



**RAP'S GHETTO  
ORIENTALISM  
PROVIDES  
THE BLUEPRINT  
FOR A  
DESI  
REVOLUTION**

**ALIEN NATION**

STORY EDWIN "STATS" HOUGHTON PHOTOGRAPHY ANDREW DOSUNMU

# F

or a minute there when Truth Hurt's "Addictive" and Panjabi MC were on the radio, it looked like the revolution was on. In the undeniable heat of that moment, as the voices of Rakim and Lata Mangeshkar, then Jay-Z and Labh Janjua, bled into one another on speakers worldwide, there was fevered speculation about the new sound they had unleashed on the world. Articles popped up everywhere with sidebar glossaries of terms like desi, bhangra and Bollywood, explaining how *Monsoon Wedding* and Hindi film samples were opening US doors to South Asian styles and artists. There was also a stunning lack of follow-up singles or artist signings; high-profile sample-clearance lawsuits and 31 flavors of music industry bullshit ensured that even as South Asian rhythms spread through urban America with viral speed, collaboration across culture lines remained tightly quarantined. Instead of more desi faces on your MTV it seemed the new order meant you couldn't break a record in hip-hop without some sort of sing-songy fake-Indian vocal on the hook. Some oochie-wally, thoiia-thoing type nonsense, aural equivalents of those fly-looking tattoos in Arabic or Chinese script that actually say nothing except "this looks exotic." By '05 the aesthetic had filtered down the sonic food-chain from gimmick Bollywood hooks to full-on Bollywood remakes by the Black Eyed Peas, as if to officially declare that the monsoon honeymoon was over.

**"I was getting booked and being told: 'Don't play bhangra, we don't want hoodies, we don't want cab drivers. Don't play hip-hop, we don't want blacks.' I was explicitly told this by the same people that get down to the shit now."** DJ REKHA

Yet in 2006 you got to wonder if those audio tattoos aren't a gimmick, something like Blondie faux-rapping and shouting out Fab 5 Freddy was in 1980: the trendy end of an iceberg about to rip open the industry's unsinkable hull. As super-producers like Scott Storch keep the orientalist jeep-beats rolling off rap's assembly line, a whole new generation of desi artists is developing a sound that is truly equidistant from the poles of Bollywood, bhangra and Indian classical on one side, and hip-hop, soul and dancehall on the other. Where major labels fear to tread, new distribution networks are being laid that run the circuitous routes of diaspora: Birmingham, Durban, Dubai. Titanic metaphors may not be dramatic enough to convey the landscape-altering potential of these two streams of music, quietly wearing away the banks that keep them from flooding together.

In Hindi this place, the point where two rivers meet, is called sangam. Sangam, not coincidentally, is the name under which NYC bhangra selector DJ Rekha has been staging events for over nine years. Basement Bhangra, her flagship night, is the legendary dancefloor where records like Punjabi MC's "Mundian To Bach Ke"—the collage of raw Punjabi vocals, thumbi and *Knight Rider* bass that became "Beware

A wedding celebration in the streets of Delhi.



The Boys" once Jay-Z touched it—were broken and it is still ground zero in the confrontation between South Asian roots and hip-hop style. Although she's seen more than her share of hype, the ups and downs don't phase her much, since the strategy has always been underground by design. "The whole idea behind Basement Bhangra was a 'fuck you' to the Indian scene [back then]. I was getting booked by promoters and being told: 'Don't play bhangra, we don't want hoodies, we don't want cab drivers. Don't play hip-hop, we don't want blacks.' I mean I was explicitly told this by the same people that get down to the shit now, who are involved in capitalizing off it." From the door, the party's sound was a Queens-bred union of Kiss FM mixshow and second generation Punjabi folk rhythms, but the idea that these could fit naturally together inside one club, let alone one person, reached Rekha from the UK, where she was born and maintains familial and musical connections. "It's just the politics in the UK that 'Asian' is automatically seen as 'urban' because it's 'black,'" she says.

