

WORKING NOTES

British Asian music and its networks: Notes from a music-making workshop at the Apache Indian Music Academy, Handsworth, UK

Monia Acciari*

Department of Languages, Translation and Communication, Swansea University, Swansea, United Kingdom

British Asian music is a phenomenon that not only involves the scenes of entertainment, but has opened its doors to the educational panorama too. Due to the crisis this industry is facing, British Asian musician and practitioners met during the BASS 'Made in Britain' Festival in Birmingham, to debate the future of this industry within the local and international arenas. Led by the international Reggae star Apache Indian, the activities at the school have produced important reflections on the status of this musical landscape. This paper, via social and cultural analysis, narrates the event, and sets a series of questions on the future evolution of the British Asian music industry.

Introduction

Networking is at the core of several interrelated activities that can be seen to characterize the mobility and exchange of material goods and non-material experiences among humans. This is well discussed and has been explored by sociologists such as Ronald Burt (2010) and Bruno Latour (1999, 2005), who have worked towards a coherent account of the notion of a network in diverse areas of sociology and cultural theory. Drawing on aspects of this work, the aims of this paper are twofold. On the one hand, it provides an account of the music-making masterclass 'Made in Britain via Soho Road' as part of the BASS 2014 Festival held at the Apache Indian Music Academy at South & City College in Handsworth, Birmingham.¹ On the other hand, it frames the status of British Asian music as a multilayered cultural phenomenon via a focus on the notion of the 'network'. Thus, the scope of this Working Notes is to point out some of the complexities of this industry at present, and to consider how it is currently networking and creating diverse scenarios through which it is aiming to develop its work.²

Ronald Burt's writing on the idea of the network (Burt 2010) explores and highlights the ways that social networks establish competitive benefits and advantages in several aspects of the social life of human beings. Specifically, Burt looks at the dynamics in careers and the development, organizations and functionality of markets. Based on the same perspective of looking at functionality and organization of networks, Bruno Latour's work, on which this piece draws, observes how such functionality is formed by a set of layers that eventually form a network. The author investigates the way that networks and networking become the rule to observe a more arduous conception of labor. For Latour, this exists beneath the formation and laying down of a network structure:

*Email: monia.acciari@gmail.com

Network was a novelty that could help in eliciting a contrast with ‘society’, ‘institution’, ‘culture’, ‘fields’, etc., which were often conceived as surfaces, floods of causal transfers, and real matters of fact. But nowadays, a network has become the rule and surfaces the exception. It has lost its sharp edge, if I believed in jargon and if work-net or action-net had any chance to hold, I would offer it as a substitute so as to make the contrast between technical networks and work-nets, the latter remaining a way for social scientists to make sense of the former. Work-nets could allow one to see the labor that goes on in laying down net-works: the first as an active mediator, the second as a stabilized set of intermediaries. (Latour 2005: 131)

In this conceptualization of network formations, Latour suggests the presence of mediators, work-nets, whose work is essential in allowing the identification, composition and therefore acknowledgement of the layering structure that characterizes the whole formation of networks. Latour’s work on network can be used to explore further how experienced musicians – the mediators, or rather work-nets in Latour’s words – of the British Asian music scene are playing an important role in layering a more complex and sensitive musical awareness related to working practices in their industry. This theoretical frame aids in the narration of the networking events that are organized by some of the current artists of the British Asian music industry.

The unfolding of work-nets

A few words on the *deux ex machina* behind BASS’s ‘Made in Britain via Soho Road’ is offered here, as well as on its role in the promotion of British Asian music across the UK. This allows us to understand the context within which the masterclass was developed.

