Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series

An **Ashgate** Book

Brimful of Asia

Negotiating Ethnicity on the UK Music Scene

Rehan Hyder

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Brimful of Asia

Negotiating Ethnicity on the UK Music Scene

REHAN HYDER
University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004 by Ashgate Publishing

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

First issued in hardback 2017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Hyder, Rehan
Brimful of Asia : negotiating ethnicity on the UK music scene. – (Ashgate popular and folk music series)
1.Popular music – Great Britain – History and criticism 2.Popular music – Great Britain – Asian influences 3.Rock groups – Great Britain 4.Popular music – Great Britain – 1991–2000 5.Popular music – Great Britain – 2001–2010 6.South Asians – Cultural assimilation – Great Britain 7.South Asians – Great Britain – Ethnic identity
I.Title
781.6'4'0941

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Hyder, Rehan, 1968–
Brimful of Asia : negotiating ethnicity on the UK music scene / Rehan Hyder.
p. cm.— (Ashgate popular and folk music series)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-7546-0677-5 (alk. paper) – ISBN 0-7546-4064-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)
1. Popular music—Great Britain—Asian influences. 2. Popular music—Social aspects—Great Britain. 3. Asians—Great Britain—Ethnic identity. I. Title. II. Series.

ML3492.H93 2003
781.64'089'95041—dc22

2003065056

Note: Some of the quotes within this book contain strong language, which readers might find offensive.

Typeset by Bournemouth Colour Press, Parkstone, Poole.

ISBN 13: 978-0-7546-4064-6 (pbk)
ISBN 13: 978-1-138-45965-6 (hbk)

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the Ashgate Popular and Folk Music series aims to present the best research in the field. Authors will be concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and may draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series will focus on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Professor Derek B. Scott
Chair of Music
University of Salford

Acknowledgements

This is a project that has spanned nearly a decade and during this period I have been deeply indebted to a number of people without whom this book would not have been possible. I would like to begin by thanking Charles Husband at the University of Bradford for first encouraging me to develop my ideas in this area, and Paul Rixon for supporting throughout the research of the original thesis. As for the actual writing of the book, I would like to thank both my department at the University of the West of England and the Arts and Humanities Research Board for generously funding the 12-month sabbatical which finally gave me the space to complete this project and, in particular, Martin Barker and Jon Dovey for their support in achieving this. At Ashgate I would like to thank Derek Scott for giving the green light for this project, the constructive comments of the anonymous reader whose report has helped shape the finished book, and a special mention to Rachel Lynch for her patience and guidance over the last few years.

As for the support of friends and family, this book simply would have never happened without them. The camaraderie of my fellow researchers Aidan Arrowsmith and Ian Toon during the dark days of my PhD in Stoke-on-Trent is gratefully acknowledged, as is the pastoral support provided by my old mate Andrew Pike and the always generous hospitality of Terry Banks and Yut-Mei. The unstinting support of my Mum, Dad and brother Shaun simply cannot be measured and I thank them as ever for always being there for me and putting up with my many moods. I would also like to give a special mention to Carolyn Hair who with grace and good humour has stood by me and kept me going through the last few years, and whose help and support have seen me through to the completion of this project.

Finally I would like to express my gratitude to the people who have allowed themselves to be interviewed and become the central subjects of this book. The generosity they have extended to me in terms of their time and support has both surprised and inspired me, and without this the work simply would never have happened. I would like to mention Rich at Nation Records, Mark at Tandoori Space and Chris Sharp at Wiiija for their help in getting hold of people and for providing me with illustrative materials, but most of all to my interviewees I extend my sincere thanks and wish them well in their future endeavours and look forward to hearing, reading and seeing what they will come up with next.

BRIMFUL OF ASIA

'Read this book as a smartly conceived and adroitly completed rescue mission. Of all Britain's musical artists, Asian bands are the most ensnared and assaulted by journalistic, academic and political clichés. Rehan Hyder cuts his way through all this verbiage to get to the musicians themselves. In *Brimful of Asia* music is used to make sense of complicated lives and lives are examined to make sense of complicated music. An essential book for cultural and popular music studies alike.'