This distinctly British conflation of black and Indian has shaped the identities of a generation including Glasgow production duo Tigerstyle, brothers who combine classical training on harmonium and tabla with a DJ's approach to percussion. Their devastating beats on remixes and white labels have recently found them owning the

**"Yeah. I'll take the credit.  
If the sound gets out to the world,  
when I come over their heads with  
something that's ill, don't look at me  
crazy, y'know? Everybody done bit  
my style from Scott Storch to...  
all of em."** TIMBALAND

floor at nights like Basement Bhangra and courted by Sequence records (who released "Beware The Boys") for a full LP. Embellishing eastern scales reclaimed from dancehall riddims and Storch beats with live instruments—and rocking a series of reggaeton remixes so tough that they single handedly jump-started their own *bhangra-ton* sub-genre—Tigerstyle has mapped out a shockingly fresh sound that has no place for either a purist conception of desi culture or US racial politics. Trying to describe where they're coming from, Pops, spokesbrother for the two, says, "Africans, Jamaicans, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis have all felt at one point or another that we are alien. Even the geography of cities where Asians are settled is the same as areas where the black community is [in the UK]. Back in the '80s, there was a big push for the [ultra-right wing, white nationalist] British National Party and they were targeting black, Indian, Pakistani people... those communities coming together and opposing the BNP movement, it builds bridges between them." Musically, those bridges mean that although bhangra has been fused with every imaginable genre from rock to two-step as the UK's large Punjabi population came to terms with its new environment, hip-hop and reggae stuck. "I mean rock music, I never felt a connection with it. When I was growing up it was white kids at school that were listening to rock," says Pops. "Hip-hop was something we could identify with, cause the artists in hip-hop were talking about the struggle in their community, how they felt out on the street when they were being antagonized, being treated different for who they are... that's something I felt at that time as well."

For kids in the UK, bhangra and Bollywood are the links to a cultural foundation, hip-hop the blueprint for dealing with their outsider status, an alchemy for turning alienation into empowerment and musical gold. But as Rekha points out, "Here [in the US], those politics don't play the same way, we're not read as black, we're not seen in that context. We struggle to find definitions, we want to connect the dots and say there

Raghav packs them in at a concert in Delhi during his tour of India.



something connecting about it...." But where hip-hop symbolizes rebel desi youths, within rap, "Indian" is a floating signifier for all manner of shit, a laundry list of addiction, sex and overall decadence. This orientalism is the new wave of an old tradition wherein Hindi words are thrown into English to label things that are off limits: *jungle, thug, ganja*. The laundry-list: brown and black solidarity or validation for invisible Indian populations.

When DJ Quik went on the record to state that his uncleared film on the beat for "Addictive" was an attempt at that solidarity, he tried to express himself in words ("Habib at 7-Eleven is not your DJ) guaranteed not to inspire it. Yet these mixed signals can't seem to give the power of the hybrid sound, or to turn desi listeners off hip-hop. The main source of frustration one senses in UK artists like Tigerstyle—built their rep reconstructing acapellas recorded in India with kicks sampled from Kingston and live thumbi and percussion overdubbed in India—is a hunger for the connection of true collaboration. Sampling, the essence of hip-hop production, builds a certain distance right into the mix that makes it possible. DJ Nihal, one half of the *Bobby Friction And Friends* show on BBC 1Xtra, imagines an alternate world that may not be far away, "I wish the Neptunes... they've made enough loot now that they've decided, you know 'I really want to go to Rajasthan, find proper



Timbaland and Pharrell wanted me to do an album in Hindi with their beats behind it. But I had spent so many years singing straight R&B, I just felt like I would be a total fraud singing entirely in another language." RAJE SHWARI

musicians, and spend a week in studio working with them, pay them to sample and then use their samples,' they could. Timbaland hasn't gone to India and recorded with a Bollywood orchestra, that's the difference." Timbaland has stopped short of a pilgrimage to the motherland, Timbaland is probably the man that sparked the revolution. Although sitar licks and tabla samples had surfaced in hip-hop before, it was his instant classic "Get Ur Freak On," built on a loop of Egyptian drummer Hossam Ramzy, which firmly established the eastern scale as the perfect backdrop to talkin' hip-hop. Putting his own ante, Tim put tabla, strings, and classical Indian over beats for Missy, Aaliyah and Tweet. "I stumbled across this stuff and I was like, Ooh, I love the chords and the changes, cause they don't play on the scale of American music. They have all these melodies that are just totally different from what we was playing," says Timbaland. As a result, Timbaland's sound to him, he had not only found the formula for a new rap genre but supplied desi artists with a method for deconstructing their own traditions. According to Tigerstyle's Pops, "When I heard 'Get Ur Freak On' one of the Timbaland tracks where he sampled Indian stuff... that really influenced how we work. Up until that time, making bhangra was like a set form. You'd fuse it with all different stuff, but in terms of how you'd manipulate your own sound, Indian music, it was quite rigid; the percussion was always doing a solid thing, the melodies were always additional." Characteristically blunt, Timbaland says, "Yeah. I'll take it. I'm glad if [the sound] can get out to the world, so when I come back to my heads with something that's ill... don't look at me crazy y'know? It's another planet, so it kinda helps me out in a way if people do that. I've already done bit my style from Scott Storch to... all of em." Going ahead of the pack meant avoiding the tattoo effect and staying relevant. Around the time Quik and Dre got sued for biting Bollywood's "Addictive," Timbaland found Gujarati-American diva Rajee Shwari



