Uday Shankar’s extensive concert tours in Europe and the United States provided him a platform to establish his identity as a representative of Indian culture during the 1930s and 1940s. Fifty years later, musicians of South Asian descent working within Britain could be found attempting to do just the opposite—namely, attempting to establish their identities as representatives of British culture. Their varying success in these attempts is evident in the history of musical prizes in Britain during the 1990s and early 2000s, the focus of this chapter. Within the British music industry, the Mercury Music Prize is widely regarded as the most prestigious music prize a British musician can win. Since its inception in 1990, it has purportedly distinguished the finest single album recorded by British artists each year. Thus when British Asian musicians began to be nominated for and then awarded the Mercury Prize, it effectively legitimated British Asian popular musicians as participants in and producers of British culture in general.

Yet what does it mean that British Asian musicians could create something that is celebrated as distinctly British music one year, and celebrated as “world music” the next year? Although the categories “British music” and “world music” might be understood to be mutually exclusive,¹ two British Mercury Prize nominees, Nitin Sawhney (2000) and Susheela Raman (2001), were transformed from distinguished “British” musicians to distinguished “world” musicians when they were awarded prizes at the first

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¹ Steven Feld notes that the world music market label relates historically to the “terminological dualism that distinguished world music from music” and “helped reproduce a tense division in the academy, where musics understood as non-Western or ethnically other continued to be routinely partitioned from those of the West... The relationship of the colonizing and the colonized thus remained generally intact in distinguishing music from world music.” See Steven Feld, "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music," Public Culture 12, no. 1 (2000).
annual BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) Radio 3 Awards for World Music in January 2002. Far from a unified style or distinct set of genres, the category “world music” was created within the music industry to package an infinite variety of international recordings for western markets. Consequently, to be a world music artist is, by definition, to be an artist from a country other than Great Britain, which begs the question: how could Nitin Sawhney, Susheela Raman, or Talvin Singh be considered both “British” and yet not from Britain? In this chapter, I focus on the recent history of the Mercury Prize and BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music in order to consider how ideas of “Britishness” changed during the late 1990s to include and exclude British Asian musicians and their music within mainstream British culture.

British Asian musicians’ recognition within mainstream British culture during mid to late 1990s depended to a large extent on their ties to a South Asian cultural heritage—as opposed to a white, Anglo-Saxon one, most often associated with British identity. In the past, most South Asian immigrants within Britain had been regarded—at best—as an economic necessity that helped meet the demands of British industrial labor after World War II. Even half a century later, their presence in England could still not be considered outside the history of British imperialism in India. British Imperialism for the first time united diverse communities of South Asians through the act of defining them as inferior imperial subjects. Once they settled in Britain, they were perceived within the category of this collective identity, and understandably began to identify with it themselves. Paul Gilroy has noted:

Asians... are understood to be bound by cultural and biological ties which merit the status of a fully formed, alternative national identity.
They pose a threat to the British way of life by virtue of their strength and cohesion... [Together with British Caribbeans, they are] denied authentic national membership on the basis of their ‘race’ and, at the same time, prevented from aligning themselves within the ‘British race’ on the grounds that their national allegiance inevitably lies elsewhere.²

British Asians were simultaneously admired, reviled, and feared because of the tenacity of their culture; of course, this tendency to affirm their culture in positive ways at least originally developed as a means of survival in a hostile territory that otherwise excluded them. The differences between British Asians’ regional and communal identities (as well as their allegiances to India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and later, Bangladesh) did not disappear, but they were in part subsumed within a larger category that defined itself in common racial terms established as a result of British colonialism in South Asia. Yet British Asians’ own efforts to construct their identities positively within Britain were eventually overruled by a dominant British view that reduced Asians to a distinct race of people who were inferior to ‘real Britons.’ In short, until this point, most British Asians had not been considered British enough to participate in mainstream British culture.

It was therefore all the more remarkable that starting in the mid to late 1990s, the mainstream press in Britain lauded British Asian musicians for their “impressive” capacity to carry on “double lives” as British citizens and as South Asians, all the while suggesting (perhaps unintentionally) that the two identities were mutually exclusive. The press tended to emphasize British Asians’ affiliation with South Asian identity, because it was more “exotic,”

² Paul Gilroy, ‘There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack’: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 45-46. The recent inclusion of many non-English players on the English football team in the 2006 World Cup would suggest that non-white players may be considered English citizens, but as Brett St. Louis has written, non-white athletes’ prowess in sports such as football (soccer) and cricket sometimes only affects their claims to cultural citizenship in England and Australia on the field. Brett St. Louis, "Readings within a Diasporic Boundary: Transatlantic Black Performance and the Poetic Imperative in Sport," in Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions, ed. Barnor Hesse (London; New York: Zed Books).
and thus more politically and commercially viable. In the mid to late 1990s, South Asian influences permeated the realm of fashion; at the same time, newly elected Tony Blair and his administration launched a campaign to rebrand Britain—particularly London—and transform its stuffy, colonial image into an economically and culturally vibrant, innovative, and multicultural hub. British Asian electronica musicians producing so-called “Asian Underground” music were celebrated, insofar as they and their music embodied the most positive attributes of Britain’s new identity as a multicultural, young, and forward looking society.

However, being Asian or having something to do with British Asian culture soon lost its inherent commercial and aesthetic advantage. By early 2000, British Asian culture and British Asian musicians had already fallen out of favor with the British public at large. Those who had previously been considered “British” British Asians once again had to defend their claims to British identity, while those British Asians who had never been recognized as British in the first place went on with their lives. The short-lived celebration of British Asian culture was of course based upon a particular construction of British Asian identity, and one that was especially affluent. During the heyday of British Asian fashion, the mainstream press celebrated the transnational mobility and cosmopolitanism embraced by many British Asian musicians, particularly Nitin Sawhney and Talvin Singh.

In doing so, the press created a mythic figure, which I will call the “global Indian,” against which they compared all British Asian musicians. The “global Indian” harks back to the archetype of the modern South Asian fusion artist established by Uday Shankar, as discussed in Chapter 1; that archetype corresponds to the figure of the modern South Asian fusion musician, geographically and culturally separated from South Asia and its official
definitions of culture, and creating entirely new forms of culture in the West. During the mid to late 1990s, British Asian fusion musicians who embodied this archetype were, however, often enveloped within the more general category of the elite “global Indian,” which included musicians, literary figures, and filmmakers. Within Britain, this category of the “global Indian” consisted of British Asians whose connection to a South Asian cultural heritage and transnational careers complemented efforts to project Britain as a cosmopolitan cultural center; their presence provided concrete proof of British culture’s reach and embrace of cultural diversity, both of which were part of the Blair administration’s efforts to revitalize Britain.

Of course, these efforts to establish Britain as a major cultural power in the international world were faintly disguised attempts to recover its identity as a major economic power and a major player in the new millennium. Yet the colossal folly of the Millennium Dome gradually persuaded many British people that these that these economic aspirations possessed more style than substance. The Blair administration in its early days lauded British Asians, including musicians, whose transnational, cosmopolitan careers exemplified Britain’s multiculturalism and international outlook. Yet these same British Asians who were praised later discovered that their links to South Asian culture were now an obstacle to their being considered British; their insistence on maintaining an association with South Asian culture was interpreted as evidence of their strong allegiance to cultures

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3 See Chapter 1, p. 93.
outside and against British culture. In this chapter, I use the concept of “the global Indian” to explore British Asian musicians’ complex and paradoxical claim to and identification with British culture.

Most if not all of the musicians I shall discuss can claim British political or legal citizenship without challenge because they hold British passports. However, these musicians’ claim to legal citizenship does not immediately entitle them to a British identity. This discrepancy distinguishes political and legal citizenship from what I shall call “cultural citizenship”—an unchallenged recognition by the public at large of an artist’s Britishness. This also means that as British “cultural citizens,” artists produce music that is understood to say something about being British, that is, not “world music.” Nevertheless, the rise of British Asian music in the late 1990s as “British” paradoxically begins with its being associated with the industry category of “world music” in its early days.

**British Asians and the world music category: Technology, creativity, and ethnic authority**

Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.5

Foucault’s definition of order above helps explain how the ordering concept of “world music” depends on external objects—in this case, other music—to create a context within which its identity emerges. A piece of music that is identified and categorized by the industry as “world music” immediately suggests something to its listeners—that the music will be in

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some way “foreign” and unfamiliar in relation to other types of music that are familiar. When people listen to a piece of music and identify it as “world music” (perhaps at the suggestion of marketing campaigns), they are likely to infuse that music with some essential quality of difference that in turn constitutes its identity as music from a part of the world—or, indeed, from another world—that is not the listener’s own. Through this circular logic, we can perceive the active presence of world music, even if world music has no concrete presence of its own.

To situate how a category of music as elusive as world music participates in and influences the defining of cultural citizenship, it is helpful to revisit the origins of world music. It has been widely claimed that the category of world music was established in order to address the problem that considerable numbers of recordings could not fit into previously defined genre categories, and this story of its origins has assumed almost mythic proportions in its repeated telling. In March 2000, Ian Anderson—editor of the British music journal Folk Roots—offered a retrospective in the history of the term “world music,” which in his telling, began innocently enough. Referring to actual press releases and meeting minutes from that time, Anderson recounts the fateful meetings in the summer of 1987:

It wasn’t a new name, just one of many that had floated around in the preceding decades. But the logic set out by Roger Armstrong was that an established, unified generic name would give retailers a place where they could confidently rack otherwise unstockable releases, and where customers might both search out items they’d heard on the radio (not knowing how to spell a mis-pronounced or mis-remembered name or title) and browse through wider catalogue...‘World Music’ seemed to include the most and omit the least, and got it on a show of hands. Nobody thought of defining it or pretending there was such a beast: it was just to be a box, like jazz, classical, or rock.⁶

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According to Anderson, “world music” as a commercial category and heuristic label originated from the practical need to create a physical and categorical space that encompassed what were an increasing number of imported non-western recordings. Furthermore, it was assumed that the consumers of one non-Western region’s music would also be interested in the music of other non-Western regions, so retailers determined that consolidating these recordings in one location, the world music category, would enhance all these recordings’ market potential within a record store.

The “world music” commercial category functions similarly to our most common sense of genre, but it also complicates that sense. Jim Samson has noted that genre is “a more permeable concept than either style or form, because a social element participates in its definition, and not just in its determination.” Thus, genres can change even when notes stay the same. Furthermore,

a genre title is integral to an artwork and partly conditions our response to its stylistic and formal content, but it does not create a genre... It is the interaction of title and content [including music, lyrics, liner notes, images, and packaging] that creates generic meaning [emphases added].

In the case of “world music,” whether we actually engage with “content” while determining genre is arguable. Admittedly, we usually identify from which country a recording originates; if it originates from outside our notion of the West—that is, “somewhere else,” we often designate that recording as “world music.” Yet to what extent do we engage with a recording if we do

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9 As noted in the Introduction, “the West” is imaginary and has no geographic coordinates. The Tokyo Symphony, while based in Asia, is still in “the West.”
not once listen to its sound, or consider any other piece of information aside from its origins? Insofar as the category of “world music” can and often does entirely evade the respective sounds and musical material that it purports to describe, we may call world music’s identity as a typical genre into question.\textsuperscript{10}

Through practical usage, then, “world music” has developed from its physical origin as a record bin to emerge as a conceptual marker of cultural “otherness.” Although the eclectic variety of musical genres found within the world music category seems to render it increasingly meaningless, the idea of “world music”—as opposed to “mainstream” popular music—has nevertheless retained a salience, particularly with respect to music made within North American and Western Europe by perceived ethnic minorities. While British Asian music may be unfamiliar to most British Anglo mainstream listeners, thus sounding “otherness,” its relegation to a category reserved for international artists does more than locate it outside the now purely conceptual pop music bins in virtual music stores; it also reinforces existing notions that, despite their British citizenship, these musicians belong to another culture, and another country.

While the world music category may at times (positively) distinguish ethnic minority musicians from a vast sea of other Western “mainstream” musicians for the purposes of marketing, at other times, the category may also re-inscribe the routine exclusion of ethnic minorities from “mainstream

\textsuperscript{10} It should be noted, however, that these days most music retailers have no need to situate a product “physically” because most consumers are more likely to type keywords into a search engine (inside or external to the merchant’s web site), which then navigates the consumer towards respective products. One may therefore now easily purchase a recording on an Internet site without even referencing its genre. Yet the determination of genres, however, still exerts a significant influence on some consumers’ purchases. When consumers and critics comment on a recording, they revert to the discourse of genre to situate their observations within recognizable frames of reference. A survey of consumer comments on Amazon.com and other Internet merchants reveal the extent to which consumers explicitly refer to genres to review a particular recording. Some of these specific comments are included later in this chapter.
culture.” The world music category applied to British born-musicians thwarts these musicians’ attempts to market their music within more “mainstream” categories—such as “pop,” “dance music,” “folk,” or “jazz” because it limits their visibility outside the niche world music market. Moreover, once these musicians are branded with the “world music” label, that label encourages audiences to perceive these British musicians and their music as representing something outside mainstream culture, that is, something “ethnically other” and/or non-Western. Although some of these musicians’ music may sound like “mainstream” music to blind listeners, the world music industry highlights and markets their ethnic heritage to the extent that the musicians can no longer claim to represent British culture.

Ascribing value to British Asian music

Because British Asian popular music is packaged as “world music” for largely white audiences, it comes to serve as an entry point through which Anglo consumers may approach British Asian culture.11 British Asian musicians on these recordings are incorporated into these consumers’ forays into British Asian culture. As they are marketed as the native inhabitants of these consumers’ sonic destinations, British Asian musicians come to represent authentic ethnic representatives of a foreign culture in these recordings, which actively challenge the reality in which British Anglo citizens regularly encounter British Asian immigrants at the supermarket, on the tube, at the workplace, and so forth. To counteract British citizens’ everyday interactions with British Asians and British Asian culture, the world music industry must transform British Asian culture into a new and exotic product,

worth the expense to experience. The ploy behind the marketing of world music is the promise to transport its listener to an exotic place, or at the very least, provide its listener with some access to another culture. The liner notes in world music albums function as a guide to these destinations, insofar as they provide the background and context necessary to introduce unfamiliar music to inexperienced listeners; they are a crucial component in the successful marketing of world music recordings as attractive products. In the face of competition with world music recordings from more remote and relatively inaccessible destinations (such as Papua New Guinea), recordings by British Asian recording artists must supply their music with sufficient exotic markers for its white consumers if they are to be effective world music recordings.

British Asian music’s classification as either pop music, or world music, is crucial to track because the music’s classification significantly impinges on

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12 The marketing of world music’s has transformed many resident ethnic minority populations in Britain, however, of which British Asians are one. Given its popularity, the marketing of Celtic music merits special mention. Celts and Celtic culture have been romanticized in English culture for over three hundred years which suggests that the appeal of a simple, rural life unadulterated with modern influences was as strong then as it is now; British people were as anxious about the effects of industrialization and urbanization during the nineteenth century as they are about the effects of globalization today. Robert Colls has noted that Celts are often represented as “the least changed, most original people of Europe [who are]... still in touch with their ancestral voices.” Cited in Robert Colls, Identity of England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 277. Yet the history of Irish Catholic immigration to Britain reveals that Irish Catholics were from the nineteenth century onward most often viewed as a cheap source of labor. As economic migrants usually confined to low-paying jobs, they were gradually identified in England as “colonial others” whose “dirtiness, drunkenness, laziness, and violence” distinguished them from the “purity, industriousness, and civilisation of the English.” See Máirtín Mac an Ghaill, "The Irish in Britain: The Invisibility of Ethnicity and Anti-Irish Racism," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 26, no. 1 (2000): 137-38. With respect to world music, the reality of Irish people’s often-disadvantaged status in Britain is conveniently sidestepped in the current revival of Celtic music, which in its emphasis on pre-Christian spirituality, is often linked to New Age music. Timothy Taylor observes this new age connection, but he suggests that the current revival is most motivated by white Americans who, perceived as lacking any ethnicity, identify with Celtic ancestry. Timothy D. Taylor, *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (London: Routledge, 1997), 7. For a more in-depth exploration of the Celtic music revival as a global phenomenon, see Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman, "Introduction," in *Celtic Modern: Music at the Global Fringe*, ed. Martin Stokes and Philip V. Bohlman (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

how outside listeners judge the music’s quality. British Asian popular musicians rarely produce music that corresponds to a single musical genre; their music may allude to or incorporate references to electronic dance music, hip hop, flamenco, South Asian folk and classical music, and jazz. To judge British Asian popular music, listeners ideally should refer to a predefined set of criteria that may be associated with any or all of the respective traditions evoked in that piece of music. Whether musicians intend to satisfy respective criteria or not proves irrelevant, insofar as critics and audiences assert themselves as the most significant judges of a musician’s musical integrity—at least within the commercial domain.

More specifically, British Asian artists’ status as South Asian diasporic popular musicians suggests that British Asian music should touch upon both traditional (ethnic) and popular (non-ethnic or non-marked) genres. Virtuosity, creativity, and innovation are artistic criteria that establish musical integrity across a wide variety of Western musical genres, from Western classical music and jazz to mainstream rock. Conversely, the criterion of ethnic identity is crucial to the marketing category of world music because it establishes authenticity—an essential selling point.14 The criterion of ethnic authority is most explicitly established if audience and critics recognize references to identifiable South Asian musical traditions, that is, South Asian instrumentation, language use, lifestyle and cultural references (food, historical figures, etc.) Usually listeners assume British Asian musicians to be world musicians (irrespective of whether they identify themselves as such); most of these listeners judge their music in terms of the respective criteria

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associated with the competent performance of Western music genres in addition to the criterion of ethnic authority, fundamental to the world music marketing category.

