sri Lanka, Canada, Germany, India and Poland sending in music. 'This is a global scene, but you have to make it big in the UK to be successful — the Asian diaspora looks to the UK first to see what's big there,' reckons Nihal. 'We have an industry with gigs, clubs, record labels and melas [outdoor concerts] — that's why Canadian artists such as Raghav and Sanj have settled here.'

'The scene's hugely exciting and it's amazing to be a part of one of the organs driving it forward, but ultimately it's the music that's doing the talking,' reckons Nihal. 'It's so diverse: you have the Punkawallahs remixing Asha Bhosle and putting a Fatboy Slim slant on Bollywood; there's Jag, a great R&B singer; Amit makes dark drum'n'bass; the Mentor Kollektiv are fusing hip hop, grime, classical and bhangra and have collaborated with the reggaeton label Looney Tunes for a *Bhangraton* album; and Swami, who has worked with Shania Twain.'

Nihal's barely scratched the surface. Producer Rishi Rich has worked with Britney Spears and Ricky Martin, as well as propelling R&B singer Jay Sean into the UK Top 10; all-girl trio Rouge seem ready to follow in Destiny's Child's footsteps with

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their huge single *Don't Be Shy*; Shiva Soundsystem and Nasha Records' regular nights and releases showcase Indo-drum'n'bass, while The D'Archetypes spoken word meets rap and gender-crossing performances, is comedic genius.

Many of the artists are far from the finished article, but that's the beauty of it — the scene's characterised by raw edginess, experimentation, and complex, genre-defying music; largely reflecting British Asian youth in 2006. 'British Asian music's emergence is undoubtedly about second and third generation youth expressing their confidence and place in British society,' concludes Nihal. 'We're unshackling ourselves from the restraints of our parents and standing up tall and proud.'

Rahul Verma is clubs editor and music critic for Metro newspaper, covers music for The Independent and writes for NME and street music magazine Knowledge.

LISTENING POST

BOBBY FRICTION & NIHAL
Bobby Friction & Nihal Presents (V2)

TALVIN SINGH
OK (Island)

NITIN SAWHNEY
Beyond Skin, Prophesy, Philtre (V2)

JAY SEAN
Me Against Myself (Relentless)

RAGHAV
Storyteller (V2)

BADMARSH & SHRI
Signs (Outcaste)

PANJABI HIT SQUAD
Desi Beats Volume 1 (Def Jam)

PANJABI MC
The Album (Instant Karma)

JUGGY D
Juggy D (2Point9)

ONLINE RESOURCES

BOBBY FRICTION & NIHAL
[www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/
bobbyandnihal/index.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/bobbyandnihal/index.shtml)

THE D'ARCHETYPES
www.darchetypes.com

BADMARSH & SHRI
www.shri.co.uk

KRAY TWINZ
www.kraytwinz.co.uk

PANJABI MC
www.pmcrecords.com

NITIN SAWHNEY
www.nitinsawhney.com

JAY SEAN
www.jaysean.com

SHIVA SOUND SYSTEM
www.shivasoundsystem.com

TALVIN SINGH
www.talvinsingh.com

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www.sonikgurus.com