Left: A bhangra celebration weekend in Washington DC. Above (top): Lining up at Basement Bhangra in NYC. (below): Ladies sit one out in Delhi.



in London where she was crooning over ethnic trance-dance on the M Of Sound label and signed her to a production deal. The draw of homemade demo of R&B tracks backed with harmonium and violin and own vocal riffs in "Bollywood Hindi" instead of samples. In rapid succession Shwari found herself singing to Tim over the phone and then voice haunting Lata Mangeshkar-ish refrains not only on Timbaland & Missy vehicles, like the brilliant "Naughty Eye," but also tracks for the Neg Missy, Slum Village and Beenie Man. "I made so many records that really ended up in the nicest way possible just turning me into a 'hook girl'" — something between a caged bird and a human arc of indocentric samples. At the height of their creative output, Tim and Shwari spoke of splitting production duties on her solo LP. "There was a story where they kinda wanted me to do a whole album in Hindi with their behind it," says Shwari. "Which sounds like a great idea, but... I really spent so many years singing straight R&B, born and raised right out of Philly, I just felt like I would be a total fraud singing entirely in another language. They wanted to keep it exotic but I wanted to represent millions of hybrid people that are out there."

Risking insanity charges by walking away from a Neptunes-Timbaland project, Shwari again began committing her vision to DAT independently, amassing a catalog of solo work some 30 tracks deep. Tracks like "A

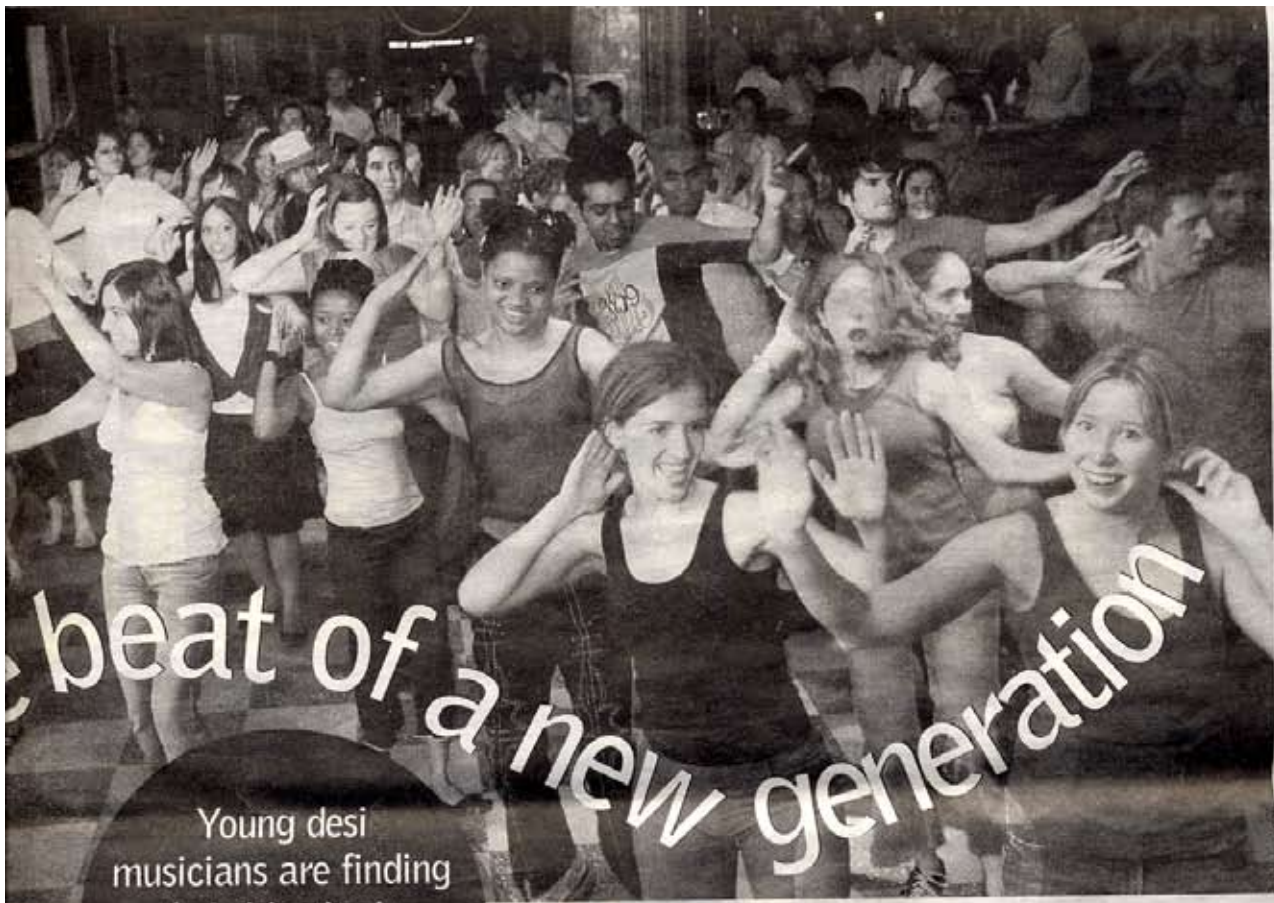
**"I started getting into like Michael, Stevie... at the same time still doing the Indian thing so I found myself having a real identity crisis."** RAGHAV