Following in the footsteps of earlier forward-looking South Asian diasporic musicians and artists, most notably Uday Shankar (see chapter 1), most of the artists who do reference these ethnic elements (including Nitin Sawhney and Talvin Singh) also regularly incorporate digital technology into their work; this combination of “traditional” ethnic references and “modern” digital technology creates an added layer of tension. British Asian musicians often confront the widespread Western assumption that technology does not exist “natively” in South Asian culture; Westerners assume technology’s provenance in the west, even when they accept its presence in Asia. Thus the presence of technological elements in British Asian music is often assumed to be symptomatic of diasporic artists’ exposure to and incorporation of Western influences. British Asian musicians’ incorporation of technology is sometimes singled out as an act of “reverse appropriation” in which non-Western artists borrow from the West. In some cases, this incorporation of technology is assumed to signify that the musician has consciously rejected, “sold out” on, or “polluted” his or her “own culture.” Even when not explicitly mentioned, it is nevertheless a tacit assumption that the use of technology marks a British Asian musician’s assimilation to mainstream British culture.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{15}\)Ironically, British Asian musicians are subject to a similar level of scrutiny from traditionally-oriented music audiences, promoters, critics, and scholars when they seek legitimacy as performers of Indian classical music. For instance, when Talvin Singh was fifteen or sixteen, he left England to spend over a year in the Punjabi countryside studying tabla with Pandit Lashman Singh in what amounts to a curtailed, modernized rendition of the traditional guru-shishya relationship; while Singh only spent one year there. Despite the renown of his teacher, when Talvin Singh returned from this year in India during the mid 1980s, he was rejected by classical Indian promoters – perhaps in part due to the fact that he had not yet earned the approval of Indian audiences in India. (It was at that point he decided to delve into acid jazz and electronica music featured on his more recent albums.) Cited in Talvin Singh: Closing the Divide (BBC News, September 8 1999 [cited February 23 2004]); available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/441762.stm. It should be noted, however, that
Given that the frequent integration of technology in many British Asian musicians’ recordings compromises their ethnic authenticity, how can these members of a local ethnic population be transformed into exotic ethnic representatives—to sell world music records? For one, the world music industry routinely adopts practices that aim to situate musicians as “outsiders” to the industry. This “iconoclast” status in many cases helps artists, insofar as it commands respect for artists whose value and talent may not yet be recognized otherwise. Many British Asians, particularly those without formalized musical training, faced resistance from early club promoters when they first introduced their music to non-Asian audiences; these promoters could not evaluate the musical competence of these early performers, and few if any musicians from that time were in social networks that could vouch for their talent. (The fact that promoters, critics, audiences, and industry executives then had trouble accepting their music because their

Singh has continued to study classical music seriously; he still returns a few months each winter to study with his teacher, and his technical proficiency has granted him. Cited in Alex Perry, Bombay Boogie Boy (Time Asia Magazine, May 2002 [cited June 12 2002]); available from http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/article/0,13673,501020520-237089,00.html. Perry notes that after Singh’s second album Ha! sold disappointingly few copies, Singh left behind his career in London and based himself in Delhi and Bombay. At the time the article was written, Singh (at age 31) was in Bombay to work on a “classical acoustic tabla solo album, five long tracks with different accompaniment,” including piano, strings, and electronics; he claimed to not have “opened his laptop in eight months.” The album has yet to be released in 2006. Singh has of late kept a very low profile, so his next plans are uncertain. Singh’s refashioning himself as a classical artist in the above article, however, represents an effective means to counteract the oft-repeated accusation that he lacks the talent to produce anything other than superficial, trendy music that quickly loses its relevance. To his credit, Indian tabla virtuoso Zakir Hussain has publicly endorsed Singh’s proficiency on the tabla: “Talvin is an extremely talented human being and a man with a very, very thinking mind... He’s also a very fine tabla player. Having that rhythmic background, as well as his inroads into creative music through synthetics is very good. I really enjoy what he does,” Anil Prasad, Zakir Hussain: Crossing Musical Boundaries (Interviews, June 29, 1999 [cited July 21, 2006]); available from http://www.innerviews.org/inner/hussain.html.

16 For a helpful perspective on how social scientists often approach this problem, and her related critique of that practice, see Kristin Koptiuch, ”Third-Worlding at Home,” in Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

17 Keith Negus has written on how the “iconoclast” is considered in the context of rap musicians’ interactions with the mainstream music industry. See Keith Negus, Music Genres and Corporate Cultures (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 85.
music corresponded to neither Ravi Shankar, Punjabi Bhangra, nor Fatboy Slim is now difficult to accept, given British Asian music’s later commercial success.) Yet after this initial period, British Asians’ distinction from other established popular music artists and “underground” credibility transformed into their most marketable quality. They were iconoclasts both in terms of their experimenting with new electronica techniques, as well as their departing from the traditional image of the classical Indian musician.

British Asian musicians’ “outsider status” has been enhanced by the fact that smaller, “independent” labels distribute much of British Asian music. Stephen Lee has noted that the development of new genres and styles has often been associated with smaller companies, “outside the control of the larger ‘major’ labels.” 18 These smaller labels are associated with what Lee calls an “indie ideology – the dedication to their artists, a close affiliation with the music, and business practices that [are] in ways more afterthoughts than plans.” 19 Many British Asian musicians originally signed on to smaller labels where they could (at least in their own minds) retain artistic control over their recordings and release new types of music.

These smaller labels, however, are rarely as “independent” as the ideology implies. So-called “indie” labels and “major” labels are most often mutually dependent on one another; major labels depend on these smaller labels’ ability to locate new, innovative music, and the smaller labels often depend on major labels’ superior networks to distribute and market their recordings. Given that many British Asian musicians have proven to be lucrative investments, in many cases more established and powerful record labels have enthusiastically undertaken the task of distributing “indie”

19 Ibid.: 21.
recordings through their vast networks. Some smaller labels explicitly require the assistance of larger labels in distributing their recordings outside a limited local area. Thus, like “world music,” the category “independent label” may only signify a concept or an ideal rather than an actual genre.

Consumers of indie rock music attach great significance to whether a given musician or musical group is signed to a major label or remains on an independent label, because they often assume that signing onto a major label represents a compromise in artistic integrity. This type of assumption also operates with respect to British Asian artists, but in a way that also references their culture and heritage. British Asian musicians who resist the temptation of major labels are perceived to have maintained more creative autonomy and commitment to “their own culture,” as opposed to “selling out,” (that is, assimilating to Western culture) if they maintain a distance from the mainstream commercial popular music industry.

Given that the relationships between independent and major labels is so complicated, British Asians musicians’ “independent” and “marginal” character should therefore be re-evaluated through tracing some of the extensive networks that distribute their music to mainstream audiences throughout the world. While Talvin Singh released his Anokha club compilation on his own label, Omni Records, the compilation did not sell as many copies as expected because it had very limited distribution. Singh proceeded to license the album’s international distribution to Island Records, which is now owned by the Universal Music Group; he also arranged for his solo album, OK (1998), to be distributed by Island Records, associated with the Irish band U2, and an extensive catalogue of Bob Marley recordings. Similarly, Nitin Sawhney’s first three albums were produced by an independent British label, Outcaste Records, originally associated with British Asian artists who
did not fit into predefined categories, such as Bhangra. Significantly, Sawhney’s last two albums appear on V2, a Virgin Music imprint, which enables him to distribute his recordings more extensively; these later albums are the ones that were nominated for the Mercury Prize and World Music Awards. Susheela Raman has been signed to the British world music label Real World, now distributed by EMI. Thus the nominees for both the Mercury and BBC Radio 3 World Music Awards predictably come from independent labels that have a strong foothold with major labels in the mainstream market. This fact calls into question the very outsider/indie status that is the cornerstone of their marketability.

**Talvin Singh: Reframing Tradition**

As an avant-garde British Asian electronica musician associated with the famed Anokha club, Talvin Singh seemed to embody the figure of the creative iconoclast and the “outsider” as described above. Yet when his solo album *OK* won the Mercury Music Prize in 1999, this prestigious recognition accordingly defined him as an “insider.” *OK* highlighted Singh’s practical experience in North Indian classical music alongside his incorporation of then most recent ambient and drum and bass electronica styles; Singh recognized how digital sampling, sequencing, rhythmic programming, and other digital production techniques that characterized contemporary electronica music at the time complemented North Indian classical musical performance techniques. Pioneering what he termed “tablatronics,” Singh was one of the first to connect his tabla via a direct input to a computer, which Singh had programmed to modify the sound of his tabla through various effects.²⁰

album OK also features prominent guest artists including esteemed sarangi player Ustad Sultan Khan, other Indian classical instrumentalists and singers, the popular Okinawan singing-group Nenes, jazz artist Cleveland Watkiss, and the Japanese avant-garde composer and musician Ryuichi Sakamoto. Throughout the album, Singh interweaves his own classically informed tabla playing among tracks of live performances by these other artists as well as among his own digitally produced atmospheric sounds.

At the time of his award, Singh’s innovations were hailed as the newest wave of British electronic dance music. His early visibility within the mainstream coincided with the height of the commercial popularity of British Asian culture; this visibility seems to have contributed to his subsequent recognition as “British,” at least within the context of the British media. Singh’s previous visibility as a fashion icon and promoter of the Anokha club helped to prepare the enthusiastic reception of OK, his first solo album. OK’s prominent use of electronica firmly established it within that genre of mainstream electronica music, and consequently mostly disassociated it from the world music category.

Yet OK makes reference in nearly all its songs to traditional elements in South Asian culture—except for the title track “OK”, which incorporates elements from Japanese and Okinawan music, and the song, “Mombasstic,” which draws mostly on acid jazz influences. While some of the songs’ musical material are based on recognizable traditional South Asian styles and genres, other songs, such as “Vikram the Vampire,” refer to Indian mythology in their lyrics only obliquely and employ the tabla in an entirely unidiomatic way—that is, as a sound effect in a multi-layered drum and bass rhythm track.

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likely the earliest instance of commercially released music that features “tablatronics.” Many other artists, including American musician Karsh Kale, have been inspired by Singh and expanded upon Singh’s initial innovation.
These sonic and/or verbal references to South Asian traditions are in most songs reworked in electronica-influenced settings that promote their contemporary musical relevance.

In the case of the title track “OK,” Singh adopts a similar approach as he introduces a popular Okinawan band of four women, Nenes, to reference the traditional Okinawan dance, Eisa.21 While the Eisa dance is often performed all over the world in communities with large Japanese and Okinawan expatriate populations, such as Vancouver,22 it is an unfamiliar and exotic genre for most western listeners. Even within Japan, Japanese music fans often exoticize Okinawa—a popular tourist destination—and Okinawan ethnic minorities, who are sometimes imagined as the last inhabitants of a pristine, pre-industrial Japan.23

“OK” opens with an ostinato played on the shansin, an Okinawan traditional stringed instrument often used to accompany singing, and related to the Japanese shamisen; the shansin is accompanied by what sounds like a wooden frame drum, cymbals and modular flute, and is then joined by the women’s chorus. Singh introduces a fast-paced electronica dance beat once the chorus enters, but the high-pitched, girlish timbre of Nenes’ voices and the unfamiliarity of the language still give the sense of the song’s “sounding traditional,” that is, foreign. As in the traditional Eisa dance,24 the women alternate between half chanting and half singing a light, lilting melody and

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then calling out “ei ya sa sa, “ answered by “ah ii ah.” Singh thus at least partly preserves the traditional structure of the melody and maintains some sense of its distinctive instrumentation, but as the song progresses, the traditional melody increasingly competes against a digitized electric guitar, relentless drum and bass dance beats, whimsical atmospheric noises, and voice samples from Japanese radio announcements.

In another song, “Soni,” Singh once again reworks a traditional melody and text. The melody and text, “Sur Sohni” supposedly composed by the seventeenth-century Sufi saint Shah Abdul Latif, are provided with an elaborate setting that features a North Indian women’s vocal ensemble and esteemed classical sarangi master Ustad Sultan Khan. Indian-American actor Ajay Naidu provides a spoken word text over the music at the end of the song, in English, that gives a brief outline of the beloved folk story in which the young woman Sohni drowns on her way across the river to meet her lover.

Singh’s decision to set the song for women’s voices goes against the traditional performance of the repertoire, which is without fail sung by male Qawwali singers (Qawwals), who are in turn usually only accompanied by the tabla, handclaps, and the harmonium. Singh’s arrangement re-imagines this

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25 The *sur* is a melodic type, akin to the North Indian classical *raga*, employed to sing with particular verses of Shah Abdul Latif’s poetry.
26 The melody sung by the choir in Singh’s version is not attributed to any source but is in fact identical to the song “Way Of Shah Abdul Latif” sung by a traditional Pakistani Qawwali singers Zulfqar Ali, Nazer Hussain, and Mazher Hussain on the following recording: *Pakistani Soul Music* (Berlin: Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 1997), sound recording. This tragic love story is well-loved and known throughout the regions of Punjab and Sindh in present-day India and Pakistan; in the story (which is supposedly based on an actual historical event,) the beautiful girl Sohni floats across the river with the help of a fired clay pot to meet her lover, Mehwali, each evening. After her father marries her off against her will to another man on her own side of the river, she persists in leaving her husband’s house to cross the river and visit her lover. One evening, her new sister-in-law discovers Sohni’s nightly journey and vengefully substitutes a wet clay pot for the fired one. The wet clay pot melts in the water, and Sohni then drowns. Interestingly, Nitin Sawhney’s song “Nadia” (or “River”) on his 1999 album *Beyond Skin* seems to refer to this tale as well: the woman vocalist’s text repeats “the water is rising, the water is rising...”
traditional *Qawwali* song in a rich arrangement that not only shifts the gender of the vocal ensemble but which also features an *sarangi* performance of Ustad Sultan Khan that is idiomatic to the instrument as it is traditionally performed in North Indian classical music; Khan is accompanied by the *rabab*, electric guitar, and Singh’s electronic programming in the background. The poetry originally composed by Shah Abdul Latif and sung by the women in the song is not accompanied by a translation, so Ajay Naidu’s passionate delivery of the tragic narrative serves as the sole means to convey the rich legacy of the text and song in their traditional context for most listeners.

Drawing again on popularly known Indian traditions in his song “Eclipse,” Singh incorporates a male chorus chanting one of the oldest and most well known Hindu mantras, the Gayatri Mantra; the Gayatri Mantra appears in the Vedic text, the *Rig Veda*—believed to date from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} millennium B.C.—and may be translated roughly as “May the Almighty God illuminate our intellect to lead us along the righteous path.” Singh’s title “Eclipse” refers indirectly to the illumination of one’s intellect, and more directly perhaps to the popular belief that this mantra helps comfort those frightened of the dark.\(^{27}\) Furthermore, within India itself, the solar eclipse has been interpreted as both a sacred, auspicious event and an event that portends massive destruction.\(^{28}\)

In an interview, Singh shared the following anecdote about his experiencing the 1995 eclipse in India:


I was in a desert in the middle of nowhere at nine in the morning and [went to] a Hanuman [monkey god] temple on the way back from this remote place to Jaipur. The Hanuman temple is always surrounded by monkeys, and these monkeys were really panicking. They made this amazing noise. I’m talking about 600 monkeys or so. And they were frightened by the eclipse.29

Singh’s anecdote in its focus on screeching monkeys omits any reference to the human worshippers at the temple of Hanuman, but the actual song does incorporate a religious element, that is, the chanting of the Gayatri Mantra.

While several allusions to Indian tradition and Hindu mythology appear throughout OK, these allusions are not always respectful; rather Singh’s allusions often reconfigure their referents in capricious ways that could conceivably upset devout Hindus as well as serious scholars of these traditions.30 For example, the whimsical title of the last track, “Vikram the Vampire,” almost undoubtedly alludes to a series of old folk stories, supposedly told by a vampire, Vetaal, to the King Vikram; Singh’s title collapses these two identities.31 In the interlude, “Decca,” Singh once again draws on Ajay Naidu, who intones “the true story of ecstasy.” With a deep, resonant, pompous, and Indian-accented voice, Naidu describes the 10,000 yearlong sexual union of the Hindu gods Shiva and Parvati on the sacred

mountain Mount Kailash, over an understated, atmospheric electronic musical accompaniment that evokes dated science fiction soundtracks. Naidu goes on to pronounce, “We call this first position…” He then pauses before his voice drops into a lower, nasal, and more vulgar sounding register to growl, “The Naaaa-styyyy!” At this point, the accompanying electronic instruments explode into a frenetic, chaotic cacophony to convey the intensity of this sexual experience. While Singh evokes classical Hindu mythology, he does so in a way that lightheartedly criticizes the hypocritical stance of many conservative Hindus who deny the role of sheer sexual pleasure in the Hindu tradition; he at the same time also seems to mock westerners’ stereotypical associations of Indian culture with the sexual practices of the *Kama Sutra*.

Talvin Singh’s deliberate allusions to “traditional” cultures and his “modern” reworking of them would seem to be a natural fit with the world music category, but when Singh was asked to comment on the term “world music,” he replied:

> I think it’s crap. It’s like Others. You go to India, and Madonna’s record will not be under Other, it will be under Madonna, and Ustad Sultan Khan’s record will be under Ustad Sultan Kahn. We don’t have that perspective on it. Exotica exists all over the world. In a place like Japan, rock and roll is exotic, and over here having a white sitar player is exotic. It’s all relative. There’s not much use for that word!32

Singh implies that only the Western-based market unfairly marginalizes artists from other cultures under the world music category. While his claim that Japanese people consider rock music “exotic” may be questioned (insofar as American and British rock music is as integral to contemporary Japanese popular culture as it is to British and American popular culture), Singh appears to be pointing out that world music is a geopolitical category, mostly

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because the term loses is relevance in almost every other place. In his use of “we,” he speaks as a representative of India. Significantly, he neglects to mention where (if anywhere) his album may be found in an Indian record store.