Punch Records is one of the leading development agencies based in Birmingham concerned with the definition, establishment and promotion of ‘the future of Black music’.³ Its work includes educational events to nourish the talent of young aspiring Black and Asian musicians. Punch Records can be seen to be very much part of the thriving British Asian music industry, moving skillfully across a set of core events that span from #ILuvLiveBHAM, The Lowdown event and GoThinkBig Birmingham Session to name a few, to its annual BASS events. The BASS festival is the only annual Black music festival that contracts and promotes new work from emerging artists. Each year, the festival assigns a theme that provides a consistency to the events, and hosts a mix of musical experiences around it. This year, BASS ‘Made in Britain’ was themed around ‘soul’, with all the events taking place in a variety of venues across the city of Birmingham. The selection of ‘soul’ as the core theme moved away from its simple associations as being black music *par excellence* for black African and Caribbean communities exclusively. Being part of the masterclass, it was possible to observe that the theme – ‘soul’ – constructed work-nets (in Latour’s terms) that flawlessly linked the very personal set of feelings and the multiplicity of its manifestations – the emotions – to artists and their musical compositions. The multiplicity of work-nets that form the very mechanism behind the wider British Asian network industry are defined by homophily⁴ and emotional patterns. These two elements are part of the ‘soul’ of a larger debate that was highlighted during the masterclass, as explained further on.

Many of the aspiring artists and attendees at the workshop had a common focal point; this was stressed by rapper Raxstar⁵ during his talk, who stated the importance of giving a voice to our emotions and musical forms to the core of our souls. To be successful, Raxstar mentioned, it is imperative to make sure that ‘we can communicate to the world from within’, thus stressing the dedication and the emotional drive beneath the lyrics of many British Asian artists. Thus the notion of ‘soul’ that Punch Records uses in its BASS 2014 is to communicate, nurture and educate at a number of levels. World-renowned music artist

Apache Indian⁶ has taken up this new challenge at the College in Handsworth by creating the music academy. He explained at the event that his aim is to create a synergy between the sphere of education and the demanding music industry.

Experiencing the masterclass

Apache Indian hosted the event, which featured an exhibition showcasing the individuals who have championed the British bhangra, R'n'B and rap scene. Framed by such an atmosphere, the core of the event was the presence of British Asian artists who, in recent years, have punctuated the scene of British Asian music, offering comments and suggestions to students and the audience at the event. Apache Indian, aka Steve Kapur, in tandem with the college, has created a music academy for young students who are passionate about music and want to learn how to 'make music' as well as about the mechanisms behind music production. Now celebrating 25 years of his music, Apache made the following comments in a private conversation:

It's my duty to think about these kids now, and I believe I now need to give back to this city; it's a shame I don't get to play music in Birmingham more often, but unfortunately they don't support reggae here. So now, playing with the success I have in India, Europe, Caribbean and also Japan, I would like to use my experience to help others.

Thus, Apache's current work in the educational sphere seeks to harmonize social values through music education and to highlight the services that academia and artistry can offer the local community. Moreover, the existence of such an academy with various learning activities with practical experience, and encounters with artists from the sector, lays down a foundation for the official institutionalization of British Asian music, establishing Birmingham as a focal point for education within the British music context.

Part of the educational pathway for students of the academy is to meet musicians who are changing the panorama of this industry and to learn from their experiences. The encounter with artists characterized the essence of the masterclass. While the status of British Asian music was largely dissected through diverse talks, the students, young aspiring artists, academics and the audience could interact with artists such as Raxstar and TaZzZ.⁷ Their talks rotated around general considerations on the state of the industry to distinct suggestions on music writing and music production.

To inform on the various aspects of music writing and production, the event, which was introduced by a series of thoughts and anecdotes on how to become a musician, was later divided into two workshops with the scope of examining the processes of 'making' British Asian music today. By enquiring whether anyone present would describe themselves as artists, rappers, singers or musicians in general, speakers Raxstar and TaZzZ were able to engage and begin a direct dialogue with the audience. Narrating the story of their own experiences, they introduced the students – and the rest of the audience – to the very early process of becoming a musician. TaZzZ stressed: 'It's not the right or wrong way of doing things, but it might be a way of connecting and relating through our stories with your own experience'. Raxstar recounted that his experience began in high school, when he was already rapping non-professionally by writing his own songs, recording them, self-producing them and distributing the recordings locally. The scope was to make use of connections and establish a network of people who could help him brand his music and establish the first steps of his career. Crucial to this, he said, is who we meet, the relationships we establish and how these relationships can support recordings, production and distribution. TaZzZ, on the other side, recounted that his experience began at school in London, and how he ended up studying music at the Arts and Drama department at his

