

The New York Times

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NEW YORK, FRIDAY, JUNE 25, 2004

India Resounding in New York



By JON PARELES

WHEN "Bombay Dreams," the musical about making it in the Indian film capital known as Bollywood, was imported from London to Broadway this spring, it introduced some listeners to the madcap eclecticism of *filmi*, the song-and-dance numbers that punctuate Bollywood's sprawling musicals.

But Broadway was the last to know about the rendezvous of Indian and Western music. The profound improvisations of South Asian classical music — from revered figures like Ravi Shankar as well as younger masters like the tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain — have long been welcome in the city's concert halls, although the classical circuit is largely quiescent in summer.

Jazz musicians have been absorbing ideas and collaborating with Indian musicians at least since the 1960's. Hip-hop has latched on to Indian rhythms, most notably last year when Jay-Z added a rap to Panjabi MC's "Mundian To Bach Ke" to remake it as "Beware of the Boys." In New York's clubs, the sounds of Bollywood and other South Asian fusions have been drawing crowds for years: some to dance, some to listen, some to mingle and network.

As often happens, the music follows demographics. In the 1960's, a change in immigration law brought a wave of white-collar Indians and

Where to experience the music of South Asian fusion in the city this summer, Page 25.

Pakistanis and Bangladeshis to the United States. Now their sons and daughters are establishing their place in the arts as well as in the wider American economy, and they are making sense of a musical upbringing that is likely to include Bollywood tunes alongside hip-hop, Western classical music, Indian classical music, rock and jazz. "Everybody's got a different diaspora," says the producer, vocalist and disc jockey DK Khambata.

Aladdin, a Bangladeshi comic who grew up in Spanish Harlem, is developing a one-man show for the Public Theater about growing up surrounded by hip-hop and salsa, tentatively titled "Indio," and a play called "The Halal Brothers," about a Muslim restaurant in Harlem. "Our generation lived with the complexities of growing up in America," he said.

For South Asian and Asian-American musi-

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cians, producers and disc jockeys who have been building their own scene in New York, the latest East-West hybrids are not just occasion for musical connections and experiments. They are also affirmations of an identity that grows ever more complex and cosmopolitan. "If you come from India," Ms. Khambata said, "you can't help integrating the social aspect. There are so many things that just get intertwined in the music."

Vijay Iyer, a pianist who brings his Indian background to jazz, said: "Making music is very much aligned with activism and sociopolitical cultural work, and that actually is something that does unite this community. It's not just making music to be cool or look hip or be sexy, but actually to make a difference in the world. Especially in New York, that's a mobilizing force for the South Asian community."

Beginnings in England

The New York wave of South Asian music was preceded by influential South Asian hybrids from England. "Mutiny: Asians Storm British Music," a documentary by Vivek Bald now making the rounds of film festivals, details the way established Indian and Pakistani communities in London confronted racism with music. (The documentary was partly financed by six years of monthly dance parties in New York, also called Mutiny, at which Mr. Bald and friends were disc jockeys mixing South Asian music with hip-hop and club beats.)

In the 1970's and 80's, bands in London merged Indian elements — notably a 4/4 Punjabi beat called bhangra — with other music that connoted resistance, like punk, reggae and hip-hop. And in the 1990's, studio wizards came up with styles that became known as Asian Underground, which swirled together South Asian music with the beats and textures of electronica.

The music traveled to New York, not just at Mutiny but also at another party that continues to take place monthly at S.O.B.'s: DJ Rekha's Basement Bhangra, which has been renamed Bhangra Against Bush during election season. "It's very urban, very New York, and that's what

makes it exciting," Rekha said. "We play big-room hip-hop and a little bit of dancehall as well as bhangra, and the music has gotten a lot more intense. The drums are more pronounced; the production is much better. The music has come of age."

Regular visitors include groups of young South Asians who participate in intercollegiate bhangra dance competitions around the country. "I can look down from the D.J. booth and see the kids on the team, doing these highly choreographed, acrobatic moves," she said. "They're second-generation kids trying to focus toward cultural preservation, re-inscribing a tradition which may or may not have existed back in India."