Simon Frith, University of Stirling, UK

'*Brimful of Asia* is filled to the brim with insight, analysis, and interpretation of some of the most important music being made in the world today. With deft mastery over a broad range of ideas and issues, Rehan Hyder locates the emergence of artists of Asian ancestry on the popular music charts in Britain as part of the global shake-up that is dramatically altering relationships between culture and place in many different ways all around the world. *Brimful of Asia* has much to say about artists, audiences, and artistry in a tumultuous time of transformation and change.'

George Lipsitz, University of California, San Diego, USA;
author of *Dangerous Crossroads*

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Chapter 1

Introduction

During the spring of 1992 a new cultural phenomenon began to emerge on the UK music scene as a number of Asian bands and musicians started to attract attention on a national scale. Suddenly, where before there had seemingly only been silence, Asian voices and sounds began to demand to be heard and spoke with a stridency and tenacity that confounded all expectations. Disparate voices in Yorkshire, the Midlands and London began to make themselves heard and, by the time summer had come around, the music press was full of reports of this new wave of Asian bands. At the time this was happening I was studying for my Masters degree in race relations in Bradford and, as someone who was not only a fledgling musician but also part-Asian – my father was born in Pakistan and my mother in England – I followed these developments with a keen interest. In the years that followed I began to realize that the experiences of these individuals provided a unique opportunity to investigate notions of ethnicity and identity in the context of a developing multi-ethnic society. The fact that Asians were entering the mainstream of the music industry for the first time meant that their sense of 'Asianness' was put under constant scrutiny and interrogation in public: what did it mean to be Asian? How did this affect their music? What did this say about Asians in Britain? The expectations and frequent stereotypes traded by a wide range of inquisitors was such that the individuals in question had to be both reflexive and challenging in their responses, ensuring that their sense of self was as much public as it was private. This is extremely significant since it reflects the very nature of identity in the contemporary world; it comes not only from within an individual, from memories and history, but is worked out and negotiated in the big wide world outside; that which is happening now and embodies a myriad array of people, opinions and influences. Who we think we are is only part of the story, since what others think of us is a contingent part of the process of self, and this is no more true than in a contemporary setting like multi-ethnic Britain at the turn of the 21st century.

So, in a sense, this is a book as much about Britain in the 1990s as it is about the experiences of the individuals focused upon. The decade has proved to be pivotal in the growing influence and acceptance of South Asian culture on the mainstream and it is important to recognize the significance of this for the nation as a whole, rather than focus on what it means for a particular 'ethnic minority' group. How then does one tackle such complex and sometimes contradictory issues as ethnicity and cultural identity? The realm of the creative arts is an obvious place to look, but how does one make sense of something as hard to

define as music and performance? To seek an absolute understanding of both of these issues seems somewhat misguided and impractical and I have attempted to reflect the ongoing process of musical and ethnic identity formation by first considering the problems associated with such research.

Writing ethnicity

The first question I asked myself was how to write about issues of ethnicity without perpetuating notions of fixed identities and static communities. Indeed one of the common irritations experienced by members of Asian bands is the expectation that they somehow speak for all Asians; that their experiences and artistic endeavours somehow represent the authentic voice of 'Asian Britain'. It is important to state at the outset that my detailed focus on the experiences of a number of specific bands and musicians is not intended to be a definitive account of British Asian identity, but to qualitatively examine the complexities at play in terms of ethnicity and identity in multi-ethnic Britain. This perspective was adopted partly as a reaction against totalizing discourses of ethnic absolutism and belonging which fail to recognize the syncretic processes at work in the expression of contemporary cultural identities. In the specific context of discourses surrounding Asian identity in Britain, the articulation of ethnic absolutism is particularly problematic (Modood 1988, 1994 and 1997) and bound up in often stereotypically defined studies of separation and 'community' (Khan 1977; Modood 1997). The tendency for researchers to regard racial or ethnic categories as unproblematic damages our understanding of the flexible and dynamic articulation of self-identity for groups and individuals by pandering to what Stanfield and Dennis have called the 'fallacy of homogeneity', which suggests that individuals within minority groups (particularly non-whites) have no differential identities (Stanfield and Dennis 1992: 22). In order to avoid falling into what Silverman has called the 'trap of absolutism' (Silverman 1993: 5) it is therefore necessary in a study of this sort to focus on the specific experiences of individuals in some detail rather than utilizing discourses of ethnic absolutism or, in this case, 'community'. By examining in detail the experiences of specific individuals in particular settings, my intention is to show how a sense of Asian identity is one that is not fixed and rigid but one which is negotiated and dynamic. By focusing on just four bands I have been able to examine in depth the complex negotiations of identity and ethnicity which can only be understood by embarking on extensive and qualitative research. As Mann has written, particularly complex research projects are such that it is necessary to focus on a small group of 'key participants' in order to gather material of any insight:

> It may well be that a particular piece of research needs to be focused on selected people for information and the information gained from them will be fitted together in a coherent way with virtually no percentages and significant tests at all. (1993: 111)

These concerns were instrumental in the focus of my research on individuals rather than on a broadly defined social group; I purposely avoided gathering information from any 'community' sources in order to get away from discourses of ethnic identity which present Britain's diverse Asian population as a fixed and culturally isolated grouping. For this reason I have also kept away from gathering data about the ethnic make-up of the audiences that these bands play to, since it is rather reductive to judge the significance of these artists by measuring their success within the community. As I have stated, although the focus of the research is on Asian bands, I did not embark on this project with the notion of constructing a definitive or representative account of British Asian identity, but rather to examine the ambiguities and complexities of multi-accented identities. For this reason the research is intended not merely to provide specific accounts of Asian identity, but to shed light on what Stuart Hall has called the 'crisis of identity' (1992b) that is representative of late modernity. The decline of metanarratives in late modernity which has seen the erosion of old identities and allegiances is such that the politics of identity and belonging have become increasingly contentious (Harvey 1989; Lash 1990). The fragmentation of old sureties and allegiances has meant that particular modes of identity and political agency – not just those surrounding ethnicity but also those based around issues of gender, sexuality, class and generation – have become ever-intensified sites of struggle and negotiation. Rallying cries around notions of ethnicity and cultural authenticity have become particularly strident in attempting to reassert old allegiances and yet, at the same time, the manifestation of multi-accented and syncretic identities becomes increasingly hard to ignore. The ambiguous and reflexive nature of identities in flux during this period is such that it is hard to maintain any definitive or absolute model of ethnicity and identity without ignoring the dynamic processes of cultural change and syncretism that are becoming such an integral part of contemporary multi-ethnic society. This is not to say that specific cultural allegiances and histories do not have any specific bearing on the articulation of individual and group identities; far from it in fact. As the experiences of the musicians interviewed show, the cultural resource provided by their various Asian backgrounds are significant features in the articulation of their sense of self and belonging, but this resource does not have an absolute or fixed influence on their lives. As Wallman has recognized, the importance of the ethnic 'resource' is extremely flexible according to individual experiences and contexts and cannot be assumed to represent a dominant mode of self in all circumstances (Wallman 1981). We need to be able to recognize the combined importance of the dynamic and shifting processes of syncretism and cultural change as well as the pragmatic maintenance of a sense of cultural heritage and belonging. These two processes are not mutually exclusive: they co-exist and combine in a way that represents the complexity of ever-shifting concepts of self and belonging. This does not present us with an easy model of identity, but nevertheless reflects the intricacies of the cultural processes at work in the functioning of multi-ethnic societies in late

modernity. This study is not intended to represent a definitive model of such a society but merely reflects the complex negotiations that are present in contemporary articulations of self and belonging. Although this is a terrain which is fraught with much difficulty and contention, it also reveals the vibrant and transformative potential of an environment which is marked by the dynamic processes of inter-cultural exchange and syncretism.

Writing music

The second question that needs attention is that of the music itself; how to write meaningfully about a medium that quite simply cannot be represented in words. Descriptions of the sound of music are inevitably subjective and tied into the ability of the author to convey what can be the most ephemeral or profound sonic and emotional nuances. Furthermore I have always felt that analysis of musical notation and lyrics is something of a cold and abstract tool; particularly when considering such complex issues as that of ethnicity and cultural identity. The close study of musical texts is undoubtedly a useful method and can uncover some important insights about both the author and the society that produced them, but ultimately they are limited insomuch as they are bound by the interpretative powers of the critic. The examination of lyrics is a particularly favoured source of analysis within popular music, but one which has limited value since it not only isolates particular passages and words but also excises them from the overall context where sound and language are fused. In the end, whatever is uncovered by such scrutiny must always be considered with caution; too often are meanings ascribed to lyrical texts that are alien or even anathema to authors themselves. It is troubling that many studies of identity and ethnicity that concentrate on music have based their analysis simply on musical texts such as records or videos, decoding them as unproblematic and unambiguous messages and statements, all too often ascribing meanings to these texts which may or may not be intended by the musicians in question. Any study of musical meaning and cultural significance taken from a musical text must be counterbalanced by consideration of the avowed intentions of the artists themselves. It is therefore crucial to allow the members of the bands in question to air their own voices and opinions, partly because of the complexity of the subject matter involved, but also because of the lack of such material in many others studies in this area (Hesmondhalgh 1995; Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma 1996). This is not to say that artists are not prone to their own interpretative shortcomings, and the poetic or even abstract nature of many lyrical texts is such that they may escape neat analysis or understanding.

