Introduction: aspects of the South Asia/West crossover

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‘Budding ethno-musicologists, step this way. If you ever wanted a bit of everything on a record, this is it,’ wrote a reviewer in the *Melody Maker* for 18 April 1981. The record that covered ‘a baffling amount of ground’ was *Revenge of the Mozabites* by the Suns of Arqa on Rocksteady Records MICKLO1. Other reviewers were as puzzled, and in some cases, stimulated by the issue. To Johnny Black writing in *London Trax* they sound as if they lost their front door key back in 1969 and have been trapped in the living room of 8 Higher Road, Urmston ever since, with only albums by the Incredible String Band, the Bauls of Bengal and Hapshash for company. From time to time they hear the John Peel prog, and have thus gleaned a passable understanding of dub. Towards the end of 1980 they were set free, had a shave and a haircut and trundled their acoustic guitars, castanets, tablas, fiddles and harmoniums to a portable recording studio in the back of a Morris 1000 Traveller where they recorded this album.

But it was, he admitted ‘the most loveably naive album I’ve heard in years’. *New Musical Express* welcomed it: ‘It comes in a splendid cover and is a strange but compelling mix of musical sounds from what seem to be early sitar Indian music to folkish airs’ and recommended purchase with Christmas record tokens. *Sounds*, accustomed to a broad compass of music nevertheless warned its readers that ‘you may never hear anything weirder than this’, and awarded it four stars, though they didn’t ‘relate to “merit” so much as adventure’. Violin and accordion ‘weave melodies around the Indian percussion until a change of instrumentation dumps the whole thing into dub reggae on piano, bass and drums in the space of a couple of bars! You ain’t seen nothing yet’, *Sounds* continued, noting that it slipped into ‘mild flamenco with Spanish guitar, castanets and Speedy Gonzalez’ old lady warbling in the background!’ and continued in some bewilderment to catalogue the other influences, ‘all Irish jiggery-pokery on fiddle and whistle’, that it detected.

Apart from being an entertaining anthology of critical reactions to the unfamiliar, the cuttings file on *Revenge of the Mozabites* documents a stage in the rapid growth of ‘Indipop’ in the 1980s. Several albums later, Suns of Arqa, with whom over a hundred musicians have recorded, still confounds the critics: ‘Sounds a bit dippy-hippy up in the hills and stoned away’ wrote a columnist in *Cut* for October 1987. This most extreme example of the ‘South Asian/Western crossover’ may be a pointer to future trends or a temporary phase in the music of the Asian and mixed communities of Birmingham, Leicester or Southall; we must wait and see. But today it is one aspect of a popular music phenomenon.
We can all quote Kipling’s ‘East is East . . .’ in part, without perhaps being aware of his concluding lines in the quatrain from The Ballad of East and West:

. . . but there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth.

Eastern and western music traditions, strong and confronting each other have met, overlapped, exchanged and shared influences in recent years. Unconstrained, or less so, by restrictive concepts of admissable vehicles for influences in music, popular musics have swapped instruments, techniques, technologies and musicians; Suns of Arqa only represented, in a pot-pourri of sounds and synthesis, a trend which has been gathering momentum over several years. We are happy to stake out the new territory with landmarks – George Harrison’s sitar, Indo-Jazz Fusion and the like. But the web of routes that lead to it remain to be charted; this collection offers a few sign-posts on some of them.

Though the East–West exchange areas remain undefined, and may well include South-East Asia and, with some justification, much of the Middle East, for the
purpose of this special issue of *Popular Music* the discussion is centred on the exchange of influences between South Asia and the West. These too are terms that are imprecise: South Asia may be said to include South and North India, Sri Lanka, Bangla Desh, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Assam, and West to include Afghanistan; the West might embrace all Europe, North America and depending on how the term is interpreted (culturally or geographically) Australia, New Zealand and other countries also. But no representation can be attempted of the countries gathered within these vaguely drawn boundaries. Some forms of South Asian music cannot be defined by them: *qawwali* for instance. This Sufi music was dispersed to many parts of the world by the Muslim diaspora. An annual *qawwali* competition is a major event in Nairobi as the music has been adopted by the Gujerati community in East Africa. There are several *qawwali* groups in Britain, though they have been disengaged from the Sufi shrine life which is discussed in John Baily’s review article in this issue (p. 223).