Singh’s album, however, is rarely found in the world music section of British and American music stores; indeed, it is more often found in the electronica section. Yet there seems to be a distinction within the broader electronica genre that allows for Talvin Singh’s music and its many Indian influences; this distinction is usually expressed by the commercial category, “Asian Underground,” and may have the positive effect of adding to his visibility and marketability. “Asian Underground” emerged as the most convenient marketing term to describe all the artists of British Asian descent during the mid to late 1990s who were infusing contemporary electronica styles with South Asian influences. Singh himself embraced the term when he titled his Anokha club compilation, Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground. Thus Singh’s solo album OK is understandably more often considered an “Asian Underground” album than a purely electronica album. Excerpts of consumer reviews on Singh’s album OK on amazon.com reveal the primacy of this generic category. For example, “savia” from San Francisco writes:

Elegant tabla rhythms mix superbly with electronic music to create a sublime ambient sound from the Asian underground. If you like ambient music, or Eastern-influenced electronica, you won’t be sorry you bought this album.33

Chris Nickson, an amazon.com editorial reviewer, introduces the album in the following terms:

A classically trained tabla player, he’s performed with Björk and Massive Attack, holds his own club nights in London, and is the leading light of the burgeoning Asian Underground movement—in other words, a man of many parts. He brings them all together here—the Bollywood strings, the kannakol patterns of Indian music, and the skittering rhythms of drum & bass and jungle—to create something that is new and thoroughly vibrant…

The review by “savia” alludes to the genres of electronica, ambient music, and -- a less common term still functioning as a genre—“Eastern-influenced electronica.” Nickson refers to the artists Björk and Massive Attack, firmly situated within electronica music, to locate Singh in their milieu. However, to demonstrate the fact that Singh is not the typical electronica artist and is creating something new, Nickson also alludes to more specific genres, some more prominently than others: Indian classical music, Bollywood film music, jungle, and drum and bass.

Significantly, the term “world music” does not figure in their descriptions, which would suggest that Singh has managed to break out of the ironically narrow category of “world music” in part because “electronica” has provided an alternative musical category. The word “electronica” itself however was first associated with British groups such as The Chemical Brothers, Fatboy Slim, Crystal Method, Underworld and The Prodigy, so in its early days, “electronica” did connote British artists (with the exception of Moby, who is an American.) As David Hesmondhalgh has noted, electronica dance music has long been central in British youth culture. In the 1990s, this music came to be perceived (at least within Britain) as both “cosmopolitan” in

34 Ibid.
35 Kannakol is the word used to describe the performance of vocal rhythmic improvisations in the South Indian or Carnatic tradition. Singh draws from a variety of sources in O.K., but within his references to Indian influences, he confines himself to the North Indian or Hindustani tradition in which he was trained.
its regular transmission among Europe, the United States, and the Caribbean, and “placeless” in terms of its dependence on European networks. In short, to be invested in electronic dance music culture was “to be open, hard to place, defiant of the very notion that you are, or should be defined by where you are from.”\textsuperscript{36} The dominant culture of electronica dance music in the mid to late 1990s embraced the very qualities that Singh and other South Asian diasporic musicians embodied—namely being hard to place, and resistant to being fixed to any one location. Thus to the extent that Singh was recognized as a cutting-edge “electronica” artist as well as an “Asian Underground” artist, he was largely considered a British cultural citizen— for at least a short time.

Nitin Sawhney: world musician or citizen of the world?

Although British Asian musician Nitin Sawhney’s music attracted attention at roughly the same time as Talvin Singh’s, Sawhney’s music received an entirely different reception. Sawhney’s album Beyond Skin, nominated for the Mercury Prize in 2000, was in many ways considered an ideal “British” album when it was released in late 1999. Sawhney’s album was supposed to be released early enough for the album to qualify for the 1999 Mercury Prize, but when it failed to be nominated, its release date was postponed so it would qualify for the Mercury Prize the following year. After Talvin Singh won the prize in 1999, it became apparent that the Mercury Prize judges were unlikely to choose a British Asian album two years in a row.\textsuperscript{37}


Many people speculated that the album, a meticulously produced album that drew on jazz, R&B, hip-hop, drum and bass, trip hop, North Indian classical music, Qawwali, and flamenco, would have been a serious contender for the 2000 Mercury Prize had Singh not won the prize the previous year. Sawhney’s skills as an arranger, producer, jazz pianist, and guitarist were highlighted in the album, and enhanced through a number of guest artists on each track drawn from a variety of musical and cultural traditions. While some of the album tracks’ lyrics alluded to the political tensions between India and Pakistan that had culminated in both countries’ recent nuclear tests, the larger idea of the album related to Sawhney’s utopian vision of rising above the conflicts and tension created by what were in his mind largely artificial categories—race, nationality, and religion.

The album cover presented a white plaster cast of Sawhney’s head and shoulders, his mouth open in agony.

Illustration 2.1 Nitin Sawhney’s Beyond Skin, cover image
Sawhney’s plaster cast erases his racial identity as an Asian; while most likely not intended, as the cast removes the “problem” of Sawhney’s ethnicity, it also projects the possibility of Sawhney’s identification as a white English person—an unequivocally legitimate British citizen. Yet the image does not only raise questions about who is or is not British. The expression of agony on Sawhney’s face also evokes the fact that the predicament of suffering is common to all humans, regardless of race. In conveying this idea, Sawhney suggests the need to see beyond the artificially constructed distinctions of race and recognize suffering in various areas of the world as a human problem, as opposed a problem confined to a particular culture or area.

The album is in Sawhney’s own words one “with a time span that runs backwards,”38 which directly relates to Sawhney’s utopian vision. At the album’s start, Sawhney calls forth specific national identities that seem relevant in our own time; throughout the album, however, Sawhney proceeds to dissolve these identities’ specificity and meaning; in particular, he dissolves the idea that the political and social problems that we consider to be contemporary are in any way new. The album opens with the then recent announcement by Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee that his country had successfully tested nuclear bombs on May 11, 1998; this announcement, which follows, came to symbolize India’s entry as a nuclear power and its subsequent rise in status as a key player in international politics:

I have an important announcement to make: Today, at 1545 hours, India conducted three underground nuclear tests in the Pokhran range. The tests conducted today were with a fission device, a low yield device and a thermonuclear device. The measured yields are in line with expected values. Measurements have also confirmed that there was no release of radioactivity into the atmosphere. These were contained explosions like the experiment conducted in May 1974. I

38 Nitin Sawhney, *Beyond Skin* (London: Outcaste Records, 1999), 1 sound disc.
warmly congratulate the scientists and engineers who have carried out these successful tests.\(^{39}\)

The album ends in 1945, with the voice of atom-bomb researcher Robert Oppenheimer; Oppenheimer quotes the ancient Hindu sacred text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, “Now I am become death, the destroyer of worlds.”\(^{40}\)

In response to Vajpayee’s and Oppenheimer’s comments, Sawhney in the liner notes to the album asks,

> The western creator of the bomb condemning it in the name of Hinduism, the Hindu prime-minister testing it in the name of what? Progress? […] If I ever have children will they discover their heritage through BBC news bulletins about radiation sickness? —or nuclear war with Pakistan? I wonder.\(^{41}\)

Sawhney’s criticism of the nuclear tests was far from unique; at the time, many people questioned the prudence of spending so much money on the development of nuclear weapons in a country where so many people still lacked access to basic resources such as food and clean water. Furthermore, the tests had the potential to transform into a deadly environmental hazard for the poorer people who lived in the vicinity of the testing cite. Sawhney


\(^{40}\) Sawhney, *Beyond Skin*. As for what for what Oppenheimer could have meant by this cryptic statement, see James A. Hijaya, "The *Gita* of J. Robert Oppenheimer,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 144, no. 2 (2000): 131-32. Sawhney seems to interpret Oppenheimer’s statement as an expression of regret; yet Hijaya argues that while Oppenheimer had “qualms” about what he had done, he did not feel it to be immoral in any way. See Hijaya, "The *Gita* of J. Robert Oppenheimer,” 158. The *Bhagavad Gita* is a Hindu philosophical dialogue between the god Krishna and the warrior prince, Arjuna, in which Krishna proceeds to convince Arjuna to fight in a war. Krishna argues that it is Arjuna’s duty to fight as a soldier; he also reminds Arjuna that it is he, Krishna, who determines who lives and dies, so Arjuna should not be attached to the results of his fighting but maintain his devotion to Krishna. Once Krishna convinces Arjuna to fight, Arjuna asks to see Krishna in his godly form. Krishna appears like “a thousand simultaneous suns arising in the sky,” as he explains why he is there: “Death am I, and my present task, Destruction.” (Translation taken from Arthur Ryder, *The Bhagavad-Gita* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1929).) This last quote seems to have been Oppenheimer’s inspiration for his quotation, taken from a television interview in 1965, twenty years after the bombs were dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

\(^{41}\) Sawhney, *Beyond Skin*. 

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laments the fact that India’s progress—and subsequently, cultural identity—should be so tied to its capacity to unleash destructive force.

Sawhney’s juxtaposition of Vajpayee and Oppenheimer’s quotations amidst his own additional comments express a sense of irony at the fact that one of America’s preeminent nuclear scientists should express his painful hindsight by quoting an ancient Hindu text; furthermore, Sawhney finds it ironic that the origin of that text—India—should be so blind to ignore its own cultural knowledge and adopt Western concepts of progress already proven too devastating to use again. Sawhney does not imply that time has stood still between 1945 and 1998; rather he implores his listeners to evaluate how nations have defined progress—often at the extent of everyday citizens. Nor does Sawhney valorize Indian culture at the expense of Western culture, or vice versa; he critiques both equally in this album, which suggests that he does not identify entirely with either one of them. Rather, Sawhney adopts a more holistic sense of cultural identity that defines itself through people’s sharing a common humanity.

Sawhney’s music also reconsiders the effects of seemingly distant and irrelevant political events on everyday people’s personal lives and experiences. The first song, “Broken Skin,” opens with the start of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s gleeful announcement; the lyrics that follow, however, link this announcement to a more personal account of nuclear tests’ destruction of land and its human casualties. A female R&B singer, singing in English, settles into a relaxed soul groove, backed by digital programming and a string ensemble. The warm R&B vocals and jazz chords on the piano, and relaxed percussion situate the song’s sound in adult contemporary/R&B—entirely discordant with the song’s focus on radiation sickness. Sung in a familiar style without referring to any particular culture,
the lyrics do not seem linked to any particular ethnicity either. (Although the
singer, Sanchita Farruque, is of Bangladeshi descent, she does not identify
herself as being British Asian within this song.) Neither does the refrain of the
song (given below) refer to any specific location; the only location we get is the
one associated with Vajpayee’s sampled speech:

   Broken skin, distant fear
   Shattered worlds of endless tears
   Hidden fires, distant lies
   Buried hopes beneath the cries\(^{12}\)

The result for the attentive listener is a complex mixture of sensory pleasure
combined with cognitive horror. The song ends with the voice of a female BBC
reporter explaining that rural villagers in the northwestern state of Rajasthan
where the tests were performed take pride in the fact that India now has
nuclear bombs; these villagers will be the most susceptible to radiation
sickness, the focus of the song. While the song does critique the
shortsightedness of the Indian state’s military, it for the most part serves as a
meditation on the relationship between technology, people, and the earth—a
much more universal theme.

The next song, “Letting Go,” in the guise of a conventional love song, is
devoid of any explicit political references and thus seems to offer a respite
from the difficult and weighty themes of the previous track. Sawhney’s more
frequent collaborator, English singer Tina Grace, adds her thin, slightly
breathy voice. (Her voice recalls that of Beth Gibbons from the popular British
trip-hop band Portishead, winner of the first ever Mercury Prize in 1991.) The
reference to trip-hop vocals is significant insofar as it situates the song as one
with a contemporary sound—one gradually emerging into the mainstream.

\(^{12}\text{Ibid.}\)
(Less obviously, it establishes Sawhney’s capacity to produce mainstream popular music for a British public.)

The song opens with the sound of falling rain and acoustic guitar, after which Grace begins to sing a melancholic, minor mode melody with phrases that taper off without clear melodic or harmonic resolutions. The melody sounds less grounded as a result. While it at times rises in pitch and volume to approach a climax, the melody inevitably tapers off before it reaches that climax and its subsequent resolution. At its end, it rests briefly on the tonic scale degree—only to weaken that sense of arrival with another phrase, which concludes on a tonally ambiguous lowered seventh scale degree. Tina Grace’s voice is accompanied by a digitally programmed percussion groove, whose slow rhythms also suggest a trip hop influence. The refrain, “Don’t be afraid of letting go—not of anything, or of anyone,” are sufficiently vague as to suggest they belong to a standard popular love song; additional lyrics including “You can’t breathe—if I hold you tight,” do not dispel this association.

However, additional comments, featured as part of the album’s promotional information on the album’s label website, reveal that the song may connote an entirely different context:

The theme is departure, the emotional letting-go of a country. It’s 1945 [the year when Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others—attempting to escape religious persecution in respective areas—began to migrate to and from what they anticipated was to become the Muslim state of Pakistan two years later]. Change is afoot and will prove both irresistible and irreversible.44

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43 Trip hop, emerging in the early to mid 1990’s in Bristol, England, is most closely associated with artists based there including Portishead, Tricky, and Massive Attack. Its name reflects its origins in American hip-hop; trip hop appropriates American hip-hop’s bass, sampling, scratching, and break beat rhythms – but at a drastically reduced tempo, more complementary to marijuana smoking or “tripping.” Trip hop may include rap, but it more often features a melody that is sung.

Sawhney here refers to the forced migration of millions of Hindus and Muslims during the partition of India into India and Pakistan and its ensuing bloodshed—the high cost of independence from Britain. The groundlessness of the melody and harmony thus metaphorically expresses the traumatic dislocation of those who were forced to leave their homes. A solo violin and male singer improvise “fills” in what sounds like an Indian classical style between the singer’s lyrics; the performers are unaccredited, but they present—quite subtly—the sole outwardly “international” sounding influence in this song, allegedly about Partition.

Sawhney explores how political divisions affect ordinary people through the lyrics of songs such as “Broken Skin,” and “Letting Go,” which allude to political tensions between India and Pakistan; in other songs, political and cultural divisions are explored in lyrics that allude to the process of immigration. As an intelligent, highly articulate, commercially successful British Asian musician, Nitin Sawhney represents a “model minority” for the British postcolonial immigrant experience; he collaborates with Indian classical singers as easily as he does with flamenco guitarists and jazz drummers, he speaks and writes English eloquently, and his numerous album releases reveal an admirable work ethic. Given this fact, it was almost inevitable that the commercial and critical reception would incorporate the album’s theme of British Asian immigration into an idealized narrative of the British experience. Even if Sawhney’s album itself does not paint British Asian

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45Vijay Prashad has written on how South Asian immigrants to the United States in the 1960s were defined positively against African Americans, who in the eyes of white conservatives lacked the initiative to better themselves. Vijay Prashad, The Karma of Brown Folk (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 167-71. While South Asian immigration to the United States and Britain are distinct, Prashad’s point that well educated, commercially successful South Asians can be defined positively only to the detriment of other ethnic groups is an important one. In recent years in Britain, the commercially successful Sikh and Hindu Punjabi and Gujarati immigrant communities in Britain have been defined positively against Muslim communities from Pakistan and Bangladesh.
immigration as a pleasant experience, this idealized narrative only acknowledges Sawhney’s negative depictions of the immigrant experience as a struggle that has been overcome.

Sawhney alludes to the process of British Asian immigration in a number of different forms throughout the album. In two songs, Sawhney revisits episodes in his and his parents’ experiences as immigrants in England during the early 1960s. The songs “Immigrant” and “Nostalgia” actually feature Sawhney’s parents’ voices. The song “Nostalgia” opens almost in documentary fashion with his mother’s voice as she recounts her thoughts on leaving India, before his father interjects his own comments:

[Fading in, spoken by mother] we have is that one day perhaps we will come back to this country, and bring our children, and show them, you know, and... what we had to sacrifice, to be in that country, you know...

[Father:] But I think in the initial stages we had a lot of struggle, but with God’s grace and then his kindness we are okay now, and our children are okay as well, I think...⁴⁶

After his mother describes the mixed feelings she had about leaving behind what was then her home country, his father adds that while leaving India was a great sacrifice, arriving in England brought its own, quite considerable challenges.

The song itself, another in the trip-hop style, is sung by the English singer Tina Grace; her English-accented singing voice contrasts against the Indian-accented voices of Sawhney’s parents. As Sawhney’s father’s voice fades out, a Western classical string ensemble enters, and we hear Grace’s voice half-whisper the word “dreams” four times. Her lyrics offer yet another perspective, namely the persona of the British-born child of those parents:

I can touch your memories

⁴⁶Sawhney, Beyond Skin.
But I can’t hear you…
I can’t taste, I can’t feel, I can’t reach across a thousand years…
I can almost touch the soil beneath your whisper
I can almost feel the hopes you left behind.

After she begins to sing, a keyboard and digitally programmed drum track enter to accompany her voice; as she repeats the first phrase, the bansuri, a North Indian bamboo flute—distinguished by its woody timbre and bending of pitches—enters barely heard. Its intermittent, ornamented line evokes the presence of a mourning, human cry and thus adds to the melancholic ambience already established; in the next stanza, it alternates with an Indian violin, which functions similarly to the flute.

The lyrics of “Nostalgia” attempt to depict the persona’s frustration that she can only sense the histories of her parents—as expressed in the voice-overs—and that she will never understand what her parents underwent. The title of the song raises the listeners’ expectation of a wistful, idealized reference to the past; the reality of Sawhney’s parents’ experience, however, subdues that sense. The sung lyrics also resist a simplistic expression of nostalgia—the proverbial longing for the homeland and its comforts. They depict the palpable but paradoxical anguish of the speaker, who longs to relate more closely to a place and time—to pain—that she herself has never experienced. The interweaving of Indian instruments in the accompaniment also suggest a sense of distance; the song presents itself outwardly as a typical British trip-hop song, but on closer listening, incorporates an Indian tinge so faint that it often seems a figment of the listener’s imagination.

The other song incorporating the voices of Sawhney’s parents, “Immigrant,” opens with Sawhney’s father, who comments on the voucher system for skilled laborers that enabled him and his wife to emigrate from

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47 Ibid.
India to England in the first place during the early 1960s.\textsuperscript{48} Sawhney’s own father narrates how he and his wife came to England:

Also when they advertised in the local newspapers in Delhi that they were encouraging for people to come down here and work, and… then we went to the embassy; they showed us Kew Garden pictures and pictures of the various parts of England. That it is all that beautiful and everything is just right. And that’s what—we just applied for the voucher…\textsuperscript{39}

As Sawhney’s father relates, immigration to the UK was actively promoted within India; prospective immigrants were shown idealized representations of England. Those who were qualified, as Sawhney’s father must have been, received vouchers. The conditions they encountered after their arrival in England, however, rarely corresponded to these idealized images of manicured gardens and tourist locations.