So from the outset I was suspicious of the value of textual analysis with regard to the music produced by these bands, and I soon realized that this book was not actually about the nature of the music created by Asian musicians but about how

such music acted as a pivot around which notions of cultural allegiance and ethnic identity were established and negotiated. In that sense the actual music itself is not of primary importance; how it is used, interpreted and reported is the real source of interest. Music, like identity itself, does not come simply from within and, although both emerge from the individual, they find meaning and contestation in wider society. So, although I have drawn on various musical texts, my prime source of information has been the musicians themselves. While the music and lyrics they produce are certainly important and provide a necessary and valuable resource for this book, I have been more concerned with their reception; how others have interpreted them and how the musicians have responded to this. Musical meaning then, like a sense of self, is something that is contingent on and negotiated in relation to the outside world and that represents an ongoing process of identity construction and maintenance. The specific arena of musical performance and production is a particularly rich area through which to explore these issues as it provides a space where identities are presented, distorted and transgressed. The notion of cultural identity as *process* is mirrored by the development and articulation of musical styles and performances which are in a constant state of flux and re-evaluation. By prioritizing the importance of musical production as a significant site of cultural interaction and change I have sought to problematize much previous work in youth studies which have tended to relegate music as simply an adjunct of style (Cohen 1972; Hebdige 1976), preferring to assert its importance as a significant area of social and cultural transformation. Frith (1996: 109) has correctly identified the importance of music-making in the articulation of a dynamic and shifting sense of self and has stated that 'Identity is not a thing but a process – an experiential process which is most vividly grasped *as music*.'

By privileging music as a site of cultural negotiation and change, where identities are performed and transformed, I intend to show how the experiences of the musicians in this study represent part of the processes of transition and change that are transforming contemporary British society in ways which reflect the complex articulations of cultural syncretism at play in a multi-ethnic setting.

The bands

The bands that I have focused on all originated in the early 1990s and represent the influence of a wide array of musical cultures; in this sense they are characterized more by the diversity of their output than by their ethnic background. They were chosen because they happened to be some of the earliest Asian bands on the scene and, as it turns out, they have also been among the most successful and have enjoyed careers that were still developing some ten years later. Although all these artists have experienced a great deal of success both in the UK and internationally, I recognize that not everybody will be familiar with their work.

Therefore I have provided a short description of each for the edification of the reader. These descriptions are a somewhat brief overview of sometimes complicated careers, but it is hoped that they will provide a rough outline and backdrop to the subsequent interview data. The artists are listed in alphabetical order; this does not reflect their degree of success or indeed the musical preferences of the author.

Black Star Liner

This band was formed in 1994 in Leeds and consisted of three members: Choque Hosein, Chris Harrop and Tom Salmon. From the outset the band's music incorporated a fusion of elements drawn from a wide range of sources. Aspects of dub reggae and rock guitar were merged with a variety of instruments from Asia and the Middle East to create a deeply textured and unique sound by a process whereby the band (and various collaborators) recorded instruments and voices live and then manipulated and remixed them into the final musical text. As such, the band's recorded output differed markedly from live performances, which tended to rely on a more direct, 'rock and roll' approach.