Above (top): Hands in the air, Delhi. (bottom): Dance floor moves, DC. Right: Posturing, desi-style, DC.

and "Average Bitch," where she splits her classical Indian reference with an R&B singjay style, will be released on her own Hidden Jewel imprint. The vocals are laid over dirty synths and dhol percussion fills from bhangra giant Sukshinder Shinda, allowing Shwari to riff off the oriental style in some phrases and elsewhere let Shinda provide the exotic hook she plays it straight.

The same back and forth defines the music of Raghav, who, like Shwari, is a second generation Indian who does not fit into the strong Punjabi identification of bhangra and considers himself more Canadian than Indian. Crooning over Sly & Robbie riddims and dusty Bollywood sample-based soul on his debut LP *Storyteller*, he switches between brown soul of the Timberlake variety and semi-classical mode on Hindi joints like "Teri Baaton." "From the ages of five to seven I took classical Indian music training, but I was more of a mimicker," says Raghav. "Then I started getting into like Michael, Stevie... at the same time still doing the Indian thing and I found myself having a real identity crisis by the time I was 13 and I got into hip-hop music for a couple of years." The crisis is still audible on the tracks of his new LP (working title: *Identity*) although each of his distinct voices for Hindi and one for English — are pop stars in their own right. "The album has sold six times platinum in India. I mean my identity crisis kind of ended up working in my favor in that territory because it's very much reality there. It's a simple statement like this that reveals the truly seismic dimensions of the shift these moments add up to: not an injection of exotic flavor into the western mainstream, but a bridge that connects it to the world's Indian audience. Although it only happens between the lines — in arabesque flourishes on top of what's basically soul, or in the counterpoint of dhol and snare crack — a new syntax of rhythm, scale and voice is being worked out, a language to unify east and west within one alien nation. **F**



# The beat of a new generation

Young desi musicians are finding their identity in hip hop, says **Aruna Viswanatha**

ly, with  
ing trad-  
forth, in a  
isco high  
with Bharat  
ning piquing an  
her kinds of dance  
City. One young kid in  
started hanging around record-  
intrigued by all the equipment  
hey could produce, and another  
ere everyone she hung out with  
at was making a record.  
g by performances at the Asia  
allah (now in its 6<sup>th</sup> year), the  
sh Pardesh, and the now leg-  
nights led by DJ Rekha in New

orn, UK-based performer, MIA,  
shores with her 2005  
ously catchy amal-  
ll, a Roland MC-  
sensical lyrics,  
w venue for  
n-American  
rk radio sta-  
ce, there is  
ved - if ill-  
s. Or if not  
are a lot of

in Boston.  
brooklyn and  
word artist  
boxer Jugular  
in Los Angeles,  
ten Island, and the

pp has picked up on South Asian  
fissy Elliot to Redman uses Hindi

Bengali, sampling Lata Mangeshkar, joking about their 'biodata' and rhyming *julebi* with lady. As the second generation of South Asian-Americans grows up, more and more are turning to hip hop as a means of artistic expression, and more and more are calling it their own.