His voice-over ends suddenly and segues into the voice of the Indian classical vocalist, Jayanta Bose, whose drawn out, melismatic melody enters as if from a distance. Bose sings the Bengali lyrics, “Kothaai jao? Kothaai jao, maaji? Kothaai choliye jao?” (“Where are you going, Boatman? Where are you going away to?”) Originating in a land dominated by rivers, many stories in Bengali folklore feature the figure of the boatman, who as he sails his boat in the middle of the water, often ponders existential questions in his songs in his isolation.

“Immigrant” extends the traditional theme of the boatman in Bengali folklore into the realm of contemporary immigration as it stages a quasi-dialogue between the boatman, and the traveler on his boat. Sanchita Farruque, the husky-voiced soul and R&B singer of Bangladeshi parentage

\textsuperscript{48} A more extensive explanation of the voucher system and its role in the history of British immigration is provided later on page 145.

\textsuperscript{49} Sawhney, Beyond Skin.
already featured on “Broken Skin,” follows Bose with lyrics that half answer his call and half convey her own internal thoughts and hopes:

You burn my flame within your hands (I-vi)
You know where my destiny falls (I)

This time has insecurity (I-vi)
I feel, makes me restless inside (I)

Will you take me there (i)
To a distant place I’ve never been before (i)
I could leave this world (i)
I could follow you like oceans to the shore (I)
You could take me there (i)
Make the rivers of my mind flow to my dreams… (I) ⁵⁰

The lyrics paint immigration as an experience characterized by both great uncertainty and hope for the future’s possibilities, which are reflected musically through a vacillation between the major and minor modes, as indicated by the Roman numerals at the end of each line above. (The numerals in bold represent the respective harmony at major arrival points.) Farruque’s occasional use of the lower third scale degree in her melody is idiomatic to the blues, but in this setting, it actually structures the harmonic setting. Over the latter half of the song, Farruque’s lyrics break at times, at which point Bose’s call returns as a sort of refrain. The song culminates in the intertwining of both singers’ vocal improvisations, in respective R&B and more classical influenced forms.

Once again, the lyrics seem to present a more idealized experience of immigration than the concrete experience of the voucher system that Sawhney’s parents went through; as quoted earlier, in the opening voice-over, Sawhney’s father states his wife and he were persuaded to apply for vouchers after being shown tourist pictures of Kew Gardens and other parts of England,

⁵⁰ “Immigrant,” Ibid.
in which everything was “all... beautiful and... just right.” Sawhney himself leaves open the tension between that idealized and somewhat dishonest depiction promised by the British government and the inevitable difficulties Sawhney’s parents would face once they came to this country. However, in many reviews and discussions of his album in the media, the positively framed lyrics were inviting enough on their own to be interpreted as a straightforward celebration of immigration and/or a tender gesture of filial devotion.

Taken as a whole, Sawhney’s album criticizes British immigration policies and race relations much more than it praises them. In the liner notes that introduce the album, Sawhney positions as a second-generation British Asian as he describes his struggles to define himself:

I am Indian. To be more accurate, I was raised in England, but my parents came from India—land, people, government, or self—‘Indian’—what does that mean? Am I... Less Indian for being born and raised in Britain? —For not speaking Hindi? Am I not English because of my cultural heritage? —Or the colour of my skin? Who decides?\(^5\)

Although Sawhney first appears to locate his identity within India, as he considers his geographic and linguistic separation from the Indian state, he begins to question the validity of that association. In the process, he gradually resitutes his frame of reference from India—where he may not be accepted because he was not born there and does not speak Hindi—to England, where he is not accepted because of his Indian heritage and skin color.

While Sawhney could complain about the marginalization that results from his exclusion from these formulations of nationality, he instead proceeds to refuse these formulations altogether as he defines himself as an individual who *refuses* nationality:

\(^5\) Liner notes, Ibid.
'History' tells me my heritage came from the ‘Sub’ continent—a ‘third world’ country, a ‘developing’ nation, a ‘colonised’ land—So what is history? For me, just another arrogant Eurocentric term… I believe in Hindu philosophy. I am not religious. I am a pacifist. I am British Asian. My identity and my history are defined only by myself—beyond politics, beyond nationality, beyond religion, and Beyond Skin.52

Sawhney here catalogues the different categories that have structured his identity in the West. According to the English history books that he has studied, Sawhney comes from a “substandard” land that lacked the capacity to govern itself in the past and, now left to govern itself, reveals its incompetence. Sawhney rejects all of these negative constructions of who he is and where he comes from—or “history”—as a Eurocentric understanding.

Sawhney’s next comments pertain to his political and communal identity, which engage both the historical relationship between Britain and India as well as then-contemporary identity politics in South Asia—namely, an extremist nationalist government in India seeking to define India as Hindu and an increasingly conservative Islamic republic of Pakistan. In adopting the identity, “British Asian,” Sawhney takes advantage of the term’s fluidity as he abandons the political and communal distinctions between India and Pakistan, and conflates them into a single identity within a British context. In identifying himself as first a British Asian who is an Indian, then a follower of Hindu philosophy (as opposed to Hindu religion), and a pacifist, Sawhney contradicts popular conceptions of Britishness as well as Indian identity. In doing so, he refuses both these identities and their associations with ethnic and national categories.

Sawhney’s songs also resist simple categorization in their tendency to weave together distinct musical influences from different cultures in such a

52 Ibid.
way that to remove one strand of these textures would radically change the nature of the song, and subsequently, its meaning. Often the juxtaposition of styles gives rise to a particular idea. In the song “Homelands” on Beyond Skin, for instance, Sawhney brings together Pakistani Qawwali singers, Spanish flamenco guitar, and a woman singing in (Brazilian) Portuguese in such a way as to suggest these traditions’ shared heritage. This notion that all of these ethnic others are somehow related is alluded to in films such as Tony Gatlif’s vision of Roma western migration, Latcho Drom (1993.) The juxtaposition of (acoustic) ethnic traditions and British electronic styles, as discussed previously, unsettles and therefore motivates listeners to reconsider how they define cultural difference, and in turn, cultural identities. Sawhney simultaneously distinguishes and fuses together categories of difference that create new meanings. In doing so, he creates a structure for his songs to support his political position, which attempts to blur distinctions among cultures and forge common ground.

How to Become a World Musician Overnight

Consistent with his desire to escape being defined by ethnicity and/or nationality, Sawhney has protested his recent association with what he views to be the ghettoizing category of world music. Sawhney’s 1999 album Beyond Skin was one of most critically praised British albums of that year and nominated for the Mercury Prize; thus Sawhney’s protests must be considered in relation to the style of music he produced on that album (and its reception) as opposed the music on his 2001 album, Prophesy, which was nominated for multiple awards and awarded the “Boundary Crossing” prize at the first BBC World Music Awards in January 2002. Nitin Sawhney’s frustration at being categorized as a world music artist in 2002 in part stemmed from the fact that
Talvin Singh’s 1999 Mercury Prize only three years earlier had optimistically suggested that Britain was finally ready to accept British Asian musicians as mainstream musicians. Sawhney’s later World Music awards seemed a giant step backwards. Given the different receptions of _Beyond Skin_ and _Prophesy_, it is useful to explore the content of the latter more closely in order to situate it within a discussion of cultural and national identity.

The first single released from _Prophesy_, “Cold & Intimate,” which features English singer Tina Grace, evokes contemporary electronica and betrays no audible traces of identifiably “ethnic” influences. On the contrary, its brooding, melancholic melody, heightened bass, and depressing, bitter English lyrics\(^3\) immediately situate the song for British popular dance music audiences within the stylistic genre, trip hop. In contrast, the song “Moonrise,” also included on the released single, features a more organic acoustic duet between French-Algerian _raï_ singer Cheb Mami, who sings in Arabic, and Nina Rocha Miranda, an English-Brazilian singer, who sings in Portuguese. A Western classical string orchestra, Nitin Sawhney on acoustic guitar, Jose Miguel Carmona on Spanish flamenco guitar, and an understated Brazilian percussion section accompany the two singers. The song’s minor mode—specifically the harmonic form and its augmented second interval between the sixth and seventh scale degrees—simultaneously evokes the common Arabic classical mode _hijaz_ and the harmonic minor scale often associated with flamenco, itself a confluence of Arabic and Spanish traditions.\(^4\) The traditionally disparate traditions of Algerian _raï_, Brazilian

\(^3\) “You see me walk, you see me fall/ You touch the tears upon my face / I taste your world, I smell your fear / I feel your bittersweet embrace / Nothing mentioned, nothing gained / You’re here, and then you’re gone / Yet complications keep me sane / We’re cold and intimate…”

samba, and Spanish flamenco are interwoven into a smooth texture and mellow groove, one whose seamless fusion of ethnically marked music exemplifies “world music” in its more commercial variants.55

“Cold & Intimate” and “Moonrise” represent but two examples of the numerous “electronica” and “world music fusion” selections on the album. Below is a table that summarizes the stylistic influences, instrumentation, and genres referenced throughout all the songs on Prophesy. They illustrate the diversity of sources that Sawhney routinely draws from and integrates into his work. The bold-faced text in the table signifies the presence of identifiably non-western sound markers; these markers may include a singer singing in another language, instruments from non-western traditions, and reference to and/or incorporation of non-western stylistic genres.

Table 2.1 Stylistic Influences on Nitin Sawhney’s Prophesy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Stylistic Influences</th>
<th>Instrumentation66</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Sunset</td>
<td>English, occasionally interspersed with Bengali</td>
<td>R&amp;B, Soul, Jazz, Electronica</td>
<td>vocals, Eska Mtungwazi (female soul) and Jayanta Bose (male Bengali singer; modal melody); tabla; digital programming; full strings (8-piece English Chamber Orchestra) + acoustic guitar, London Community Gospel Choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Nothing</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Electronica/Dub, Jazz, Drum and bass</td>
<td>vocals, Tina Grace; digital programming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

55 The song “Moonrise” contains lyrics that exceed the typical melancholy of Brazilian popular song lyrics. Joshua Roth graciously provided the following translation of some of the Portuguese lyrics sung by Nina Rocha Miranda: “Don’t be sad / When I extinguish myself / You’ll be free of this dark life / Look at the moon, look at the moon rising / Taking your place / Waves of sorrow / To appre... / To appreciate / And then one day... a tempest that treats our pains / does not bid farewell to the future / That still could be / Eyes in the dark / Still can, still can see.”

66 Some details on instrumentation taken from commentary v2records.co.jp, Nitin Sawhney: Comment of the Songs ([cited 5 August 2004]); available from http://www.v2records.co.jp/special/a054_sc/010615/comment.html.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Table 2.1 (Continued)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><strong>Acquired Dreams</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><strong>Nothing More</strong> [shortened acoustic reprise of 2nd track]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><strong>Moonrise</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><strong>Street Guru</strong> (Part 1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><strong>The Sermon</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><strong>Breathing Light</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.1 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Developed (interlude)</th>
<th>English (Australian-accented Aboriginal critique of development)</th>
<th>Spoken word with ambient background</th>
<th>spoken male vocals, Mandawuy Yunupingu (founder of Australian Aboriginal band Yothu Yindi); Didgeridoo drone; intermittent acoustic guitar jazz-style improvisation with many augmented 2nd intervals that suggest an “Eastern” tinge; Japanese yidaki</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><strong>Footsteps</strong></td>
<td>(Three) South African languages</td>
<td><strong>Traditional South African choral singing,</strong> recorded in a children’s school in Soweto</td>
<td>children’s chorus, Rishile Primary School Choir, Meadowlands, Soweto; sound of playing children in the background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><strong>Walk Away</strong></td>
<td>English/Portuguese</td>
<td>Jazz / new age</td>
<td>vocals, Nina Miranda; Wurlitzer piano; brief news report (?) sample at end; cymbals; Carnatic violin improvisation in background</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><strong>Cold &amp; Intimate</strong></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Trip-hop, electronica</td>
<td>vocals, Tina Grace; programming; full strings, English Chamber Orchestra – (filtered to sound “distant”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><strong>Street Guru (Part 2) [interlude]</strong></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>“Cold &amp; Intimate” is heard briefly through car radio speakers, and it fades into spoken word monologue with ambient electronic background</td>
<td>vocals, Chicago cab driver (dense rant on feeling left behind in technologically advanced world: “I’m a low-tech man in a hi-tech world, and shit, there’s nothing I can do about it…”); programming; tabla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><strong>Ripping Out Tears</strong></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>Heavy metal (electric guitars), hip-hop, electronica</td>
<td>vocals, Pinky Tuscadero (N. American female rapper) and sample of an American male’s racist comment against African Americans; electric guitar; keyboard; programming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><strong>Prophesy</strong></td>
<td>English; Nonsense syllables</td>
<td><strong>Latin, gospel, Indian classical vocal ornamentation</strong></td>
<td>vocals: Jayanta Bose (Indian classical (male) singer improvising); gospel choir, London Community Gospel choir; acoustic guitar; drum kit; tabla</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen from Table 2.1, approximately half of the album features internationally oriented elements typically associated with world music influences, such as Indian classical music and Middle Eastern music; the other half, however, does not, which should call into question whether *Prophesy* qualifies as an actual “world music album.” Although “Moonrise,” “Breathing Light,” “Prophesy,” “Acquired Dreams,” “Footsteps,” and to some extent, “Sunset,” draw on international traditions, “Cold and Intimate” and the eight other songs on the album have more in common with British popular contemporary dance and electronic music. One song, “The Sermon” is singular in that it features the folk and blues singer Terry Callier, and blues-tinged harmonica. This reference to African American blues is conspicuous; the blues, far from an “international” genre, appears in this context as ethnically marked as the inclusion of Natacha Atlas’s Arabic styled vocal ornamentation in “Acquired Dreams.” The integration of all these different international and ethnic influences results in a wide range of cultural referents, whose inclusion complicates attempts to categorize *Prophesy* as a straightforward British popular music album. On one hand, “world music” seems an apt description for such a variety of influences; on the other hand, that term discourages people’s recognizing the album’s engagement with British popular music.

A closer look at two particular songs, “Breathing Light” and “Walk Away,” further reveals even more cultural influences than have already been addressed. In these songs, Sawnhe incorporates digital samples of sounds steeped in British contemporary culture and once again interweaves the “foreign” sounds in such a way that these disparate cultural references seem to join together naturally. In its first ten seconds, “Breathing Light” opens with
what sounds like a digitized human heartbeat, which gives way to a burst of radio static, whose sharp attack and echo evoke the sound of bullet fire. Immediately afterwards, a BBC reporter comments on location from the war in Sarajevo; his report is juxtaposed against this heartbeat sound as well as against synthesized atmospheric sounds that seem to be produced from underwater and/or a helicopter. Fifteen seconds later, Nitin Sawhney dissipates the tension created by the opening with sustained arpeggios on the piano that outline triads based on open fourth and fifth intervals; he is quietly accompanied by Steve Shehan, percussionist, on brushed cymbal. A western classical string ensemble then enters to support the immediate entry of the voice of Nelson Mandela, who proclaims, “We are free to be free.” As Mandela’s voice fades, an Indian flute (bansuri) enters amidst the accompanying strings; then the texture thickens to incorporate digitally programmed drum and bass rapid rhythmic sequences, bass guitar, and intermittently, a male voice (Indian jazz-fusion musician Trilok Gurtu) echoing the drum and bass rhythmic patterns with vocal bols, vocal rhythmic improvisation associated with the North Indian classical tradition.

The track is notable in the ways that it uses Indian instruments and musical techniques, for they blend into the texture in such a way that they do not sound “Indian,” per se. The bansuri tends to weave around the western classical string section’s melodic and rhythmic ostinato, and the bols delicately augment the rhythms established by the digitally produced jazzy, drum and bass-influenced rhythmic track. The sense of openness in the texture, melody, and harmony complement the notion of freedom and responsibility evoked by

57 Sawhney recorded the comment live while visiting Johannesburg, South Africa and meeting Mandela in February 2001, former president of South Africa and civil rights leader. Mandela’s willingness to meet Sawhney of course testifies to both the seriousness with which he approaches his work, and the respect he has earned from others internationally. See Nitin Sawhney, Prophesy (Berlin: V2 Music Limited, 2001), 1 sound disc.
Nelson Mandela. While the average British listener may find the song’s opening alienating, the piano’s cascading arpeggios, the string ensemble’s ostinato, and understated jazz and drum and bass-influenced rhythm that follow dissipate the tension evoked by the opening; the resulting texture provides a smooth and relaxing structural foundation against which foreign sounds such as the Indian flute and Trilok Gurtu’s bols are intermittently introduced as accents so as not to overwhelm the listener or even attract much notice.

In the song “Walk Away,” Sawhney also uses a familiar sounding backdrop against which he intermittently introduces more foreign sounds. The track features an arpeggiated ostinato played by Sawhney on solo piano, though at a slower tempo. After two cycles of the ostinato figure, singer Tina Grace joins Sawhney with an English text. Multi-track recording creates the false impression that as she finishes one phrase, another singer enters to sing the next one; in reality, there is only her voice. After Tina Grace finishes her second full stanza, another voice does actually enter. The voice of Brazilian-English singer Nina Miranda begins to interlaces Grace’s voice in a similar pitch register and timbre, but in Portuguese. Underneath all of this, one can hear an intermittent Carnatic (South Indian) violin improvisation, which joined with Miranda’s Portuguese text, does not sound overtly foreign.