Black Star Liner's first record, *Smoke the prophets*, was released on their own Soundclash Sound label in 1994 and was made single of the week in the Vibes section of *New Musical Express* (13 November 1992). Following the release of *High Turkish influence* in 1995 they were signed to the independent label EXP, which led to their debut album *Yemen cutta connection* the following year. It was a significant critical success – named as dance album of the week by *The Guardian* newspaper (23 August 1996) and the preceding record, *Haláal rock*, became single of the week in *Melody Maker* (10 August 1996). The latter included a collaboration with Cornershop's Tjinder Singh (see below), who provided vocals on the track 'Dhuggie Dhol', and the two bands would later appear together on the BBC's *India 5-O* live broadcast in 1997. By this time EXP records had collapsed and Black Star Liner subsequently signed a three-album deal with Warner Music UK. The deal in fact produced just a single album, *Bengali bantam youth experience*, which was released in 1999 to much critical acclaim and nominated for the coveted Mercury Music Award. The breakdown of relations between the band and the new management at Warner Music UK resulted in legal wranglings which meant that Black Star Liner did not release any further records for four years, although in 2003 Choque Hosein, the sole remaining member, was about to sign with a new label and finally to start releasing records again.

Cornershop

Previously named General Havoc, Cornershop emerged in Preston in 1992 around the nucleus of Tjinder Singh and Ben Ayres, who met while studying at Lancashire Polytechnic in the late 1980s and who have remained the key

members of the band ever since. Tjinder's brother Avtar, David Chambers and Anthony Saffrey completed the line-up. The band was quickly signed to the London-based independent label Wiiija, through which they released their first records *In the days of Ford Cortina* and *Lock, stock and double barrel*, the latter being chosen as single of the week by *NME* (27 November 1992). Musically Cornershop began as an archetypal indie/rock band, favouring a three-guitar line-up betraying energy and enthusiasm over musical ability. The band courted controversy early in their career by burning a picture of former Smiths' vocalist Morrissey outside the London offices of his record label EMI in protest at the singer's supposed flirtation with far-right nationalist sentiments. This act garnered a lot of attention in the press and did much to label the band as an angry and explicitly political group, despite the fact that this was not always apparent in the band's lyrical content.

Following the release of Cornershop's debut album *Hold on it hurts* in 1993, the band began to experiment with new sounds, drawing on a wider range of influences and sounds, including greater use of Asian instruments such as the sitar and the dholki. The band's second album *Woman's gotta have it* (1995) reflected these changes and went on to gather widespread critical acclaim in the USA following a licensing deal with David Byrne's Luaka Bop label. Cornershop's increasingly eclectic and innovative approach came of age in 1997 with the release of their third album *When I was born for the 7th time*, which not only featured the number one single 'Brimful of Asha' but was also nominated for the prestigious Mercury Music Award. The combination of rock, hip-hop, funk, country and Asian sounds resulted in an album which was radically different from the band's initial output and Cornershop have since built on the success of this approach with the release in 2002 of *Handcream for a generation*, to almost universal critical acclaim. The band have continued to work around the songwriting ability of lead singer Tjinder Singh and, until 2003, remained under the auspices of Wiiija Records.

Fun^Da^Mental

Fun^Da^Mental were formed in London in 1991 around the core membership of PropaGhandi (aka Aki Nawaz), Lallaman and Goldfinger and released their debut single 'Janaam: righteous preacher' the following year on Nation Records – a label co-founded by Aki Nawaz. The band rapidly gained a reputation for the outspoken political content of their early records, as epitomized by their first album *Seize the time* which dealt with issues such as racism, vigilantism and the global arms industry. The controversial lyrics rapped over dense hip-hop beats and enhanced with provocative samples drawn from film, television and political speeches – *Seize the time* includes dialogue from the film *Gandhi* (1982), a documentary by Australian journalist John Pilger on the international arms industry and the speeches of Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam – led the

band to be described in some quarters as 'the Asian Public Enemy' (Sullivan 1993). Such was the force of the band's political approach, that their music was often under-reported early on, even though the fusion of hip-hop beats with samples of south Asian instrumentation was an innovative and original development in British music.

Fun^Da^Mental's subsequent output has reflected a continuing commitment to raising controversial political subjects (as in the case of their 1999 release *Why America will go to hell*, which speaks out against the issue of rape as a weapon of war in the CD's liner notes) as well as a process of musical discovery which has produced a diverse body of work. Since *Seize the time* Fun^Da^Mental have released an entirely instrumental album, *With intent to pervert the cause of injustice*, the dissonant, industrial *Erotic terrorism* and the almost world music sounding *There shall be love!* All of these releases have sought to widen the band's musical base through collaboration with musicians from as far afield as New Zealand, South Africa and Pakistan. Although the band has gone through several changes of personnel, Aki Nawaz has remained the chief creative force and co-ordinator, continuing to shape projects and seek out collaborators from within Nation Records in London.