Choe Malabar, the Brooklyn-based half of Himalayan Project, left Gujarat for San Francisco when he was 12, found himself in school with only two other South Asians, and was intrigued by the music he heard in his neighborhood. "I remember listening to NWA, Ice Cube, and nodding my head to it," he recalled. "It just sounded good."

Later, as his interests developed, he began to frame his attraction to hip hop in more intellectual terms. "It's the most urgent of American art forms," he said, as he explained how he thought rap could often get to the heart of a controversy in an immediate and definitive way. "They say, 'Diallo, 41 shots,'" Malabar said, referring to the 1999 Bronx shooting that became synonymous with egregious police misconduct, and sparked the lyrical wrath of dozens of hip hop musicians. "It becomes like the lingua franca," he said. "You know what they're talking about."

But it's not as if all desi rappers and producers use Bollywood or bhangra in their music; in fact, many consciously stay away from them so as to not to be pigeonholed as (or exploit) their identity. But others embrace it, rapping in

political camp of hip hop, other acts, like LA's Karmacy, are more interested in probing the personal aspects of their Indian roots. One of their most popular songs, "Blood Brothers," chronicles the story of two Gujarati brothers, one who travels to the US, and the other who remains at home, to unexpected results.

One of Karmacy's founding members, Sammy Chand, even formed his own record label, Ruckus Ave, to both put out Karmacy's records and to foster South Asian-American music. He got his initial inspiration from the success of the early 80s bhangra fusion scene in London. "Old folksy Punjabi stuff that was finding synthesizers for the first time," Chand said, "the fusing different backgrounds mentality. I saw that, and knew the culture I wanted to get started [in the US] would need a structure and outlet."

But Malabar, Chand, and all the others still run into the same roadblocks.

"The main problem a lot of acts have is being taken seriously as hip hop artists," said Raj Beri, a former organizer of Artwallah who often writes about the desi music scene. Beri does see hope in the success of Asian American artists like Jin, a Chinese-American rapper who has developed a mainstream following. "That's the potential," Beri said, "probably three, five years down the road, you will see some South Asian American artists hit it big too."

Malabar sees this potential not only in acknowledging his South Asian roots, but also hip-hop's roots. "I would love our community to support us," he said, "but hip-hop is an African-American tradition, and we try to pay homage to that tradition."

And Karmacy has been able to capitalize on the hip-hop tradition they fall into. One of the largest rap and R&B radio stations in the country, Hot 97, has hosted a night featuring Karmacy at New York City's Knitting Factory.



Raeshem Nijhon



DJ Rekha

## Indian Summer

The guru of Basement Bhangra celebrates 10 (or nine) years on the job



ERIC LITWIN/REX.COM

**D**J Rekha sits at Café Mogador, looking like a music mogul. In one hand she's got her regular cell phone; in the other, she gets a call on her Treo from **Panjabi MC**, perhaps the biggest bhangra artist in the world, ringing in from India the day of the bombings in Mumbai. He's an old friend, having played at her party Basement Bhangra back in 1998. Rekha wants to use an exclusive track of his on her upcoming mix CD for Koch Records, called *DJ Rekha Presents Basement Bhangra*, a long-overdue representation of her popular event, held the first Thursday of every month at S.O.B.'s. If the rest of the world isn't already listening on XM Satellite Radio (which has broadcast the party live since December), it'll finally hear the tunes New Yorkers have enjoyed for almost 10 years when the disc comes out this fall.

"Nine," clarifies Rekha. "In India, once you turn 20 they say you're in your 21st year. Basement Bhangra's nine, so we're in our 10th year. It just depends how you look at it."