The confrontation of ethnic influences from different traditions on the album generates some tension because it would seem to result in cacophony; yet in practice, Sawhney consistently arranges these influences in such a way as if to the differences are made to seem complementary to one another, and naturally agreeable.\textsuperscript{58} The lyrics make frequent allusions to the clash between

\textsuperscript{58} While Sawhney’s approach would seem to underplay the differences and risk diluting them in order to produce an agreeable result, this is not the case; in contrast, Sawhney arranges these disparate influences in a manner that preserves their differences while exploring their complementary natures, and the end result often surprises the listener.
technology and humanity, but this clash in many ways seems to be resolved through the integration of cultural influences throughout the album. The clash is a theme throughout the album. Sawhney himself offers the following comments in the liner notes, which underscore this tension:

Technology is a drug.
We can’t get enough of it...
Basically, we are all addicts – addicted to the comfort and convenience that technology provides – addicted to the notion that progress is directly related to the size of your computer screen... We’re already developed... Then again, wealthy kids from America shoot each other. Poor kids in Soweto can’t stop smiling.
So who’s developed? [...] When I look in front of me, I see two paths – spiritual and material. Two worlds – developed or developing. You decide which is which. We’re still in the wake of millennium paranoia – earthquakes, floods, end of world scenarios, cult suicides, viral diseases that eat into our computer realities. This is our developed world.”

The actual songs on the album elaborate on these comments by bringing together speakers from different cultures, many of whom offer their thoughts on the dangers of technology and our simultaneous dependence on it; in these songs, more digitally mediated production techniques are integrated with live, acoustic performances. The incorporation of the human voice on several of the songs on the album serves to indicate an active human presence. This is not to say that all vocal performances on the album are unaltered, live recordings; Cheb Mami’s voice in the song “Moonrise” is provided with reverb, but Sawhney’s incorporation of a relatively unmediated voice in otherwise digitally produced songs such as “Cold & Intimate” reaffirms the human element within technology and dispels the belief that technology has obliterated this human presence.

Furthermore, the human voices in these songs, that is, the voices of Terry Callier, Cheb Mami, Natacha Atlas, and Jayanta Bose, are routinely

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59 Sawhney, Prophesy.
marked. As the listener associates their respective voices with a particular ethnicity, the voices evoke particular locales, and in their diversity, also reaffirm for the listener a human presence in these songs. The songs’ evocation of different cultures suggests that people’s ability to create and sustain cultures and individual identities is not as threatened by technology as it would seem, and is actually thriving.\textsuperscript{60} Also, the incorporation of ethnically marked voices amidst a digital music environment suggests that technology exists all over the world and that it does not require the participation of Western subjects. Lastly, Sawhney implies that the prevalence of technology is not inherently dangerous; rather, technology becomes dangerous only when we begin to measure human progress and development by its presence.

The humanistic themes explored by Nitin Sawhney on his album \textit{Prophecy} depart from the politics of individual identity that he explored in \textit{Beyond Skin}. Sawhney’s exploration of global themes would suggest that the album fit into the clichéd advertising rhetoric of world music fusion recordings that attempt to bridge boundaries between cultures through the universal language of music. Sawhney does not imply, however, that cultural differences do not matter in the face of music. Given that both albums’ highly politicized critique of race and economic inequity explicitly attack the logic underlying the distinction between world music and British popular music, it is all the more ironic that Sawhney’s second album won a world music prize.

\textsuperscript{60}This is not to suggest that album claims that technology is harmless; “Broken Skin,” the song that alludes to nuclear tests, points out the devastating consequences of misusing technology.
**British identity and its stakes**

Sawhney’s disappointment and anger that this album was categorized as world music make even more sense when considered in the context of the politics of exclusion within the British music industry. This exclusion reflects a long and bitter precedent of excluding British Asians from British culture. In 1961, the British conservative Enoch Powell explained the distinction between political and cultural citizenship in the following terms: “The West Indian or Indian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen by birth; in fact, he is a West Indian or Asian still.”61 Thus, in Powell’s formulation, while non-white people born in Britain may have the right to British political citizenship, they do not have the right to cultural citizenship in British mainstream culture, i.e. English culture. The underlying rationale for this distinction grounds itself in a belief that only whites may be English, and that English culture defines British culture.

Some people still believe in distinguishing British society in this manner. In a recent article, Nitin Sawhney described hearing the following “joke”:

> [The] extreme right wing comedian Bernard Manning scoff[ed] at the people like Sawhney and his parents claiming to be British. According to Manning if that were the case then a dog born in a stable should call itself a horse...62

While British Asian people may be born within Britain, their birthplace does not change who they are, that is, non-English outsiders. This belief is closely related to the history of South Asian immigration and the racism that ensued in Great Britain. While South Asians have immigrated and settled in Britain since the 18th century, mass migration of South Asians to Britain is a relatively

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recent occurrence; South Asians began to arrive in large numbers in Britain only after India and Pakistan gained independence from Britain in 1947.\(^3\)

In light of this recent history of South Asian migration to Britain, British Asians still encounter significant resistance against being accepted as legitimate citizens in Britain. British Asians have a great deal at stake in being recognized as complete and legitimate citizens, that is, in both political and cultural realms, especially considering the long history of their struggle; thus, contemporary musicians’ repeated attempts to claim that status should be understood in the context of this historical struggle to be recognized as legitimate citizens of Britain. While the actual status of British Asians’ state citizenship itself has rarely been called into question, the definition of that citizenship and the rights granted by that citizenship—including the right to reside and be employed within Britain—have always been subject to negotiation. In the next section, in order to establish that history, I will briefly outline the major immigration and nationality acts passed in Britain since 1947, how they affected Asians’ claims to citizenship.

The history of South Asian immigration to the UK is of course most explicitly related to Britain’s former colonization of South Asia, but more recently, South Asians’ immigration has been closely tied to the immigration of another community of ethnically marked immigrants, namely British colonial subjects from the Caribbean, once known as the British West Indies (including present-day Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Belize, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Montserrat, Turks and the Calicos Islands.) Directly following India and Pakistan’s independence from Britain in

\(^3\) While this mass migration took place in the 1950s and 1960s, South Asians have in fact been settled in Britain for many centuries; as Rozina Visram notes, this fact is usually lost in academic studies on the British Asian community, most of which rooted in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Her most recent study outlines the rarely acknowledged history of British Asian settlement before the 1950s: Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).
1947, the 1948 British Nationality Act granted British citizenship to its indigenous citizens and imperial subjects alike, all of who were entitled to live and work in Britain. Furthermore, a new political entity was created—the United Kingdom and Colonies (UKC)—that granted Britain’s colonial subjects the same rights already extended to indigenous British citizens.64

The 1948 British Nationality understandably resulted in Caribbeans’ increased presence in Britain, and their visibility directly affected the future terms of South Asian immigration.65 Caribbeans’ arrival in large numbers and the perceived problems they created motivated the government to consider ways to restrict non-white immigration; yet what was essentially a “race” problem had to be translated into more polite terms before it could be passed as official policy. Contrary to the 1948 Act that treated all citizens equally, the British government under Churchill during the early 1950s began to view its citizens in distinct categories; they consequently coined the term “Commonwealth immigrant,” to refer specifically to migrants of color (including Irish migrants,) as opposed to migrants of “European” descent.66

These racial distinctions were reinforced through legislation in the late 1950s. The subsequent 1957 British Nationality Act was passed mostly to preserve the right of white migrants in its colonies (“lost British stock”), that is, “those who had served Britain well” in its colonies—to British citizenship and residency. This act, however, did not extend complete rights of British citizenship, i.e. the right to reside and settle in Britain, to nonwhite residents of

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64 Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 16-17. Kathleen Paul has noted that the creation of the UKC directly related to India and Pakistan’s recent independence; while the creation of the UKC may initially appear as an enlightened act recognizing the inherent humanity of Britain’s colonial subjects, she argues persuasively that the creation of the UKC “was a political maneuver designed to ward off potential calls for colonial independence.” Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, 23.

65 On June 21, 1948, the *Empire Windrush* arrived from Jamaica with 492 Jamaicans on board and docked at a port near London; its arrival is recognized as initiating “the first wave of mass migration to the United Kingdom.” Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, 111.

66 Ibid., 134-41.
the colonies, who included more than three million stateless Hindu and Muslim refugees, particularly those who had settled in East Africa before 1947—and had also served Britain.\textsuperscript{67} Violent riots in Nottingham between whites and West Indians in 1958 intensified the English public’s concerns over the growing Caribbean immigrant population and the prospect of immigration in general. In retrospect, we may immediately identify these concerns as restating previous colonial stereotypes: during the 1950s and early 1960s, the English described their West Indian neighbors as being prone to violence and lack of discipline, yielding low output with high turnover in their jobs, living in “primitive, squalid and deplorable” conditions.\textsuperscript{68}

Prior to 1962, Indian migrants had migrated in smaller numbers than Caribbeans. The peak period of Indian migration to Britain took place between 1955 and 1965; most of these early immigrants were employed in factories around London and developing industrial cities in northern England.\textsuperscript{69} Following the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, the number of Indian migrants began to exceed those of Caribbean migrants. Many of these new immigrants were relatives of residents already settled in Britain; thus communities were expanding horizontally.\textsuperscript{70} As a result, the socio-economic profile of Indian immigrants was gradually transforming from mostly industrial, working class males to professional, middle-class families.

\textsuperscript{67} For example, when Kenya gained its independence in 1963, Kenyan Indians were presented with two options—Kenyan or British citizenship. Only a small fraction chose to take Kenyan citizenship; over the next ten years, immigration acts passed in Kenya began to restrict the rights of Indians with British citizenships so that the employment of these Indians was for the most part prohibited by the late 1960s. Most of these Indians, in addition to those from Uganda, Malawi, and Tanzania were denied the right to reside in Britain in 1968. See Alan Travis, “Blunkett Ends Passports Injustice, 34 Years On,” \textit{The Guardian} July 3, 2002.


\textsuperscript{70} Shukla, \textit{India Abroad}, 49.
One factor leading to this transformation was the fact that the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act explicitly divided immigrants into three categories, and issued to each of them respective types of employment vouchers. These vouchers were divided and distributed to those who had jobs to go to, those who possessed skills useful to England, and those who were unskilled laborers seeking employment, respectively. The last vouchers of unskilled laborers were admitted in restricted numbers until 1964, at which point the government announced that it would no longer accept applications from them.\textsuperscript{71} The effect of the voucher system introduced in the late 1950s was to limit the entry of immigrants who did not qualify as skilled or professional workers, such as those immigrants from the Caribbean who had supplied the demand to fill lower class jobs during the early 1950s.

While the vouchers attempted to ensure only that “desirable” immigrants would now be allowed to settle in Britain, the next phase of legislation further distinguished the different types of citizenship, and the rights associated with them. The 1964 Nationality Act, for instance, directly followed Kenya’s independence in 1963, which had prompted the mass migration of Kenyan Asians and Europeans;\textsuperscript{72} under the terms of the 1964 Act, only those of European descent were permitted to “return” from Kenya.\textsuperscript{73} The later 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act further defined British citizenship on familial and blood lines, as opposed to geographical lines; it “restricted the automatic right of entry [that is, settlement] to the UK to UKC citizens who

\textsuperscript{71} Paul, \textit{Whitewashing Britain}, 166-70.
\textsuperscript{72} In both Kenya and Uganda, Asians were widely resented by the majority African population on the basis of their perceived and -- in many cases-- actual complicity in British colonialism against Africans; from the mid 1960s onwards, the wealthier Asian community in east Africa was subject to increasing restrictions until most were forced to leave. Idi Amin expelled all Asians from Uganda in 1972.
\textsuperscript{73} Paul, \textit{Whitewashing Britain}, 166-74.
were themselves or who had a parent or grandparent, born, adopted, registered or naturalized in the United Kingdom.”

The subsequent 1971 Immigration Act divided British citizens into “patrials” and “nonpatrials”—the latter of whom were placed “on virtually the same footing as aliens.” Those British (and UKC) citizens lacking the familial or blood lines defined in the 1968 Act, or who had not lived legally within Britain for five years were rendered “nonpatrials”. As a result, “nonpatrials”—mostly non-whites with ancestors in formerly colonized areas—“discovered that their British nationality amounted to little more than a name on a passport and that their access to Britain was restricted in much the same way as it was for aliens.” A glaring exception, thirty thousand Asians forced to flee Uganda in 1972 were admitted into Britain—unlike the Asians from Kenya—to avert a diplomatic crisis. Because of these expulsions, many British Asians identify to some extent with their heritage in East Africa. For example, Talvin Singh’s song, “Mombasstic,” from his album OK is supposedly dedicated to his father, who fled Idi Amin’s regime in Uganda during the 1960s. While Mombasa is actually located in Kenya, the shared experience of British Indians from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Malawi suggests that these British Indians conflate these countries into a single British Asian East African experience.

74 Ibid., 179.
75 Ibid., 181. As Paul notes, “patrials” included those British subjects and UKC citizens “who had themselves or whose grandparent had been born, adopted, or registered in Britain,” or UKC citizens who had lived for five years in Britain. “Nonpatrials” were those British citizens who lacked this familial connection, or UKC citizens who had not yet lived five years in Britain.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 182.
79 While the song’s title and Singh’s dedication of the song to his father concretely refer to a particularly troubling episode of British history characterized by the betrayal and mistreatment of British Indians, the musical content of the song suggests an entirely other
The conservative administration under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s has been associated with some of the most discriminatory policies against British Asians; these policies coincided with the childhood and adolescence of many contemporary British Asian popular musicians including Singh and Sawhney and can be assumed to have influenced attitudes towards Britain. Thatcher introduced new legislation in 1981—the British Nationality Act—to address what was in her words the public’s growing fear “that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.” Home Secretary William Whitelaw went so far as to state quite explicitly the legislation’s intent to prevent the entry of non-white citizen-holders, of whom Asians were now the most visible; he justified the necessity of passing the 1981 British Nationality Act on the basis that the Act ensured that “holders of the present citizenship may not unnaturally be encouraged to believe, despite the immigration laws to the contrary, that they have a right of entry to the United Kingdom.”

The 1981 Act divided “British nationality into three tiers: British citizenship, British Dependent Territories Citizenship, and British Overseas Citizenship.” In addition, the children who were born to parents “not legally settled” in Britain only became eligible for British citizenship after living in Britain for ten years. While all three categories carried the same British context. The song is built around synthesized syncopated dub rhythms and regular rhythmic patterns that evoke traditional African rhythms. The song also uses atmospheres to evoke the sound of a jungle, or rainforest; these rhythms and atmospheres are interwoven with samples from a deep-voiced man repeating text in a presumably African language, as well as a jazz-influenced muted trumpet improvisation. Singh’s decision to integrate this jazz improvisation in the melody with more African-derived rhythms can be explained by his earlier experiments with acid jazz fusion in the 1980s; given his own comments about dedicating this song to his father’s experience, his evocations of Africa through the vocal samples and atmospheres may be understood to relate to his own identification with Africa through his father’s history. The song’s juxtaposition of dub, jazz, and African rhythms suggests that Singh connects the idioms of African-American jazz and Jamaican dub to its historical origins in Africa.

80 Paul, Whitewashing Britain, 182.
81 Ibid.
passport, the right to live in the United Kingdom was restricted to those in the first tier (former “patrials”). Those in the second and third tiers were also entitled to British consular protection—as long as they did not enter Britain itself.82

The reign of Cool Britannia

The hostile attitudes towards British Asians evinced by the government and the public during the Thatcher administration were dramatically reversed in the mid to late 1990s, which witnessed the beginning of the so-called “Cool Britannia” era—associated with the new left-leaning government of prime minister Tony Blair (elected in 1997) and its campaign to re-brand Britain, and transform its stodgy, stuffy, colonial associations into a vibrant, cutting edge, cosmopolitan center that would establish its identity as the premier cultural center of the world in the new millennium.83 “Cool Britannia” is, of course, a play on “Rule, Britannia,” a song written in 1745 that celebrates Britain’s colonial power and achievements. The song’s stanzas were amended throughout the nineteenth century to both affirm and reflect a “new imperial reality,” captured in the refrain “Rule, Britannia, rule the waves / Britons never will be slaves.”84 “Cool Britannia,” by contrast, celebrates contemporary achievements in music, visual art, film, and dance as a testament to Britain’s new identity as a vibrant and innovative cultural center.85 It should be noted that Blair himself distanced himself from the term “Cool Britannia,” which he

82 Ibid., 183-84.
85 John Ghazvinian mentions the rise of designers such as John Galliano, Alexander McQueen and Vivienne Westwood as well as a new East End art gallery scene in the mid 1990s as precursors to Newsweek’s October 1996 cover, which asked “Is London the Coolest City in the Universe?” Ghazvinian notes “Brit cool is as old as the Carnaby Street haze of the ’60s. But was encouraging about 1997 was that (as the pun on “Rule Britannia” suggests) imperial glory was definitively uncool.” See John Ghazvinian, “Black Britannia,” Institute for Public Affairs in These Times, March 7, 1999.
attributed to a “US headline writer.” Blair instead noted, “[The official term] ‘powerhouse: : uk[’] is a real symbol of our belief that the creative industries are central to our economic future.”