Two years ago, Rekha started another dance party: Bollywood Disco, which takes place monthly at Blur in SoHo.

AR Rahman, who wrote the songs for "Bombay Dreams," is one of the top modern film composers, but also one of the most Western-flavored, and while the Broadway show hints at styles from across the subcontinent, many numbers end up sounding like mildly exoticized Andrew Lloyd Webber. Through the decades, filmi have tossed together everything from electro to salsa to surf music to funk with vocals that hint at ancient Indian traditions; there's a daring shamelessness to the way they steal from and one-up their sources.

"They've been sampling the West longer than the West has been sampling them," said Mr. Iyer, the pianist who has been melding Indian structures with jazz.

The sounds of older and nuttier filmi, and some of the American music they drew on, have been drawing crowds to Bollywood Disco. "We play some of the really kitschy stuff, the ripoff of the ripoff," Rekha said. "I had grown up on 1970's and 1980's Bollywood, and I'm really into the retro stuff, but I had never gotten much of an opportunity to play it. Now, we get a lot of people who are just Bollywood freaks. They request songs; they sing along with them. And there's really no other place that's embracing it this way."

A Spiritual Undercurrent

A few weeks ago, the sound of a man singing a ghazal, a love poem from an ancient Persian tradition that made its way to India, hovered above the room at Kush, a lounge on the Lower East Side done up in qua-

si-Moroccan style. So did the haze of a drug that's now illegal in most other New York City clubs: tobacco, wafting from hookahs on the bar.

There was a buzz of conversation from a crowd of people in their 20's, about half of whom looked Indian or Pakistani. Soon, an electronic bass line slipped in below the ghazal, and then the muffled thump of a down-tempo drumbeat. It was suave international lounge music; it was also unmistakably Indian. Karsh Kale was at the turntables, wearing one earphone to cue the next song and keeping an eye on the crowd; he smiled as a few people started to sway. It was a night of Kollektive, a weekly gathering for fans of Asian Massive, a New York blend of South Asian and Western music.

"It's not really to define a particular South Asian identity, but to explore many different forms of how South Asian identity has also become a Western identity," Mr. Kale said. "In South Asian art, what I feel most attracted to is that there's a sense of struggle and tragedy in the music that is always kept intact. It's eloquent at the level of Shakespeare in being able to express emotion. I'm not trying to share some sort of spiritual or political sentiment as much as I'm trying to share pure sentiment."

Kollektive returns to Kush in September, but Mr. Kale, a tabla drummer and producer as well as a disc jockey, will be busy this summer.

Tonight he will be among the disc jockeys at Turntables on the Hudson, along with a kindred spirit from India: Guarav, who is one-half of the Midival Punditz, a pair of disc jockeys and producers from New Delhi. Mr. Kale also leads a band, Realize, that mixes electronica and rock with Indian vocals and complex tabla rhythms.

"The greatest thing about the culture that I come from, and that I'm able to share within a club setting or on an album," Mr. Kale said, "is that even though we live in a modern society and work at a modern pace, there's this timelessness in the music of South Asia that reminds us about being reflective at the same time as we're living in the moment."

'A Second Language'

Mr. Iyer has collaborated with disc jockeys and Indian classical musicians as well as jazz improvisers. His own compositions and arrangements reach deep into both the labyrinthine harmonies of modern jazz and the rhythmic cycles of Indian music. Mr. Iyer said he was inspired to look into Indian music after hearing the way the pianist Randy Weston drew on African music. Just as Mr. Weston's piano can sound like a set of tuned African drums, Mr. Iyer's piano can suggest the skittering patterns of tabla drumming.

Mr. Iyer grew up in Rochester, surrounded by American culture as much as by the Indian music his parents had brought with them. "I went to hundreds of Indian music concerts," he said. "Without trying to pretend that I'm an expert on it, because that's something you have to devote your whole life to, it's a second language that something in my heart was really drawing me toward. It was really about trying to make sense of who I am. I'm not

trying to recapitulate Indian music or pretend that I'm playing Indian music."