Panjabi MC calls back a few minutes later to give Rekha the go-ahead for the track, and she hangs up, pleased. When

she's not DJ'ing at Basement Bhangra or her *other* successful monthly, Bollywood Disco (held at Canal Room the last Thursday of every month), she's also a politically active artist—throwing or playing benefits for Katrina and tsunami victims, staging anti-Bush parties during the Republican National Convention, and getting involved with [popandpolitics.com](http://popandpolitics.com) and Break Through (online at [breakthrough.tv](http://breakthrough.tv)). Add her musical skills and friendly, open-minded charm, and you have one of the city's true treasures.

**Fly Life: How did you pick the tracks for the CD?**

Rekha: The record's going to have a lot of the people that played at the party over the years. It's gonna have a lot of dancehall flavor, hip-hop touches. But the exciting thing to me is that it's not a world music record, it's a dance record. The same way baile funk is dance music, the same way grime is dance music.

**Eugene Hutz says he had that same "world music" problem.**

Yeah. He's a good model; I really like what he does. With **Eugene** and **Balkan Beat**

## Fly Life

By **Tricia Romano**

grant parents: "Why risk it? Do something stable." But they also accept it. They're very supportive now. This party, for whatever reasons I still don't understand, somehow caught a lot of media attention early on, and that meant something for them and gave them some sense of validation. There was a write-up in *Newsday*, which is the Long Island newspaper. I remember when that happened, that was one of the first things that convinced my parents. The real benefit of this is not having to wear Indian clothes at family functions.

**Basement Bhangra's stayed in one place; it hasn't really moved around.**

Well, I fortunately have a really good relationship with S.O.B.'s. I've been pre-empted once, by **Celia Cruz**, which I gladly gave up my night for. But outside of that, clubland sucks. It's hard to get a space where the venue gets what you're doing musically. Now it's like, if you don't have a bottle crowd... I mean, I *could* have a bottle crowd, but I don't want to. I don't want those pricks at my place. I don't want anyone who's dumb enough to buy a bottle at my party. Can you quote me on that?

**What was it like to see bhangra and Bollywood blow up after you had started?**

There was definitely a little like, "I told you so." I remember the exact moment that I heard "Beware." I was in England that winter, and I heard the song blow up on the radio in England, without the **Jay-Z**. It was really exciting, but it's England, you know? Things that get big there never make it here. And then I remember I was getting on the Triborough Bridge and it came on the radio and I had thought that if they were going to play it here they would edit out the Punjabi lyrics, because it's really easy to edit it out. And I heard it on Hot 97. *The Hot 97*. I had to pull over. I had a lump in my throat. I couldn't believe it. I just couldn't believe it.

**In the late '90s the East Asian scene seemed like it was going to blow up with Talvin Singh and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. What happened?**

It's like electroclash. Everyone's excited, people hype this moment, the press gets behind it, the tastemakers get behind it, people buy it a little bit. Bhangra has a long history of this happening. Poor bhangra music in England for the past 20 years has been the next thing and then almost not, the next thing and then almost not, next, almost not, back and forth and back and forth...

**It's like when drum 'n' bass tried to merge with hip-hop to go mainstream.**

It's gotta be organic. It's very hard to force those things. The success of it all used to be more surprising, the whole success of Indianness as a cultural phenomena, everything from **Deepak Chopra** to yoga to this music. It's not a spike. It's more integrated, in subtle ways. Like before it would be a big deal if you saw anything Indian anywhere. And now, it's like, "Oh, big deal. They're playing some lounge track in a bar." Or "Big deal, there's an Indian character on that reality show," *America's Next Top Model* or whatever. It's not as much of a shock. I think that just means that we're here to stay.

Research assistance: **Elizabeth Thompson**

Catch DJ Rekha at a special Basement Bhangra Thursday, August 17, S.O.B.'s, 200 Varick Street.

**Steadily less shocking in her Indianness**

**box**, there's an energy about that kind of music. It's not anthropological, it's not a specimen of a culture. It's about a moment that is now, that references or incorporates traditional music but also has modern aesthetics embedded in it. And it's time that we stop making those differentiations. Does it make you dance?

**'It's a dance record. The same way baile funk is dance music, the same way grime is dance music.'**

**What do your parents think of you DJ'ing?**

Well, I kind of lied to them for many years. I started with my male cousins, so it was like some cute little family bonding activity. And then I was still struggling to get out of college, and the first time I quit my job, I didn't tell them for like five months. I pretended. One time I even met my dad for lunch and I left home in a business suit. They're like a lot of immi-