The “powerhouse : : uk” campaign and proclamation’s of the administration’s commitment to a “people’s Europe” were widely attributed to a recent report, Britain™: Renewing Our Identity.87 Issued in 1997, the report was written by the London-based left-leaning think-tank, Demos and commissioned by the British Design Council. Established in 1944 and funded by the British Board of Trade, it was “from the outset a propagandist organisation” that aimed to convince British manufacturers that they could profit from focusing on design-related aspects; later, it also served as a showroom for the best of British design. The Design Council had commissioned the Demos report as part of a larger effort to reform British design; this effort included the Millennium Products initiative of the late 1990s, which attempt to designate 2,000 examples of British business ingenuity by the end of the millennium.88

Britain™: Renewing Our Identity, the young researcher Mark Leonard presented his vision that branded Britain into “Hub UK – Britain as the world’s crossroads:”

Britain is an island, but is never insular. It is more connected to the world than any land-bound nation. It is a hub: a place where goods,

86 John Penman, “Blair Has Designs on Boosting The "Best of British" In Millennium Style,” The Scotsman, April 3, 1998, 22. The double colon and lowercase letters included within the official spelling of the term were presumably intended to convey a more stylish, younger image. See John Michael Lee, “Interpreting the ‘Rebranding of Britain’,” The Round Table 362 (2001).
messages and ideas are exchanged; a bridge between Europe and America, north and south, east and west.\textsuperscript{89}

In an effort to establish Britain “at the forefront of creativity and invention,”\textsuperscript{90} Leonard mentions Britain’s musical artists, who have long been leading the world in music and musical innovation – from the Beatles and Pink Floyd in the 1960s and 1970s to Oasis, Radio Head \textsuperscript{sic}, Prodigy, Orbital, Portishead and the Spice Girls in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{91}

The last comment on creative musical artists introduces Britain’s ethnic minorities: “The ethnic mix of West Indians [Caribbeans] and Asians has developed new types of music from dance music to trip-hop.”\textsuperscript{92} If one were to visit the website of the British Council’s \textit{New Routes: A World of Music From Britain} online magazine at the time, one could find a picture of Talvin Singh accompanying the text,

The defining lines between Britain’s multicultural traditions are gently shifting, as different communities grow up side by side in changing political and cultural environments. Devolution within the UK has also provided the exciting opportunity to reflect on the musical identities of four very different nations that combine to create the rich diversity of music in Britain today.\textsuperscript{93}

The transformation Britain’s demographic had recently undergone was documented in findings from the 1991 Census, which for the first time included a specific question on ethnic group.\textsuperscript{94} Released in 1996, the Census reports enthusiastically declared that the country’s “multifarious

\begin{footnotes}
\item[89] Leonard, "Britain™,” 44.
\item[90] Ibid., 47.
\item[91] Ibid., 50.
\item[92] Ibid.
\item[94] Data on ethnic groups had until this point been compiled indirectly through another question that asked about subjects’ country of origin. Karen Long, "Standing up to Be Counted: Interest Group Strategies and Ethnic Classification in the United Kingdom and United States Censuses" (paper presented at the International Studies Association, New Orleans], March 23-27, 2002), 7.
\end{footnotes}
population...[lent] credibility to the status of London as one of the most, if not the most cosmopolitan city in the world.  

Asian Chic

This vibrant blending of different cultures was also seized upon as an effective marketing tool within the commercial sphere. The mid 1990s also witnessed the popularity of South-Asian themed references in popular culture, or “Asian Chic,” and this popularity continued into the late 1990s. Established department stores including Selfridges and Liberty promoted South Asian themed clothing and decorations, which together with the increasing visibility of “cutting-edge” British Asian electronica musicians including Talvin Singh on the covers of popular style magazines such as I-D and The Face, constructed an enthusiasm for “Asian Chic.” British Asian ethnicity was thus welcomed within mainstream culture, but almost always within the context of other South Asian-themed merchandise. Talvin Singh himself at one point confessed that he was “wary of becoming part of this season’s novelty phenomenon.” He went on to explain, “You have to be careful – you can suddenly find yourself tied in with Liberty’s new range of Indian cushions.”

At its height, “Asian Chic” encompassed a romanticized appreciation for South Asian traditional clothing and culture, but also grew to encompass the more “street-styled” British Asians in the club scene and their “run-down” neighborhoods. An excerpt from an article describing a contemporary fashion

collection serves to illustrate how such typically disparate cultural references and locations could be conflated into a single, marketable trend:

[Wayne Hemingway of clothing line and outlet Red or Dead commented that the] “Bollywood” collection for spring/summer ’97 is a fusion of traditional Asian clothing and British streetwear. There are saris for women and embroidered cheesecloth shirts for men, to be worn over jeans and trainers. Hemingway has even taken sari fabrics from Southall and made them into wedge mules. The sari promises to become clubland’s favorite way of dressing.97

Hemingway’s comment documents the British fashion industry’s reinvention of inexpensive everyday traditional South Asian clothing; separated from their original context as functional garments, South Asian clothing and fabric staples were transformed into trendy accessories to be worn along with existing British streetwear styles. South Asian culture served as a source of raw materials for an ultimately British product, separate from any actual Asian people. In a later comment, Hemingway made a superficial attempt to promote the clothing store called “Red or Dead” and its South Asian-influenced fashions within the context of contemporary multiculturalism in Britain:

The most exciting thing about the collection was embellishing the cross-cultural aspect that goes on in Britain. Most countries don’t have that... We have taken Indian sari fabrics to British street level, which is fun and kitsch.98

In this statement, Hemingway comes closest to locating this fashion within the context of British Asian young people and other ethnic minorities’ everyday existence; they and their families are of course the source of apparent British pride, that is, “the cross-cultural aspect.” Hemingway, however, denigrates

98 Ibid.
the lived experience of British Asian culture as he describes the Indian sari—a garment worn by millions of women throughout South Asia and the South Asian diaspora—as entertaining “fun and kitsch” for non-British Asians.

Reporter Sheryl Garrett revealed that “Asian Chic” was not only limited to street fashion and club wear, but also extended to upscale designer goods as she described her experiences shopping in West London, an affluent part of London not usually associated with immigrants:

Dries Van Noten, Rifat Ozbek, Vivienne Tam and Dolce & Gabbana [are all] showing sari shapes in jewel colours worn over loose, embroidered trousers. It’s all a far cry from the few pounds you would pay for a bolt of beautiful fabric in Southall.99

As she observes the considerable price differences between the glamorous, elaborate fashions from European designers and the presumably identical fabric available in Southall—the most established Asian neighborhood in London, she hints at the actual population of Southall and their socio-economic status. In this way, British Asian everyday clothing is, like its musical counterpart, transformed into an exotic, desirable commodity for white affluent customers.

Elsewhere, Garratt reports that the disadvantaged Bangladeshi population that resides in the East London neighborhood in Brick Lane can also be incorporated into the realm of “Asian Chic”:

The commercialisation of anything Asian knows no bounds. In East London, the run-down, predominantly Bengali area around Brick Lane is becoming seriously fashionable.100

In doing so, she delineates the clear boundary between those who consume fashion and those who are consumed by it. “Asian Chic” permeated British

100 Ibid.
cultural spaces where British Asians were once relatively invisible, and formerly invisible British Asian consumer goods and localities were pressed into the service of signifying white affluence.

As it was pressed into the service of “Asian Chic,” British Asian culture was conflated with Indian culture, which had also been appropriated within mainstream commercial contexts. In another shop, Garratt observed a man complimenting the South Asian-themed clothing and home accessories that manifested the market’s embrace of South Asian influences at this time; she then speculated that this man owned a copy of Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* but had never read it. The Booker prizewinning novel is mentioned as yet another South Asian-themed, fashionable accessory to own and be seen with, rather than as a work to be read for its literary value. In previous years—in this century and others—the fashionable accessory had come from China, or Japan; the focus on South Asia was momentary but marketable in the short run. Garrett’s comments also reveal the fact that white consumers were “experiencing Asian culture” as consumers without having to confront the Asian people living around them.

It was in the context of fashion that musicians such as Talvin Singh were discussed. In the midst of describing Indian-influenced trends in British fashion and design in the wake of Cool Britannia, Garratt introduces Singh as a classically trained musician with a street mentality:

[The] classically trained tabla player Talvin Singh. His album, *OK*, is an innovative blend of global dance, Indian instrumentation and samples filtered through the vision of someone who grew up in Brick Lane, East London.  

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101 In the next sentence, Garratt mentions the high-concept British lifestyle magazine, *Wallpaper*; one issue in the late 1990s subtitled “Indian Summer” featured loosely narrated fashion spread involving two women fighting over a man; it featured English (white) models in brown-face and elaborate South Asian themed clothing, as well as armed secret agents.
Garratt locates Singh within the quickly gentrifying neighborhood of Brick Lane, traditionally home to extremely poor Bangladeshi immigrants and their families; this is a strategic move, for in these sentences she attempts to establish Singh’s authenticity as both a socially mobile representative of both the poorer Bangladeshi residents who constitute the visible ethnic minority in the East End, and of the better-heeled (mostly white) club and restaurant patrons and loft owners who choose to reside there in growing numbers.\textsuperscript{103} Placing Singh within the fashion scene was not entirely the media’s doing, as Talvin Singh himself willingly participated and situated himself and his music within this scene. Singh commented: “Having the [Anokha] club is good because it’s built a new environment, not only musically but as far as fashion is concerned as well... Fashion and music are parallel.”\textsuperscript{104} Singh wastes no time in situating the ambience and concept characterizing his club within the typically more commercial commodity of fashion design.

Once the mainstream media discovered the Anokha club, local newspapers and publications such as Time Out repeatedly named it one of the best club nights in all of Britain. A great deal of the media’s excitement around

\textsuperscript{103} It should be noted that Garratt distorts the facts of Singh’s own history to support this claim. Singh did not grow up in Brick Lane, but he does, however, maintain a music production studio there. He grew up in another East London neighborhood, Leytonstone, and he is of Punjabi (Ugandan/Indian) rather than Bangladeshi descent. Recent statistics reveal the considerable differences between Brick Lane and Leytonstone. The 2001 census statistics for Waltham Forest, where Leytonstone is located, indicated its population was 14.4\% Asian or British Asian (3.5\% Indian, 7.9\% Pakistani, 1.0\% Bangladeshi, and 2.3\% Other.) 15.5\% of its residents resided in Council Housing, i.e. with state assistance. (See Statistics About Waltham Forest (2001 [cited); available from http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/AreaProfileFrames.asp?TID=13&AREA=Leytonstone&AID=175526. In contrast, the 2001 census statistics for Tower Hamlets, where Brick Lane is located, indicated its population was 36.6\% Asian (of which 33.4\% were Bangladeshi.) See Statistics About Tower Hamlets (2001 [cited); available from http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/AreaProfileFrames.asp?TID=13&AREA=Tower+Hamlets&AID=175505. Also, in 2001, 60\% of those belonging to the Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic group were categorized as “low income.” See Statistics by Ethnic Group: Low Income for 60\% of Pakistanis/Bangladeshis (2001 [cited); available from http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cc1/nugget.asp?id=269.

\textsuperscript{104} Stein, “Bombay Mix,” 8-9.
Anokha focused on its distinct ambience and what people wore there, which both defined and echoed the season’s fashion trends:

The look at Anokha is London street fashion incorporating the sari, shalwar-kameez (think Jemima Khan), Atchkan (men’s neru [sic] collared tunic) and choli (blouse worn under the sari). The sari, in particular is worn with the same ease as the Nineties club uniform: puffa jackets, trainers, combat pants and striped tops. Sweety [Kapoor, Anokha host and promoter] says, “This is definitely a fashion thing rather a political statement. These clothes happen to be functional for the way I live my life. Saris give me maximum glamour with minimum effort and I have to wear trainers because I’m standing with the guest list for three hours every Monday night.”

Kapoor defines her clothing as “functional” in order to establish that it was she rather than European fashion designers who initiated the trend; while her comments do allude to the important role that British Asians played in initiating the fashionable combination of traditional Asian clothes and street wear, it would be unwise to discount entirely the role of the fashion media in legitimizing and thus helping establish the trend.

The environment in which Singh was nominated for the Mercury Prize was thus one that privileged his Indian heritage, insofar as it affirmed a positive construction of British identity during the late 1990s and coincided with commercial trends. After the so-called “Indian Summer” and its novelty faded, there was much less enthusiasm around the formerly fashionable conception of British identity as Cool Britannia. Even before the new millennium began, the Millennium Dome was revealed to be a colossal, embarrassing flop, and a different notion of “Britishness” came into being. While Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney’s nominations for the Mercury Prize were situated within the era of Cool Britannia, Nitin Sawhney’s participation in the BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music signified a cultural shift that

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returned to an earlier, more insular version of what constituted “real” British culture. This history is narrated in the following section, which begins with a description of the Mercury Prize and BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music’s origins and then moves on to describe British Asian participation within respective awards in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium.

**Beyond Nationality, and Beyond Britain**

By virtue of their global travel and presence, Singh and Sawhney were tied not only to the trend of an Indian-tinged Britain, but also the circulation of Indian culture in general in a new mode, exemplified by bestselling authors Arundhati Roy and Salman Rushdie. Indian themes were in no way new because they had been coming in and out of fashion since the British arrived in India in the 17th century; the 1980s in particular bore witness to a wave of movies, television series, and books that made nostalgic references to the era of British colonialism in India (popularly referred to as “the British Raj”). This wave most notably included the television miniseries “The Far Pavilions,” based on M.M. Kaye’s novel of the same name, and “The Jewel in the Crown,” based on Paul Scott’s novel *The Raj Quartet*. This 1990s incarnation of Indian-theme trends was different, however. To describe this new incarnation, Graham Huggan draws on Padmini Mongia’s discussion of “Indo-chic,” a term which the media coined amidst the flurry of commercial excitement that

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107 “Beyond Nationality” was selected as the title of a program organized by the British Council Switzerland in 2004; its cover featured a photograph of Talvin Singh, and the schedule of the program featured performances in Switzerland by well known British Asian musicians including Talvin Singh, Bobby Friction, State of Bengal, and multi-racial band Maroon Town. See <http://www.britishcouncil.ch/arts/beyond04_mus.htm>

immediately followed Arundhati Roy’s Booker Prize for her novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997:

[T]he publicity Roy’s novel attracted and which it continues to this day to generate, helped place it firmly within the recent media-invented tradition of ‘Indo-chic’. The journalistic label is appropriately catchy; it is also global in its implications, coinciding with the recognition of India’s emergence as a world economic power… ‘Indo-chic’, and Roy’s contribution to it, are not simply to be seen as naïve Western constructs; they are products of the globalisation of Western-capitalist consumer culture, in which ‘India’ functions not just as a polyvalent cultural sign but as a highly mobile capital good.109

This notion of “Indo-chic” thus established the unlikely figure of the novelist as intrinsically associated with India’s emergence as a major economic and political power. As highly marketable, articulate English-language writers, Roy and Rushdie were closely followed in the media and quickly acquired the status of public intellectuals, more popularly conceived, who were called upon to comment on India at every available opportunity. Roy, based in India, acquired visibility as a political activist protesting against both local and global instances of social and economic injustice. Rushdie, an Indian expatriate, had already commanded international attention when his book *The Satanic Verses* angered conservative Muslims around the world and provoked Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini to issue a death sentence against Rushdie. Rushdie’s novels continued to receive critical praise outside Muslim communities, however. His 1981 novel *Midnight’s Children* received the Booker Prize, but went on to win the most prestigious book prize in the British

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109 Graham Huggan, *The Post-Colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (London: Routledge, 2001), 67. Huggan makes reference to Mongia’s concept and theorization of “Indo-Chic” in the following (unpublished) presentation: Padmini Mongia, ”The Making and Marketing of Arundhati Roy” (paper presented at the conference India: Fifty Years After University of Barcelona, September 1997). Huggan’s move to situate Roy’s prize within a new recognition of India’s perceived economic power also relates to Britain during this same period -- for the international recognition of India’s potential raised the social standing of not only the country’s own citizens, but also certain members of the British Asian immigrant community, notably Indians. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis were not as readily included within this category, and I shall discuss this exclusion in the next chapter.
Commonwealth in recent times when it was named The Booker of Bookers in 1993. Roy and Rushdie represented a new type of Indian citizen, as comfortable or more comfortable with living outside India than with living within it.

Given that Singh and Sawhney also had international careers and were highly visible people of Indian descent, it was all too easy for most British people to lump them into a single category, that of “the global Indian.” This figure had very little if anything to do with British culture. As they entered the transnational realm, Singh and Sawhney transcended their former identities as British Asians, Indian immigrants, or even simply Indians to emerge as one of many newly visible “global Indians,” and “a highly mobile capital good.” Singh and his collaborators’ particular participation within the fashion scene confirmed his engagement with British culture, as shown in the articles cited earlier. Yet when interviewed for this articles, Singh would also allude to his contacts and activities in India. These allusions contradicted his association with Britain and instead suggested his identity as a “global Indian”:

The man who has transformed the tabla from a novelty into a respected pop instrument knows where to look for the truly cool Asian fashions. “There’s a London-based designer called Shahid Bashir who does traditional Indian clothes crossed with cyber club-wear which are brilliant. In Bombay it’s Lalit Jalan. He’s a top Indian designer and he takes certain cuts of men’s clothing and manipulates them in the nicest way. People like that have had a real influence on my music.”

Singh’s commenting on the fashion scenes in London and Bombay in the same breath suggests his transnational lifestyle, which blurs the distinctions between his British (Asian) identity and an apparent Indian national identity. This blurring of identities was perpetuated mostly by the press, which focused upon Singh’s cosmopolitan lifestyle as a consistent point of reference. Singh

110 Ibid.
positioned himself as a simultaneous insider and outsider to Indian culture
and often reiterates the recognition of India’s newfound economic power:

Even for an underground artist like me, who is not on the billboards, India is such a huge untapped market. The kids and students are obsessed with the internet, far more so than here, and they’ve suddenly got access to the whole world. If you call up Microsoft, you’ll probably end up speaking to a technician in India.  

As Singh explained India’s economic development and his participation in it to reporter Max Bell, Singh consciously allied himself with that economy in Bell’s eyes:

Everything from jingles to movie music is booming in India, so it makes sense for Singh to spend a lot of time at his suburban house in Mumbai. [Singh states,] “My only problem is that I can’t get paid in sterling there so I’m channelling it all into a low-key label called Vani, which translates as sound.” Singh knows how to sell himself.

Singh’s ability to maintain a home and form a record label in India established (for most readers) his proximity to Indian culture and economics. Singh further distanced himself from Britain when he revealed how often he traveled from one place to another, information that was most often revealed by reporters who were fascinated by whom he met.

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111 Max Bell, "Wanted Worldwide; from Hoxton to Mumbai, Via Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Wine Cellar, Talvin Singh Is a Man in Demand. Max Bell Wonders How He Fits It All In," The Evening Standard, April 4, 2001, 5.
112 Ibid.
113 The media was captivated by his “jetsetter” lifestyle, and even more so by his access to and apparent demand from influential cultural figures from Madonna to Andrew Lloyd Webber A typical article follows: “Singh… is now heavily in demand as a tabla player, programmer and DJ for Björk, David Bowie and Siouxsie and the Banshees, among others. However, like his friend and kindred spirit Ryuichi Sakamoto, the 30-year-old renaissance man has refused to be typecast as a specialist guest… Oh yes, and Madonna and Massive Attack are pals…Bernardo Bertolucci and Andrew Lloyd Webber are both keen to work with him… [along with] Ustad Sultan Khan, Cleveland Watkiss, sometime U2 producer Howie B and the stunning vocalist Mahalakshmi M. Iyer… Singh can jet off to India with Virgin and watch his film, Drum and Space (about contemporary Indian sounds) in First Class one day, hook up with the great director Bertolucci after watching Bhaji On The Beach at the Barbican and then nip off for a bit of winter R and R in Woodstock, upstate New York. After meeting him, Bernardo was so taken with all things Indian that he promptly went to Kerala on Singh’s recommendation.” From Ibid.
During the mid to late 1990s, Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney came to exemplify the cosmopolitan British Asian at the forefront of British Asian popular music and culture. Both musicians directed attention to the fact that they had sold a reasonable number of albums in the mainstream commercial music market, for they interpreted their commercial success as evidence that most British people had accepted that their culture was in fact becoming more culturally and ethnically diverse. As later comments show, Sawhney and Singh may have been hasty in judging British culture’s readiness to accept them.