Voodoo Queens/Anjali

Voodoo Queens were formed in London in 1992 by sisters Anjali and Rajni Bhatia, Anjula Bhasker, Ella Dragulis and Stefania. After playing live for the first time they were offered a John Peel session on BBC Radio One, broadcast in January of the following year. After further live performances the band were signed by London independent label Too Pure and released their first single 'Supermodel, superficial', which was a critical and commercial success. The song's lyrics presented a stinging critique of the beauty industry and the pressure put on young girls to diet and this, combined with the slogan 'Who needs boys when you've got guitars?', led to Voodoo Queens being associated with the UK's nascent Riot Grrrl scene. The band adopted a raw guitar-based style in garage/punk tradition and live shows were characterized by high-energy performance and aggression. Their musical approach, and the fact that several members of the band were of Asian descent, led them to be described in some quarters as the 'female Cornershop' – a label rejected by Voodoo Queens and certainly not borne out in any considered musical comparison between the two bands. In 1994 the band released their only album *Chocolate revenge* and embarked on a successful UK promotional tour. The following year saw Voodoo Queens leave Too Pure records because of musical differences and lead singer/songwriter Anjali Bhatia set up the short-lived Voodoo record label to release the band's last single 'Eat the germs' on limited edition 7-inch vinyl.

Following this Voodoo Queens disbanded and Anjali set out to re-invent herself as a solo artist, signing to Wiiija Records in 1996. Having begun working

as a DJ and embracing a more technological approach, Anjali set up a studio in her home in order to write and produce her own material. Her new output was in marked contrast to that of Voodoo Queens, using sampling technology to create a decidedly more laid-back musical style, and her first single 'Maharani' was released in 1998. The incorporation of Asian instrumentation with soul and funk influences and the use of samples of 1960s exotica enabled Anjali to establish herself as a solo artist of some note. Her eponymous album released in 2000 was successful both in the UK and in Europe and the 2003 follow-up, *The world of Lady A*, looked set to build her reputation further.

Throughout the 1990s and beyond members of each group have allowed themselves to be questioned by me and have been gracious, open and thought-provoking in their responses. The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured, which enabled the respondents to raise a number of ideas and issues that undoubtedly played important roles in shaping the structure and key concerns of the final text. I also spoke to a number of journalists and record company personnel in order to widen the perspective of the study; a full list of all interviewees, including the dates of each interview, is included in Appendix 1.

At the time of writing (spring 2003), all the musicians I spoke to were active within the music industry, playing live, writing material and releasing records that continue to reflect the energy and enthusiasm that has enabled them to survive and prosper for well over a decade. I would whole-heartedly recommend any reader interested in the subjects raised by this work to seek out the recorded material of these diverse artists. Such is the variety of their music that there is no single compilation album that features them all and, although I would have liked to have included one with this book, the practicalities of doing so and the strict legislature of music copyright law prevent me from doing so. Needless to say, the music produced by these artists is not to everyone's taste, but the sheer weight of ideas and innovations they reflect would provoke the interest of even the most jaded of listeners.

Structure

In order to understand the particular experiences of the small number of Asian bands and musicians focused on here, it is important to establish an overall conceptual map of the specific environment from which these individuals have emerged. In the following chapter I will examine contemporary debates surrounding the articulation of ethnicity in the UK, paying particular attention to the experiences of Asian people. I will focus on the specific experiences of migration and settlement in the post-war period and examine subsequent attempts to construct 'authentic' discourses of identity and belonging. In doing so I will highlight the tension between absolutist and syncretic discourses of cultural and

ethnic identity and examine the central role of the artist in the establishment of new understandings of self and belonging. In Chapter 3, I will summarize previous attempts to analyse the significance of youth culture in forging new identifies, focusing on the role assigned to music. Thus I will attempt to assert the central importance of music in the construction and transformation of youthful identities, particularly in the context of a multi-ethnic environment. As well as stressing the transformative potential of music-making in this context, I will also examine some of the pressures and expectations put upon Asian musicians by cultural commentators and elements of the music industry. Before I finally move on to examine the experiences of the musicians interviewed in some detail, Chapter 4 will look at the post-war history of Asian influences and involvement in popular music in the UK. Here I will examine the construction and maintenance of a number of delimiting stereotypes of Asian music and culture which have had a particular effect on the careers of contemporary Asian bands.