secondary school. He said that he might have been 10 or 11 years old when a workshop on music technology was organized by his school, where an old sequencer and early software gave life to his initial composition. He also mentioned that the process of music production had always fascinated him and the way in which, for him, words and music could not exist one without the other. TaZzZ continued his story by revealing the importance that elements of his personal life (like the South Asian origins of his mother), his passion for Bollywood and the whole idea of fusion sounds had on the core of his entire work. For both TaZzZ and Raxstar, the approach with music began at school, highlighting the importance of having such a masterclass within the college environment. This experience contextualized the importance of Apache's academy to kick-start a possible career within this music industry.

Following discussion around their origins, the two musicians asked the audience what makes a song their favorite, and what elements they felt define a song as a good one. The audience unanimously answered the following: good tunes, melody, and lyrics. There are different ways of connecting with a song, as Raxstar says: 'I connect with a song when I am able to relate to it, when it triggers memories. For me, songwriting is about going through something and expressing it: you could be in a relationship, be angry at something, and express it in a song. This is what provides a song with structure. Instant impact is what you want, wherever you are'.

Songwriting and production were examined in greater depth within the two workshops.

First workshop: Songwriting

I attended the workshop on songwriting that was led by Raxstar, who introduced the audience to the various techniques and methods of songwriting. The rapper began his talk by motivating his audience with the question: 'Why do we write, and what do we write?'. After collecting a range of responses – which included a passion for music, curiosity and experimentation with sounds – Raxstar proposed a more complex response that tapped into his personal experience:

Songwriting means dealing with a certain situation, such as being in a relationship or being hurt by someone; and while I might not be ready to talk about it, it's important to release these feelings. I do it via songwriting. A lot of us say it's like a personal diary. Some people at times do write songs and they don't release them, because it's too personal. Once you have it on paper, that's another scary part: someone else will be hearing it, and you keep wondering *What will they think?* It's there that you need instinct; and if you will be a songwriter, you must be able to accept also who might not appreciate your song.

The workshop continued with a constant interaction between Raxstar and the rest of the group, exploring diverse techniques of songwriting. My question to the rapper focused around the use of language and emotions: how they can be best transmitted to a wider audience? And what was the response from a global audience to such a language? Raxstar replied:

If I'm happy with what I've created, all the rest is incidental. The success doesn't necessarily matter, if you are doing something with a good intention. [...] The way I've converted it into a career is to look at how other people have done it, and wanting to be part of this network. I began absorbing issues on being a British Asian boy and on my South Asian origins, but also other social matters. I then started to internalize it; and while writing a song in 2000, someone told me there are so many British Asians in the UK, and no one is really representing them – and so I took this whole concept. I internalized that, and *Keep it Under Cover* was born. This kind of song allowed me to talk about loving a woman, which

is not necessarily accepted by our parents, together with being a singer or a rapper – which cannot be, for many, an alternative to being a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer, or whatever they want us to be. So while writing this song, I had only one thing in mind: *How can I represent our people?* A second song I have done was titled *Jaaneman*. That was a love song, different from the one I wrote in 2000. Looking back, I can now see why that song was so successful. It's because it had the right song formula that also included Hindi lyrics in the chorus. The effect it provoked was like a Bollywood film that's watched everywhere and even if there are people unable to understand Hindi, yet everyone can relate and empathize with the main character; and this is when a film and a song can become of global interest. So even with Hindi lyrics, I was able to reach a large amount of people, because my song was talking about universal feelings.