In their repeated references to their ethnicity, Singh and Sawhney stressed their marginality to a white English majority. They stood to gain respect as a result of their perceived struggles against racism. Singh’s previously cited comments immediately after winning the Mercury Prize reflect his awareness of how a number of people would admire that he had been able to win the prize, despite his ethnicity. Sawhney has repeatedly referred to his own specific experiences of marginalization in interviews; the following excerpt from one such interview catalogues the different forms of racism that Sawhney had experienced in his youth:

[Sawhney grew up] seeing National Front leaflets distributed outside the school gates, getting followed home by someone in a van shouting out racist abuse through a loudhailer, and being jumped on by the same eight kids every day during his early teens. Having a National Front music teacher banning him from the music room for six years, and starting school during an era when the NF were getting more votes than the Liberal party.¹¹⁴

While sharing their struggles earned the musicians some respect, it also placed them in a precarious position. As (apparent) living proof that Britain had in fact changed from its racist past to nurture musicians of color, they

exemplified the values of Tony Blair’s administration, as expressed in the
*Branding Britain* report. At the same time, their ethnicity and incorporation of
Indian elements was immensely fashionable. They were made almost doubly
vulnerable to being incorporated within this fashion because they were
foreground as setters of the trend, as well as those who were made more
fashionable by its circulation.

**Awards, Prizes, and Citizenship**

“Asian Chic,” like most other fashion trends, had a short shelf, which
on its own could not have had much effect on the music industry. The
confluence of the Asian-themed trends, however, along with an increasingly
visible British Asian population, and the government’s initiation of
multicultural policies, resulted in a particularly conducive environment for
British Asian musicians to develop their careers and attract outside attention.
While the Mercury Music Prize and BBC Radio 3 World Music Awards may
appear to be independent of all of these developments, one cannot truly
consider these prizes outside of national trends and politics.

These awards’ organization and promotion by the music industry
connect them to already existing large-scale commercial apparatuses, through
which they shape the consumer market, and in turn, consumers’ opinions. The
awards themselves however are based on a combination of factors, which
include the following: first, what the music industry thinks will sell, has
already been sold, or both; second, what the industry believes to be the public
and/or mainstream consumers’ opinion as to which musicians have merit and
should be recognized; and third, the perceived merit of the respective music—
a combination of artistic, cultural, and political factors.\(^{115}\) Musicians who

\(^{115}\) The industry’s interest in influencing the outcome of “independently judged” awards is just
one example of its regular attempts to seek new venues through which they may be able to
receive these awards have therefore in most cases already earned the music industry’s “stamp of approval.” After receiving their awards, musicians may continue to influence the public’s opinion and earn their approval (if they have not already, in the form of product sales figures and so forth.) Furthermore, while the actual awards given during award ceremonies often suggest a “lag” between public opinion and the industry’s anticipation of it, the industry can still influence public opinion to some extent. While the tastes of more sophisticated consumers belonging to trendsetting subcultures may be “ahead” of the industry, the more conservative tastes of mainstream audiences will usually fall “behind,” and are therefore often more significantly influenced by the outcomes of award ceremonies.\(^\text{116}\) In order to understand how the awards function publicly as arbiters of culture, I outline how each of these awards originated, the process in which the award is judged and awarded, and also the recent nominees and winners of each prizes.

\(^\text{116}\) An article by Mary R. Watson and N. Anand that was published within the final stages of this dissertation focuses on the role of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences (NARAS) in the American Grammy awards and concludes, “The sidelinining and subsequent inclusion of rock, Latin and rap music shows how, on the one hand, powerful organisations within the music industry try to stamp their authority on the canon based on an elite taste. On the other hand, when an institution fails to make correct or appropriate classifications, the very legitimacy of the institution is at stake. The relationship between institution and canon [of popular music] is reflexive; while a canon is legitimized by judgements made by institutions, the accuracy of canonical judgements often decides the continuing legitimacy of institutions.” Mary R. Watson and N. Anand, “Award Ceremony as an Arbiter of Commerce and Canon in the Popular Music Industry,” Popular Music 25, no. 1 (2006): 54. See also Moses Avalon, Confessions of a Record Producer: How to Survive the Scams and Shams of the Music Business (San Francisco: Backbeat Books, 2001), Russell Sanjek and David Sanjek, Pennies from Heaven: The American Popular Music Business in the Twentieth Century (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996).
The Mercury Music Prize

Originally sponsored by the telecommunications company Mercury Communications, the Mercury Music Prize was first awarded in 1992 and is widely acknowledged as the most prestigious music prize in Britain and Ireland.117 Conceived in 1991, the Mercury Prize developed from retailers’ desire to motivate “out-of-the-habit record buyers (i.e., those over 25 or so) to listen to new artists.” Their model was the Booker Prize,118 whose annual shortlist of six novels is massively promoted and publicized by both the media and booksellers; the Booker Prize’s prestige introduces readers to novels they would never select or discover on their own.119 Given that it has been awarded since 1969, the Booker Prize had, by 1991, accumulated considerable prestige and therefore readily commands significant attention from the media. In contrast, the Mercury Prize—a new and relatively unfamiliar prize at the time—faced a challenge in establishing its legitimacy. Following in the footsteps of the organizers for the Booker Prize, the Mercury Prize organizers first approached corporate sponsorship to gather financial support. It was crucial that this corporate sponsorship come from outside the music industry so the prize could maintain its independence from the record industry (at least in theory); the prize organizers recruited Mercury Communications Ltd—and six years later in 1997, Panasonic—as an official sponsor.120

117 While Ireland is technically included as a source of eligible nominees, it is rarely mentioned or referred to in either the nomination of artists or the discussion of the award.
118 The prize is now known officially as the “Man Booker Prize.”
120 The Mercury reference refers to Mercury Communications Ltd, a domestic and international telecommunications company, and bears no connection to the former American record label Mercury Records. After Mercury became defunct and was subsumed into the larger company Cable & Wireless in 1997, Panasonic assumed the prize’s sponsorship “but has kept the Mercury name as this is now a significant brand.” From Cable & Wireless: A History: Mercury
The organizers then began to assemble a cadre of respectable professionals, from which Simon Frith, a prominent music critic, emerged as a logical leader: Frith explains, “I was approached to devise the judging system (I was recommended by the BPI— [the] British music industry trade body—as someone who had nothing to do with the music industry but understood how it worked).” Frith explicitly claims that he has “nothing to do with the music industry,”—a comment that invites scrutiny, for Frith is arguably one of the most recognized British popular music scholars today.121

But Frith has also had a significant career as a music journalist and critic, and it is in this capacity, more directly related to the music industry, that he is popularly known. During the 1970s and 1980s he penned a column on British music for American magazines including Creem, Rolling Stone, New York Rocker, and the Village Voice. In Britain he has at various times written for the publications Cream, Let It Rock (as a member of the editorial collective,) Melody Maker, New Society, New Statesman, Sunday Times, Scotland on Sunday, Sunday Herald, and The Scotsman. While the relationship between rock criticism and record sales is far from straightforward, as both a prominent academic and journalist, Simon Frith certainly remains a significant influence in the world of British popular music.

Frith’s status is important to recognize because he has continued to serve as the “chair of judges and general consultant” of the Mercury Prize since it was founded. The Mercury Prize judges comprise ten people including

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121 For the last two decades, Frith has been an academic and is presently a professor in Film and Media Studies at Stirling University in Scotland; he has also in the past taught sociology and English. Frith is well published within popular music scholarship; he has recently edited the Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop and has also authored Performing Rites (1996) and The Sociology of Rock (1978.) Furthermore he is a founding member of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IAPSM) and a founding editorial member of the Cambridge University Press journal Popular Music.
Frith, most of who serve two to four years on the committee, but some of whom are replaced each year:

The usual line up is 2-3 critics (press/magazine), a radio person, a TV person (BBC/MTV/other commercial), assorted musicians (most often film music writers as they’re the only musicians unlikely to have no interest in a year’s releases), sometimes a deejay.\[122\]

Despite its professed objectivity and independence from the music industry, the Mercury Prize seems to have been designed to increase sales of new British albums. The Mercury Prize inevitably boosts the sales of its nominees and/or awardees in the short term; one sales expert claims that sales may increase up to 300% after a musician wins a Mercury Prize.\[123\]

Furthermore the awards promote the nominees in the period during which the fewest number of recordings are traditionally sold—July through September.\[124\]

The prize draws particular prestige from the fact that it is not limited to a particular musical genre; its broad range thus distinguishes it from the more commercial-music oriented “Brit Awards.” The Mercury Music Prize accommodates jazz, classical, and folk in addition to rock and pop; this comprehensive outlook has helped establish its authority to name the “best” new British album of the year. As far as how winners are chosen, Simon Frith has claimed that “the only criterion is what the judges think is best,” though he also admits that they consider the shortlists’ “overall feel.” Frith also believes, “the winners do give a pretty good account of the history of British

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122 Frith, *Online Exchange*.
124 Record companies enter their records at the beginning of June, which yields 170-200 entries. In mid-July, the committee of judges produces a shortlist of twelve albums. Record retailers and the music industry promote the albums on the shortlist until an awards ceremony and show in early September, during which the judges reconvene to select a winner. Frith, *Online Exchange*. 

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music over the last 10 years."\textsuperscript{125} Given Frith’s influence as an academic, these statements are quite significant. Simon Frith’s academic writing is informed by the British Marxist approach to cultural studies referred to in the Introduction, which may well factor into his decisions within the Mercury Music Prize. Frith’s Marxist slant suggests that what he “thinks is best” might be music that in some way resists its incorporation within mass consumer culture, which seems to be supported by the list of nominees each year. In 1999, for example, the list of nominees snubbed Robbie Williams, who won multiple Brit music awards and topped the sales charts that year; the 1999 list also omitted Jamiroquai and Fatboy Slim.\textsuperscript{126} Frith himself described the nominees on the 1999 list as musicians who “at once draw on the past and look to the future, display a love of craft, and a drive to experiment, and use music to depict both a multi-cultural metropolis and an emotional landscape.”\textsuperscript{127} Thus the attribute of popularity, or commercial recognition, does not figure into the Mercury Prize criteria and may actually work against the artists, at least in Frith’s purview.

More importantly, Frith’s comments that the Mercury Prize winners outline a history of British music, as well as his characterization of the 1999 shortlist, suggest that a master narrative is at work—one with a strong nationalistic agenda. The Mercury Prize history of winners—as short as it is—


\textsuperscript{127} Ibid. A more cynical critic, Alexis Petridis, conveys the Mercury Prize’s almost deliberate avoidance of commercially viable recordings in the following excerpt: “The Mercury Prize … has never quite recovered from some dubious late 1990s decisions. In 1998, Roni Size’s drum and bass album \textit{New Forms} beat Radiohead’s \textit{OK Computer}; in 1999, Talvin Singh’s tepid \textit{OK} won in a patronising concession to ‘new Asian cool’. These promoted the notion of Mercury judges as stuffy critics playing at being trendy, attempting to jump on bandwagons that had long left town.” See Alexis Petridis, “Putting Aside Tacky Image and Dubious Past,” \textit{The Guardian}, July 31, 2002, 5.
functions as a record of Britain’s great musical achievements, as well what its cultural values at a given time. Drum and bass pioneer Roni Size was awarded the Mercury Prize in 1998 presumably to draw attention to the fact that Britain did actually have a vibrant, young, and multicultural music scene; the judge’s decision to focus on innovation and multiculturalism of course complemented the Blair administration’s optimistic “re-branding of Britain” as a multicultural cosmopolis at that time.\(^{128}\) As a Mercury Prize judge, Frith explicitly creates those events that construct musical histories; as a significant academic and critic, he writes those same histories for an audience of other critics and academics, who in turn often proliferate Frith’s narrative.

Although Frith does not explicitly mention above that the prize restricts itself to “British artists,” he implies that criterion when he states that the nominations reveal “a pretty good account of the history of British music.”\(^{129}\) For this reason, the fact that British Asian musicians’ were nominated for the Mercury Prize between 1998 and 2001 serves to establish those musicians’ identities as being intrinsic to the history of British music—and in doing so, being British.

**The 1999 Mercury Prize Nominees**

The considerable attention and prestige associated with the Mercury Music Prize predictably generated even more excitement on July 27, 1999 when the list of nominees was announced to reveal the inclusion of two British Asian acts, Talvin Singh and Black Star Liner. Immediately after the announcement, numerous music critics attempted to situate these acts’

\(^{128}\) More cynically, Roni Size’s prize also perhaps attempted to demonstrate that the Mercury Prize judges were—contrary to popular opinion—“hip,” by virtue of their apparent acquaintance with somewhat recent club music trends and comfort with choosing a dreadlocked British Afro-Caribbean electronica musician.

\(^{129}\) Frith, *Online Exchange.*
recognition within the context of the increasing diversity of cultures reflected within Britain. David Lister of The Independent, commented:

The increasing multi-culturalism of Britain’s music scene was reflected in the shortlist for one of the year’s most prestigious music prizes announced yesterday. The Mercury Music Prize […] included […] acts from the Asian underground scene, Talvin Singh and Black Star Liner.\footnote{Lister, "A 'Multi Cultural' Mercury Shortlist," 7.}

Mentioning “multi-culturalism” along with the Mercury Prize’s prestige suggests that these acts, however “underground,” have earned both official recognition and legitimacy with respect to their contribution to music in Britain. Talvin Singh and Black Star Liner appeared on the shortlist alongside a few other artists, some of whose names were more recognizable—such as Blur, Manic Street Preachers, Beth Orton, and the Chemical Brothers.

They were by no means the first British Asian nominees for the Mercury Prize; Punjabi-inflected Ragga singer Apache Indian had been nominated in 1993 for his album No Reservations, and only one year earlier, in 1998, popular British Asian bands Asian Dub Foundation and Cornershop had been nominated for their albums Rafi’s Revenge and When I Was Born for the Seventh Time, respectively. Yet Singh and Black Star Liner in 1999 generated noticeably more interest as British Asian nominees than those of the previous year.\footnote{It should be noted that at least part of the increased attention given to Singh and Black Star Liner was a direct result of Asian Dub Foundation and Cornershop’s earlier nominations.} While the presence of two British Asian acts on the 1998 Mercury Prize shortlist may have been considered a fluke, the fact that two more British Asian acts had appeared on the 1999 shortlist of Britain’s most prestigious music prize demonstrated to most people that British Asian musicians were not a one-time novelty, but a consistent presence that demanded recognition.

David Lister, in the quotation above, groups Talvin Singh and Black Star Liner together in a way that reflects critics’ tendency to propose British
Asian artists’ ethnicity as a coherent stylistic genre. When Nick Barber, another critic with *The Independent*, complained that the nominations fell into a predictable pattern, his comments delineated a similar understanding:

Kate Rusby is there to stick up for folk music. Denys Baptiste is the jazzer. Thomas Ades fulfils the classical quota. The Chemical Brothers, Underworld and Faithless chip in the dance records you don’t have to go to clubs to enjoy. Talvin Singh and Black Star Liner fly the flag for the Asian/British crossover, with Singh doubling as the drum and bass representative. The other finalists are generally acclaimed alternative rock acts; Blur, Beth Orton, the Manic Street Preachers and the Stereophonics.132

Barber groups Singh and Black Star Liner, an electronica-influenced band, into an “Asian/British crossover” category in this instance, which seems to function as a descriptive genre akin to the others he mentions—folk, jazz, classical, dance, and rock, even while it “flies the flag” for their distinct British Asian ethnicity; he notably singles Singh out for “doubling” as a representative drum and bass artist as well as an “Asian/British crossover” artist. Barber’s reference to “Asian/British crossover” suggests that he thinks of Asian music and British music as being entirely discrete categories. In its common usage, the word “crossover” has usually referred to music that has proven popular with a marginal, usually ethnically defined audience before gaining popularity with mainstream audiences. But Barber’s assumption that Singh’s music corresponds to this model does not hold true.133 Singh’s music was actually more popular with electronica audiences than with Asian audiences.

In follow-up interviews, Singh and Black Star Liner attempted to decouple themselves:

Both Singh and [Choque] Hosein [of Black Star Liner] are perturbed at being lumped together simply because of their ethnic origin, as happened last year with the folky pop of Cornershop and the edgy hip-hop of Asian Dub Foundation. Says Hosein, “He’s coming at it from the classical side of things, and I’m from Leeds. He’s the tasteful carpet, and I’m the purple swirlly one with the orange walls that you remember.” Agrees Singh, “[Hosein’s] music is totally punk and relies on sampling. I represent Indian music in the way it is carried onward.”

This was not the first time British Asian acts have been “lumped together,” as 1998’s British Asian nominees were also massed into a single category, despite the fact that their music had no common stylistic elements. Singh and Hosein are both artists who experiment with combining Indian traditional sounds with digital production, but Singh approaches music from a classically influenced perspective that is more interested in the development of musical ideas over vast expanses of time, that is, more akin to techniques of improvisation in Indian classical traditions. Hosein, on the other hand, experiments unrestrictedly as he juxtaposes samples from various sources in a whimsical way that is fresh and innovative, but largely unconcerned with creating or maintaining any larger structural organization.