Other musical forms may be local in nature. There are some two hundred languages in India alone, and if each identifies a cultural entity it is likely that the latter may have some form of musical expression that it deems its own. The music of the Bauls of Bengal is one such tradition. Rather than dip into a number of South Asian musics we are including a perception of this ancient form, the performance of an unconventional mystic whose ‘home being under a tree, moves from district to district, all the year round, as a dancing beggar who owns nothing in the world but a patchwork quilt’, as one Baul described himself to the musicologist Deben Bhattacharya. Charles Capwell considers the esoteric origins of ancient Tantric song-poems, their circulation among Buddhist and Saivite Hindu devotees and eventual popularisation by the mendicant singers. He notes the influence of the celebrated poet Lalón and makes mention of some of his spiritual descendants. It is important in the discussion of a genre that the individual exponents, heroes among their contemporaries, are not buried in the depths of academic analysis and historicism. John Baily takes up the theme of the individual performer in his examination of the short life of the Afghan musician Amin-e Diwaneh, a virtuoso player of the *dutar*. The personality of the musician as recalled by his friends emerges in Baily’s account, and the role of musician as popular hero is discussed in the light of his ‘amateur’ status. It is interesting to note that Amin-e Diwaneh first heard the newly improved *dutar* over the radio, underlining the significance of mass media in contributing to both dissemination and change in music.

A major factor in the distribution of popular music in South Asia and its expansion from localised idioms to widely dispersed genres, was the establishment of the phonograph industry. This has a history in India almost as long as in the United Kingdom, Calcutta having its first factory as early as 1908. Having been involved in the industry since the early 1930s, G. N. Joshi is uniquely placed to examine the evolution of the phonograph in India. Though his field was not popular music he was a highly popular recording artist, who later took an executive role with the Gramophone Company. His contribution formed an Appendix to Mr J. M. Ojha’s Report, commissioned by UNESCO, which is the subject of a review by Dave Laing in this special issue, p. 225.

Thirty years after the introduction of gramophone recording, sound film was introduced in India. Its great popularity meant that cinema music reached a vast public in the cities, in spite of the problems of linguistic diversity. Lengthy, spectacular, romantic and frequently mythological, Indian films constitute a mass
media extension of popular theatre. In his survey of 'Popular Music in India' Peter Manuel examines the early years of film music and the changes wrought by the reorganisation of the industry in the 1940s and the greater complexity of the forms and distribution of film music (e.g. through radio) since the 1970s. But he also discusses popular music outside film and comments particularly on the boom in cassette production. India in the 1980s has over 12,000 permanent or travelling cinemas; Alison Arnold discusses the many influences that have borne upon Indian film music, both foreign and indigenous, and traces elements from Mozart to China in the work of some musical directors. Noting that popular Hindi film songs eventually dominated Indian film she considers the social and national implications of its popularity.

Though the influences on Indian film music have been diverse, drawing from classical, popular and folk sources, the influence of Indian music on western popular and jazz idioms has been principally from North Indian classical traditions. In his paper Gerry Farrell discusses the musical elements that were explored and assimilated in rock and folk-rock groups, of the 1960s, in particular the Beatles, and compares them with the aspects that were investigated by jazz musicians, among them John Coltrane, Don Ellis and John Mayer's Indo-Jazz Fusions. He argues that, in their respective ways, pop and jazz musicians sought to reflect the sound images of Indian music rather than seek to play it.

One interesting, even ironic, aspect of the South Asian/Western 'crossover' in popular music has been the establishment by The Gramophone Company of India of a branch in Great Britain designed to meet the needs of the British Asian community. Sabita Banerji observes that it is in the last decade or so that British-born young people of South Asian parentage have made their own music, distinct from the ghazals and Hindi film music of their parents' tastes. Bhangra, a sprightly hybrid of Punjabi music and Western rock, has a considerable following, and the many bands continue to experiment with electronics, appealing to a widening audience in several continents through the marketing of records to South Asian communities elsewhere.

Whether the impact of South Asian music will be as lasting and far-reaching in the shaping of world popular music as were jazz, and later, the blues, only time will show. Perhaps not, but there is no doubt that the crossover between South Asia and the West has a history, in one aspect or another, as old as the century; older, if we include for instance, the curious experiments of Raja Sir Sourindro Mohun Tagore, whose collection of Indian musical instruments is noted in the 'Middle Eight' section of this issue. That we have only begun to look beneath the reflecting surface is obvious. If this collection of papers stimulates others to conduct research in the field we will be more than pleased, but the greatest pleasure lies in sharing the rich and diverse forms of popular music which the meeting of East and West has stimulated.

A note on spelling

Transliteration of Indian words presents many problems, and the use of diacritical marks is not standardised. The editors have decided to respect the spellings and marks used by each contributor, even though they may vary.