Raxstar's career itself seems to be a creative process that seeks to connect sound to complex sensorial experiences from his home and from other places. Home, he agreed, was Britain, while India was the place of his origins and his 'other familiar' place. This duality strongly influenced his writing, the melodies and his way of thinking, feeling and producing music. The creative process beneath songwriting is a suggestive set of work-nets that span personal emotions, passion for technology and music composition along with cultural and ethnic belonging, each of which help to form the body and complexity of his songs. The workshop on songwriting underlined four main aspects: (1) the importance of writing and speaking about emotions; (2) the need to incorporate an expression of ethnic and cultural mix; (3) fine-tuning of notes, sounds and lyrics, which could appeal to a specific audience, and using the language of being a British Asian artist as a vessel to reach an international audience; and (4) the use of technology as being essential to the creation process.

Second workshop: Music production

The second workshop was dedicated to music production. I am grateful to Dr. Rajinder Dudrah, who attended the second seminar and provided the relevant points from the discussion. This workshop was led by the London-based rapper TaZzZ and gave rise to a series of considerations on the evolution of British Asian music production.

The following points emerged during the second workshop. The first aspect debated was the rise of the so-called 'Bedroom DJ' culture. Bedroom DJs are normally a group of individuals in their late teens or early twenties, who are still living with their families, or about to move away and start their own lives and careers. These individuals normally live an isolated producing experience, and engage with the arts by actively taking part in creative activities. They approach such art opportunities for entertainment purposes or as occasions for self-expression, which may include the use of not only technology and software, but also publications and magazines. The Bedroom DJ is often highly adept in the use of new media and digital technology across cinema, television and internet activities, and thus stands at the juncture between technology, performance and culture. In association with promoters, producers and other professionals, Bedroom DJs have been able to push forward music techniques and technological developments in the last few decades.

The second point revolved around the effort of Apache Indian and the work that his academy was doing to promote new music and fusion-based production cultures. By stressing the desire to include elements of music production within the educational scopes of the academy, and through the narration of his early experience as a musician at school, TaZzZ offered the opportunity to reflect and debate the relevance of cultural aspects in music production. He mentioned how R'n'B music has undergone changes in the past few years, and how such a genre is now perceived across the world.

The debate explored the possible avenues through which musical cultures – such as those of Madonna, or folk bhangra – could intersect with British Asian music production. In such a mix, I also wondered, what are the meanings of listening to this music in contexts such as Birmingham, London or Manchester – i.e. how does this music take on a micro-local inflection in such cities and spaces within them?

The third aspect of the workshop was to encourage aspiring music producers not to be afraid of experimenting with their ideas, and urging them to undertake independent research. The importance of internet technologies such as storage platforms like Soundcloud, and self-promotion through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, were noted as being excellent arenas to experiment and to become more widely known.

Conclusion

I would like to end by quoting the words of Apache Indian, who, perhaps, perfectly explained the relevance of having work-nets that are able to form coherent and intertwined sets of experiences into a network. These networks are composed of a multitude of elements and ethnic dualities that have influenced the theme, language and flavors of music for many artists. It was remarkable to hear Apache Indian explaining the sense of being there in Birmingham as a person and as an artist:

I am very proud of Handsworth and of being an artist from here, and being part of the great artists able to express through reggae part of my culture from my family, and from the place I grew up. That helped me to create a new sound that is a reflection of who we are, where we come from, and where we have grown up. I would like to thank Raxstar, TaZzZ, PBN, and Bambi Brains who have accepted to come to this event. This is my vision, this is what I really wanted: that is, to have all artists from old and new generations to discuss the state of our music today.

The final panel – formed by Team PBN, TaZzZ, Raxstar, Bambi Brain, journalist Asjad Nazir, and headed by Apache Indian – highlighted the changes that the British Asian music has undergone over the past decade. From the discussion between the artists and the audience, it emerged that the elements acknowledged to have changed the British Asian music scene were (1) the implementation of social networking sites to help develop the brand and identity of emerging artists; (2) the use of YouTube – defined by TaZzZ as ‘the biggest TV ever’, capable of being an unlimited open channel for market promotion; (3) recognition of bhangra as a mainstream industry; (4) the exploitation of the global success of Bollywood to produce music; and (5) the diminishing popularity of live performances, which Apache attributed to a lack of support from the larger community: ‘often it’s not a matter of not having talent, but it’s rather a matter of not having the right support’. The larger industries from India, such as Bollywood or bhangra, have overshadowed the ‘British Asian music industry’, and many of the artists seem to be moving back to South Asia, leaving the British ‘stages’ blank. In this regard, PBN stated, ‘the infrastructure here is dying’; also, some of the audience reported the actual difficulty of gaining recognition in this scene.