In a solo set on Wednesday night at Merkin Hall, he will be playing American songs arranged so that they are, as he puts it, "camouflaged" by Indian rhythmic cycles. His other local performances include a set with the jazz quartet that includes his longtime collaborator, the saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, and an appearance at the Lincoln Center Festival in a program organized by DJ Spooky called "Transmetropolitan," on a bill that also includes DJ Rekha and an Anglo-Indian producer, Nitin Sawhney.

"It's very trendy right now to be associated with all things South Asian," Mr. Iyer said. "I don't know how long that's going to last. But I can't escape it; this is what I am. And I'm going to be with this forever."

bring in the noise ▶

AS THE ONLY GIRL IN HER TOWN'S LITTLE LEAGUE, TARA RODGERS was no stranger to getting into her own groove.

But years later, when Rodgers, the electronic musician, aka Analog Tara, began setting up a recording studio at home, she didn't want to fly solo in her bid to get down.

"I was doing a lot of research," the 31-year-old says, "[but] online forums on music equipment were very male-dominated, [and] music magazines didn't really cover what women were doing."

So in 2000, Analog Tara launched Pinknoises.com, an independent Web magazine that gives it up to the chicks with interviews, essays and reviews designed to promote women DJs and sound artists and provide a leg up on the ins and outs of music production.

"I've always had a chip on my shoulder that women tend not to be taken seriously as musicians," the Oakland, Calif., native explains, "[so] I wanted to make sure there was good coverage of women in electronic music, and a good, educational resource on music production."

Nearly four years later, Analog Tara, in cooperation with Web designer Karen Choy and a handful of others, has compiled a massive electronic music resource encompassing stories, tips and advice from artists around the world.

"One of the great things about conducting artist interviews for Pinknoises is that I get to meet a lot of the artists whose work I admire," she says.

One of these faves, DJ Rekha, aka Rekha Malhotra, offered up an interview for the site two years ago. The queen bee of New York's South Asian music scene and founder of the Basement Bhangra dance bashes, Rekha raves about the experience.

"People have e-mailed me from all over the world about [my interview on Pinknoises]," she says. "I think it's a great site, because even though there's a growing number of women DJs out there, there aren't so many in the production end of it, [and the site's] a practical resource on [production]."

Currently amassing an updated collection of interviews for "Pinknoises," a book version tentatively slated for release next year, and coming off a 2003 Webby Award nomination for Best Music Web Site, Analog Tara says Pinknoises has received enormous support in spite of the fact that many women she's interviewed have grown exhausted from the topic of gender in electronic music.

"There are times when I'm tired of being asked those questions, too," she admits, "but I think people realize that these kinds of independent forums are necessary to provide better coverage — until the mainstream music industry changes." — Lisa Kelly

FALL CLUBS

Join the party: A politically charged bash ignites the movement



Photograph by Cary Conover

Beat yourself up.

Now that political parties are the in thing, one more isn't going to make a difference. Or is it? While some other politically charged events hide behind the mantra of getting out the vote, Rekha doesn't pussy-foot around. When the bhangra DJ behind the long-running Basement Bhangra party and Bollywood Disco added another Basement Bhangra bash to her roster, she quickly partnered with Not in Our Name and dubbed it Bhangra Against Bush. "We were tagging on an extra day, and this summer I felt like with the RNC coming, I wanted to figure out a way to bring attention in a very blatant way," she explains.

You can't get more obvious than putting a picture of an Indian woman in a sari posed in opposition to a cowboy-hat-wearing Bush on the flyer. Not surprisingly the anti-Bush stance has been controversial. "I got one or

two nasty e-mails about it," says Rekha. "Someone said, 'Why are you so on one side?'" But she adds that "the overwhelming response has been positive."

This isn't the first time she's dipped her toes in scary political waters. The DJ has long been an activist, hosting parties and donating time and money to several organizations. And while the soiree's message is strong, the event itself isn't overwhelmed by the politics, says Rekha. "It's tricky to do art and politics. If the integrity of art is maintained, then it's all right. The most I do is get on the mic once or twice. Usually I say, 'Get the monkey out of office.' There's no point in preaching to people." TRICIA ROMANO

Bhangra Against Bush, every third Thursday until the election, S.O.B.'s, 204 Varick Street, 212.252.2392