Having established the historical and theoretical background for this study I will then look at the experiences of the four Asian bands selected for this study in depth by focusing mainly on information gathered from personal interviews. Chapter 5 will examine how these bands have negotiated their sense of Asian identity as emergent artists in an industry that promotes notions of novelty and exoticism. It will focus on the reaction of the national music press to the emergence of Asian bands in the 1990s and examine how subsequently the musicians in these bands have attempted to transgress stereotypical interpretations of their music and identity, particularly those pertaining to notions of eastern mysticism and 'exotic' politics.

Chapter 6 will examine the importance of political issues in the music of these bands and focus on the pressures brought to bear on Asian musicians by the 'burden of representation', from both commercial and 'community' sources. Here, I focus on the importance of ideological and financial independence for these bands and examine the flexible and pragmatic tactics adopted by them in order to survive and flourish within such an arduous environment.

Finally, Chapter 7 focuses on the articulation of syncretic modes of cultural expression and identity, highlighting the ability of young Asian musicians to successfully manipulate a number of cultural inputs and resources. This chapter analyses a range of influences that were significant in the emergence of Asian bands in the 1990s and examines the combination of traditional Asian, global and Western influences that have combined to produce new, syncretic manifestations of cultural expression and identity. By examining the response of the musicians to existing categories of ethnicity and identity this chapter will conclude by highlighting the ability of these young people to articulate a multi-accented sense of self and belonging – one which is both flexible and able to incorporate a range of cultural inputs and allegiances.

The specific experiences of these few bands can never hope to deliver a definitive understanding of what it means to be Asian in the UK at the start of a new millennium, but can provide us with a vivid and enlightening snapshot of the transformative potential of life in a contemporary multi-ethnic setting. The ability of these individuals to balance a range of cultural inputs and articulate modes of self and belonging that are dynamic and multi-accented is evidence that we can perhaps begin to move away from the limiting discourses of absolutism and 'authenticity' which seek to stifle the ever-growing manifestations of cultural exchange and syncretism. The experiences of these musicians teach us that, despite the many pressures and expectations of contemporary life, it is possible to embrace a multitude of cultural inputs and influences and, with vitality and drive, transfix and transform the society from which they emerged.

Chapter 2

Negotiating difference: ethnicity and identity in contemporary Britain

This study is grounded in the context of what we might call a 'multi-ethnic' society as it exists in the contemporary setting of Britain at the beginning of a new century. The migration and settlement of brown and black people from the former colonies in the immediate post-war period radically altered the composition and character of British life in ways which continue to throw up new and ever-changing cultural forms and practices. For the settlers themselves, and in particular their offspring, issues of identity and belonging have been paramount in the functioning of their everyday lives. Widespread experiences of prejudice and racism (Fryer 1984; Solomos 1987) have meant that notions of ethnic and racial identity have taken on much importance for Britain's so-called 'ethnic minorities' and continue to play a central part in notions of identity and belonging. The maintenance and assertion of a sense of distinct ethnic identity, often with significant links (both real and symbolic) to the country of origin, have been important resources in establishing a positive and assertive role in contemporary British society. Of course any kind of positive expression of ethnic particularity cannot function in isolation, and the multi-ethnic nature of contemporary British life is such that the inevitable processes of cross-cultural dialogue and exchange challenge the maintenance of a closed or 'pure' sense of ethnic identity. Current debates on issues of ethnicity and identity therefore need to focus on the tension between the desire to retain a sense of ethnic particularity and the dynamic processes of cross-cultural exchange through which new modes of identity are realized.

It is in order to examine these dialogues that I have chosen to examine how a small group of individuals have negotiated their sense of 'Asian'[1] identity throughout the 1990s and beyond. I have focused on a small sample of Asian bands in the UK whose experiences represent both the vitality and creativity of a contemporary multi-ethnic nation, as well as highlighting many of its tensions and contradictions. The importance of expressive cultural forms and practices are central to any articulation of ethnic identity, and music is perhaps the most vivid and dynamic of these forms (Gilroy 1993a; Back 1996). The music of these young people embodies what Paul Gilroy has called, 'kaleidoscopic formulations of cultural syncretism' (Gilroy 1988: 45) which begin to realize the positive