This discussion led me to think further about the future of this industry. At the beginning of this article, I introduced the work of Latour on the notion of the network, with an aim to frame the current need for the British Asian music panorama to establish and maintain an institutionalized network. The current scene is distinguished by numerous ‘structural holes’ (Burt 1995), or rather by missing ties between the diverse parts of this network in spite of being populated by extremely talented, young and up-coming R’n’B and rapper artists (such as Aniiskii, Shivali, Asad Artist and Aay Kay, who were all present

at the songwriting masterclass). Apache Indian concluded by stressing the need for contemporary artists to network and establish an institutionalized body if the British Asian music industry is to survive.

The role of AIM is therefore an important one, not least in terms of constructing and establishing a foundation for an institutionalized industry. This places importance on notions of togetherness and unity among artists through the construction of a network with links to an educational environment. The event not only provided networking opportunities among the promising artists present, but also raised various important questions that are yet to be answered: In what other ways can the British Asian music industry get support from the larger community in order to survive? What is the role of local councils and art and cultural institutions to assist in promoting this industry and its artists? Although the scene is at a critical point, can the formation of a cohesive network – starting with Apache's music academy, Punch Records and the self-promotions of artists using online platforms – be a sufficient impetus for the British Asian music industry to gain wider recognition on a British and global stage? In summing up, can established industries such as British bhangra and Bollywood support British Asian music and its evolution?

Notes

1. On AIM, see <http://www.sccb.ac.uk/college-life/aim-academy> (accessed September 2014).
2. A summary video recording of the event can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=;3iVPq8TPyUY#t=49> (accessed September 2014).
3. Punch Records specializes in several activities, especially cultural events, touring, artist development, education and learning. Established in 1997 as a record store selling rare Black music, it rapidly became Birmingham's leading independent vinyl suppliers to local DJs. However, when in 2004 the store had to be closed, the demand for workshops by Punch's artist-led DJ increased. Nearly 10 years later, Punch has grown into a music arts organization supporting Black music and arts; see www.punch-records.co.uk.
4. Homophily, in social metric, defines the extent to which social actors build ties with others. Homophily can be defined in relation to gender, sexuality, race, age, occupation, status, social values and any other such specific characteristic.
5. Raxstar is a British rapper, from Luton, who stamped his mark on the music scene in 2005 with the song 'Keep it Undercover' – a song that documented young love and international conflict. Ethnic duality is an integral part of his identity as a British Asian. The culture he inherited and the one in which he was brought up are worlds apart, he mentions, yet music has been the creative journey to explore such diversity.
6. Apache Indian is a UK vocalist and reggae DJ. Moving away from a classical vocalist approach, his work tends to fuse Asian, West Indian and English cultural elements. Apache Indian was one of the earliest UK artists of Asian origins to make an impact on the UK charts with a series of hits during the 1990s. With the song 'No Reservation', he coined the term 'Bhangramuffin music', which incorporated elements of bhangra and dancehall.
7. TaZzZ is an acclaimed British rapper, music producer and sound engineer, who runs his own music studio called 'TaZzZ RecordingZ' in London. TaZzZ was noticed within the music scene with the release of 'Radha' in 2012, which was described by Bobby Friction (BBC Asian Network) as 'the new generation of sound'. This concept is based around how rappers share their individual stories, using a quirky comedic approach to highlight the jealousy and insecurities of their women when in a relationship with a musician.

Notes on contributor

Monia Acciari completed her PhD at the University of Manchester, with a thesis on the complexities of popular Hindi cinema in Italy. She conducts research on the impact of Popular Hindi cinema in

Europe. She also works in the field of Film Festival studies, with particular interest in festivals relating to Indian cinema.

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