BANDS, BEATS AND BEGINNINGS...

The definition of Bhangra has shifted over the four decades featured in this collection. Inspired by rural traditions in India and the Punjab that still remain today, Bhangra originally described a type of folk dance and song performed by groups of men celebrating their crop harvests, with traditional and self-created tales of greatness. With simple musical accompaniment (dhol barrel drum and mono-stringed toombi), dancers thrust out their chests with pride, jigged their shoulders and even performed acrobatic feats to enjoy the rewards of their labour in the fields. Between the mid-1960s and mid-1990s, Bhangra was gradually reinvented in the UK, to the extent that its rhythms, lyrics and dance styles influenced music produced in India and songs in Bollywood films.

The panels and images in this section of the exhibition are a collection of archive photos; album, cassette tape and CD covers; posters and other ephemera, which celebrates the early origins of British Bhangra that emerged in Southall. It brings together fragmented histories of a music scene and highlights the legacies and attractions of various popular artists who have been instrumental in the development of contemporary British music.

Kuljit Bhamra MBE (musician, producer and composer)

MOHINDER KAUR BHAMRA BHANGRA LEGEND

The story of the development of bhangra music in the UK appears to be mainly about the men who sang and played in the bands. However, there have been a number of important female artists who have contributed greatly to this history. This section tells the story of one of the real legends: Mohinder Kaur Bhamra.

Mohinder Kaur Bhamra began singing whilst at school in the Punjab (India). Performing as a student at major school and local events, she was selected to appear as the lead singer for a visit from Indian Prime Minister Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Her interest developed in the Sikh temple, where at special religious occasions and anniversaries, she would perform Shabad Kirtan (sacred Sikh hymns). Married in Kenya, Mohinder Kaur came to Britain in the early 1960s to Southall, where South Asians were beginning to settle. Already qualified in Giani (the study of Sikh scriptures), she was soon in demand to officiate at wedding ceremonies. At this time it was unheard of for anyone to perform both the sacred and secular music at these social events, however she and her growing musical family had engendered a certain respect that allowed this.

At many wedding receptions it was commonplace for men and women to be separated, but Mohinder Kaur had begun to sing a new wave of songs with strong danceable rhythms, popular with these social gatherings culturally dominated by men. Extending the physical performance space, catering furniture had to be moved aside to make space for the guests – and so the dance floor was born. However, she thought it unfair that the men would be dancing whilst the women sat removed, often in another room as the party was in full swing. In fact, Mohinder Kaur gained a reputation for refusing to sing unless the women were allowed into the function hall, and she would often urge them to participate: 'This song is for you', she would say, 'you can dance too!' The risk of making such a demand in a reception hall full of beer-drinking men was huge, but she was unshakable. Through her influence and exhortation, there occurred a significant turning point. As Mohinder Kaur's songs inspired confidence in them, more women came out and danced in the same social space as men.

Though the Punjabi community grew in Southall, the majority had settled in the Midlands, and so there was an increasing demand for Mohinder Kaur to perform across the UK. In addition to performing Ghazals (Urdu and Punjabi poems) at home parties, she found a special demand for Punjabi traditional songs, and so began to develop this part of her repertoire. She soon set out to look out for new works from interesting writers, poets and lyricists. In the early 1970s, she often teamed up with the renowned Smethwick-based singer A S Kang, and appeared in his first album *Jawani* (1976). Mohinder Kaur's first solo album *Punjabi Geet* featured duets with the renowned Indian singer, K Deep.

Playing harmonium, she was accompanied with her three now musically-fluent sons, Kuljit (tabla), Satpaul (mandolin) and Amarpal (accordion). With A S Kang and other male singers including Daljit Sagoo, and the Southall-based toombi player from India Bawa Charanjit, they pioneered the entertainment at the Punjabi wedding reception parties, which is the basis of the modern day Bhangra scene. The repertoire of songs that Mohinder Kaur has made her own is in much demand, and her hit song *Giddha Pao Haan Deo* has become a dance floor anthem and is played regularly by DJs at Punjabi weddings. It is also very much in demand at the ladies' Sangeet night, which takes place the evening before the main ceremony. Other songs tell tales of heroes and heroines: Heer-Ranjha, Sassi-Punnu, Shree-Faryadh, Mirza-Sahiban and Laila-Majnu; Romeo and Juliet-type characters in idyllic rural settings. With a strong interest in traditions, established bodies of work and connections with top India-based artists and recording studios, her hallmark remains quality of lyric and cultural integrity. She reflects, "People respect my religious beginnings from the temples".

Mohinder Kaur Bhamra has dealt with fundamental issues whilst maintaining her reputation, and as a singer she has successfully negotiated some of the most difficult social territories, provoked real social change within her broader community, and yet retained respect in religious and secular contexts.

Barb Jungr, singer and songwriter