Ethnicity aside, Talvin Singh and Black Star Liner were still relative outsiders to the music industry, and neither had expected to be nominated for the Mercury Prize. Hosein noted his bewilderment at being included as a “surprise entry” among such well-established electronica acts as the Chemical Brothers and Underworld. Singh was reported to have heard about his album, OK’s nomination via his Mumbai, India-based manager; he explained his amazement at being included among such well-known rock bands such as the Blur, Manic Street Preachers, and Stereophonics, who were well known in

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135 Ibid.
Britain, unlike himself: “No one really knows me here, but I recently played to 45,000 people in Delhi [India]. I don’t make pop music, so it’s strange to be up there.” While Singh effectively distances himself from well-known mainstream British bands, he also hints that he and his music are more appreciated in India than in Britain—a suggestion that depicts him as a “global Indian” and that casts doubts on his primary cultural affiliation with British cultural.

Almost immediately after the nominations were announced, critics began to calculate what they felt were artists’ respective odds of landing the Mercury Prize the following month. Given British popular music’s predilection for both guitar rock and electronic music, and the fact the Mercury Prize is intended to represent the tenor of British music at any given time, the bands that were given the highest odds belonged to these genres. David Lister of The Independent designated the guitar-rock band, the Stereophonics, as the “favorite” with 3:1 odds. He gave Black Star Liner 4:1 odds of winning and offered them strong praise: “The coolest band on the list by far…A mix of Asian and dance and kitsch. One of the best acts at Glastonbury [the leading summer musical festival in Britain].” Lister commented on Talvin Singh, whom he gave 6:1 odds of winning, with decidedly less enthusiasm: “Traditional Asian music plus drum and bass; somehow it doesn’t quite take off.” According to the BBC, most bookies had

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135 Ibid.
136 Lister, "A 'Multi Cultural' Mercury Shortlist."
137 Rajan Datar, "Music: Mercury Music Prize: Turning the Tablas. When Talvin Singh Won the Mercury This Week, Critics Dubbed It Tokenism. But They're Just Racist, Says Rajan Datar, Who Talks to the Tabla Star and DJ About the Many Blooms of the Asian Scene," The Guardian, September 10, 1999, 14, "East-West Fusion Takes Mercury Music Prize," The Herald (Glasgow), September 8, 1999, 3. Entertainment Newcomer Wins Top Music Prize (BBC News, September 18, 1999 [cited February 23, 2004]), available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/441303.stm. Datar, in particular, also notes the debate was so heated that one judge admitted that "a few drinks had to be bought all round after to cool things down" and reach a unanimous verdict.
accorded Singh’s albums with even fewer odds at 10:1. While Asian music was “around,” Singh’s album was not widely recognized to be the album that was defining British culture.

Announcing the Winner: a Landmark Achievement or a Token Nod?

Singh’s low odds at winning the Mercury Prize led to most people’s absolute surprise when Singh won the prize on September 7, 1999. Frith reported that the judges had some difficulty in choosing a winner and only arrived at an agreement after “an unpleasant and acrimonious debate.” Award judges offered the following praise for Singh: “A creator of electrifying rhythms and energy,” who took his listeners on “a remarkable musical trip across a global landscape.”

The judges’ praise for Singh relates to Frith’s master narrative about the history of British music as well as the promised escapism of its non-western aspects. The reference to “a remarkable musical trip across a global landscape” once again complements the British government’s desire at the time to pursue a more cosmopolitan identity that projected Britain as a multicultural center as well as an important player in the global economy. It also relates to the discourse of travel that often accompanies the marketing of world music, but with some significant differences. As John Connell and Chris Gibson have noted,

[T]here are places in music that offer familiarity, nostalgia, a sense of difference and a place in which to escape and relax. [M]usical representations of place... largely provided, in every era and genre, gendered representations of places, with most local people being exotic,

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139 *Entertainment Newcomer Wins Top Music Prize.*
141 *Entertainment Newcomer Wins Top Music Prize.*
female and subservient, and landscapes that were either pristine or iconic. As Connell and Gibson observe, typical presentations of world music offer a sense of escape, most often to relaxing destinations often associated with colonial stereotypes of gentle natives and beautiful lands. The apparently exhilarating effect of Singh’s music thwarts the possibility of relaxation, however. Moreover, Singh refuses to occupy the female gendered, subservient role of the colonial object. He instead embodies the more masculine persona of the traveler, who claims new territories through the act of defining them in his own terms; indeed, the track “Traveller” that opens the album OK pronounces, “The world is sound.” May Joseph has described how the idea of travel is often enabling:

It implies the construction of borders, involves spatial displacement, and positions the body in moments of transition that variously challenge, alter, alienate, and distort the individual and the familiar. Travel implies a refraction of time, both historical and local. Within the shifting, transitional space of the traveler, borders must be redrawn constantly.

As Singh embodies the role of the traveler, he gains the power to claim territory, and to map this territory by drawing his own borders.

Thus the global landscape the judges allude to has less to do with a tour of romantic isles and more to do with Britain’s vision of regaining economic and political power throughout the world. Singh’s own comments further situated the judge’s comments as ones that related to Britain and British culture, as he offered his own perspective as a British Asian musician’s

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winning the prestigious Mercury Music Prize for the first time and what it meant.

I was kind of surprised, but then I wasn’t that surprised because I feel that I do deserve this award. My life has been a bit of a struggle. With me being from Asian origin I am a minority and this is celebrating the struggle of our forefathers.\textsuperscript{145}

Whether or not Singh’s prize could be regarded as a landmark achievement was hotly debated immediately after his prize was announced. Talvin Singh himself was well aware of the fact that the prize may not result in a sustained acceptance of British Asian music into mainstream culture; he understandably attempted to establish his winning the prize as a significant event, but the inconsistency of his comments that followed from one interview to another reveal he too was uncertain as to whether he should project his identity as a British Asian musician or a serious electronica musician.

During his acceptance speech, for instance, Singh stated, “For the last three years, the revenue from this industry has come from dance music and drum and bass. It’s about time that was put back into schools in [the form of] samplers.”\textsuperscript{146} Singh’s comment at the time drew applause from fans of electronica music, who agreed that British schools should emphasize digital music production more as part of their pupils’ education, and that it be given greater respect and significance—presumably in relation to the Western classical and other more traditional types of music considered essential in most curricula. In this comment, as he advocates in schools’ funding the purchase of digital music equipment, Singh significantly omits any reference to his Asianness or to Indian music and in doing so defines himself as an (mainstream) electronica artist.

\textsuperscript{145} “East-West Fusion Takes Mercury Music Prize,” 3.
Singh’s wish to help develop opportunities for younger people was not unusual at the time. During the late 1990s, many musicians considered the project of involving young people with electronica music and digital music production as inherently valuable. This belief relates back to many urban musicians’ own experiences making music and finding support in schools and local community centers. After launching successful careers, many British hip hop and electronica musicians (both Asian and non-Asian) were determined to facilitate young people’s access to music production equipment and studios. Some people believed that involving young people in these activities was intrinsic to continuing various local musical traditions; others believed that involving these young people in music would keep them “safe” and off the streets, and if they performed, provide a safe space for their friends as well.  147

In a later interview with *Billboard*, however, Singh does in fact refer explicitly to Indian music: “The Arts Council gives a certain amount of money to the ethnic arts... At the moment, it’s not going to the right places.” 148 During another interview with Rajan Datar following his Mercury Prize, Singh further explained his opinion on the issue:

“I struggled to learn this instrument (tablas) for years,” Singh points out, “and I want to help those who are trying now. I get talking to kids from

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147 Stevie Chick, “Taking It Back to the Streets; Just the Job,” *The Evening Standard*, November 4, 2002. Within certain British Asian circles, electronica music was considered as a potential means of social mobility. (In Asian Dub Foundation’s song “Hypocrite” (*Rafi’s Revenge*, 1999), rapper Deedar Zaman proclaims, “ADF—definitely, without a doubt—have the skills, to pay the bills!” The summer of 1999 coincided with the band Asian Dub Foundation’s launch of its education outreach project, ADFED. ADFED, run by the members of Asian Dub Foundation and other groups, provides disadvantaged and at-risk young people with access to and instruction in electronic music. The band, known for its political activism and commitment, believes that young people should use technology and music to empower and educate themselves. They also seek to educate a group of people traditionally excluded from technological spaces, targeting women. Lisa Das, July 1999, Rajan Datar, “Right Here, Right On: Asian Dub Foundation’s Follow-up to Their Mercury-Nominated Album Displays Their Continued Contempt for Commercialism,” *The Guardian*, March 17, 2000.

Leicester and Birmingham who are just out of school and want to get into music and I give them all the help I can. And it’s not just Asian kids who want to learn. It’s unbelievable there isn’t one centre in England where you can learn this sort of music. Only £300,000 a year [of public money] goes to all Asian arts and that’s why I have never accepted any money [from public support] even when I’ve really needed it. Our generation have got to carry the fight on this.”

Singh contends that the tabla can no longer be assumed to satisfy only the interests of a marginal ethnic community and must be recognized as having entered mainstream British culture; in Singh’s eyes, all British young people should be able to study the tabla if they wish. While Singh positioned himself as a mainstream electronica artist during his actual prize acceptance speech, in this interview with Datar, a British Asian reporter, Singh perhaps comes across as a more legitimate and thoughtful musician to more conservative audiences because he advocates more traditional forms of Asian music and culture, at least as they relate to the proper education of British schoolchildren.

Singh’s award initiated many discussions on Asian music should be introduced within the mainstream and whether it would be accepted, particularly within the music industry. Shabs, director of Outcaste, a record label devoted to promoting British Asian musicians, offered his perspective on how the Mercury Prize affected the course of British Asian music’s entry into the (mainstream) music industry:

This prize means that the perspective and repertoire of the music industry will get wider. It is accepting music that is not tired and obvious. So much of what the industry does is based around marketing - trying to squeeze more out of the public’s purse. What we are doing is expanding the boundaries and that’s what the Mercury prize recognises. I grew up with the Beat and Specials thing, where for the first time black and white were making music together, injecting some colour into music and that’s what we’re doing. Except this time we’re not a minority any more, we’re in the majority. Now it’s no big deal what colour you are - there’s people out there who accept the music for what it is.”

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150 Ibid.
Shabs interprets Singh’s winning the Mercury Prize optimistically, to mean that the industry no longer cares about the ethnicity of British Asian musicians, and finally accepts these musicians’ music on its own terms.

The apparent acceptance of a variety of different ethnic influences and figures within the mainstream media, considered alongside Talvin Singh’s Mercury Prize, suggested to some people that a profound shift in racial attitudes had taken place in British media, and therefore, in British culture. Whether factors like Singh’s prize or the more frequent appearance of British Asian news presenters on television indicated a significant change in climate, however, was still uncertain. After the Mercury Prize, the mainstream media was prompted to ask numerous British Asian musicians their perspective on whether Singh’s prize had initiated a significant positive development. Sanjay Varma, of the British Asian electronica group Earthtribe, commented that although he had been subjected to a “fair share of beatings” and been called “Paki” as a child, he no longer seemed to encounter those forms of racially motivated harassment. Nitin Sawhney, however, took a more cynical view as he pointed out that there still seemed to be a relative lack of British Asian role models for younger people, which had tragic consequences; Sawhney then cited the recent case of a 13-year old boy who had hanged himself after he was told that because he wore a turban, he would never be able to play major league soccer.\footnote{Dominic Pride, Paul Sexton, and Kwaku, "Asian/British Connection Thrives," \textit{Billboard} 109, no. 13 (1997): 1.}

There were further reasons to doubt the lasting significance of Singh’s prize. During the 1980s and 1990s, the mainstream media and public had on several occasions recognized British Asian musicians, but in almost every case, these musicians slipped back into obscurity shortly thereafter. As early as
1982, the popular British music television show Top of the Pops had featured a young Sheila Chandra, singing her hit “Ever So Lonely,” which reached #9 in the charts. During the 1990s, Ragga artist Apache Indian had seven top 40 hits. In the early 1990s, he received four Brit award nominations as well a Mercury Prize nomination for his album *No Reservations* in 1994.\(^{152}\) It must be noted that during the early 1990s, Bhangra did in fact achieve significant popularity with mainstream audiences; touted as “the next big thing” throughout the style press in Britain, Bhangra soon lost its appeal and disappeared from the mainstream:

When the short-lived hype around bhangra died away, the tag became a millstone. The music and style press decided they had “done bhangra”, while record companies told upcoming Asian artists such as Sawhney that “we don’t do bhangra”, even when they were creating something very different.\(^{153}\)

These musicians, such as Nitin Sawhney, who weren’t “doing Bhangra” found it difficult to promote their work to mainstream labels, mostly because the mainstream labels refused to believe that British Asians were capable of producing anything other than Bhangra, now an outdated trend nobody wanted to touch.

Even in light of this history of the rapid rise and fall of British Asian artists, the inarguable prestige of a British Asian album winning the Mercury Prize still seemed to promise—at least for a short time—more significant recognition, capable of generating a lasting presence for British Asian musicians within the mainstream British music industry. The mainstream press promoted the celebratory claim that British Asian musicians had finally arrived within the mainstream, as exemplified by headlines published immediately after Singh was awarded the Mercury Prize, for example, “British


\(^{153}\) Ibid.
Asian Scene on Brink of Mainstream.” To support its claim, this particular article cited Singh’s album OK’s impressive sales figures—70,000 units in Britain, 40,000 of which were sold after Singh won the Mercury Prize.154

Rising from the Underground into No Man’s Land

By late 1999, the term “Asian Underground” was an established term, circulating among advertising and media critics for at least three or four years. Functioning as an electronica subgenre and associated with British Asian musicians, Asian Underground music was at one point considered to be one of electronica’s most forward looking and innovative developments. Singh’s winning the Mercury Prize in many ways rendered that genre name obsolete after it advertised the music industry’s endorsement of so-called “underground British Asian electronica music.” Nitin Sawhney himself commented: “If you look at Talvin winning the Mercury Prize, me having a record [Beyond Skin] in the top 50, and Cornershop having a No. 1 single [“Brimful of Asha,” remixed by Norman Cook/Fatboy Slim], you can’t call that underground.”155 The term “underground” had once served to emphasize the newness and until then relatively noncommercial quality of British Asian music, but British Asian music’s newly heightened profile now thrust it into a no man’s land, where it was neither considered comfortably within, nor entirely divorced from, the mainstream commercial music industry.

“Shabs” Jobanputra, director of Asian-run label Outcaste (then distributor of Sawhney’s album,) commented at the strangeness of British Asian music being at the brink of the mainstream, rather than being

155 Ibid.
established within it: “We’re still at the stage of being critically acclaimed... We’re waiting for that nontraditional entry point such as what happened with Ladysmith Black Mambazo or Buena Vista Social Club.”

Shabs’s reference to the groups Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Buena Vista Social Club and their “nontraditional entry points” alludes to their initial promotion via a television commercial and a film documentary, respectively. Shabs’s opinion that these formats are unique and thus suggest more potential profit does not require further explanation, but what cannot be overlooked is the fact that he names two international groups from Cuba and South Africa, respectively, and among the most visible or commercially successful artists in the world music industry from the 1980s and 1990s. Shabs was the director of a label whose music—despite his efforts—had been considered distinctly marginal to mainstream popular music. In this quotation, Shabs suggests that Sawhney and other artists on the Outcaste label may not be recognized by the mainstream if their albums are released in a traditional manner more associated with mainstream popular music.

Producing British Asian music in a context more closely connected to world music, however, did seem a more viable “entry point” to the mainstream than the manner in which most British Asian recordings were being produced so far. Some British Asian musicians had already sold thousands of records, but the company that publishes official record charts in Britain, the British Chart Information Sales Network, had never recorded the sales of these records. They were sold in what are termed “specialist outlets, independent shops catering to British Asians--as opposed to the so-called

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156 Ibid. The commercial breakthrough of the world music groups Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Buena Vista Social was in no small part due to their collaboration with established mainstream artists—Paul Simon and Ry Cooder, respectively. It does not appear, however, that Shabs intends to suggest that British Asian musicians need a (white) mainstream musician to promote them.

“chart-return” stores, where sales data is tracked and used to compile the official sales charts.\textsuperscript{158} Thus even if British Asian artists such as Stereo Nation and Apache Indian were in fact selling large numbers of albums, without their sales being acknowledged within the mainstream music industry, these artists were to remain the in margins.

Still, the most recent British Asian electronica artists such as Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney seemed different, for their music was usually not to be found in Asian record stores at all because of their being signed to labels that the smaller stores could not afford to carry. But they still faced considerable barriers to being considered as British popular music. Sawhney apparently walked into a music shop one day and looked for \textit{Beyond Skin} among the other nominees for the Mercury Prize. His CD was however missing, and he tracked it down only after he looked in the World Music section, where it was tucked away.\textsuperscript{159}

In an article on British Asians’ invisibility in the mainstream media, the head of a British popular music business network admitted that these other barriers were in fact an issue. Keith Harris, chairman of the Music Tank network, commented on the fact that even if young people had been exposed to many British Afro-Caribbean musical role models, most people had never been exposed to Asians in the mainstream media—a comment that echoes Sawhney’s earlier comment about a lack of Asian role models. Harris added, “There is a lack of cultural diversity in the employment processes of the

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid. These independent shops frequently sold recordings more cheaply than larger record stores, but they did not track barcodes, which only appeared on selected recordings in the first place. Burrell, “Invisible Superstars,” http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/music/features/story.jsp?story=453972.

record companies, and that leads to a lack of people who are close to what is going on out there."\(^{160}\)

Yet many writers and critics both outside and within the British Asian population still viewed Talvin Singh’s capture of the Mercury Prize in October 1999 as the logical culmination of British Asians’ increasing presence and recognition in the mainstream media at that time. In 1997, the British government National Census office estimated that 3.5% of British citizens were of South Asian origin.\(^{161}\) The mainstream release of films such as *My Beautiful Launderette* and *Bhaji on the Beach* and television shows such as *Goodness Gracious Me* had already heightened awareness of British Asian contributions to mainstream British culture, and British Asians were increasingly visible outside British Asian communities. Imran Khan had attracted considerable publicity for his new magazine, *Second Generation*, a stylish publication that addressed the immigrant experience. The mid to late 1990s also witnessed the operation of several British Asian run record labels, including the labels Multitone, Nation, Nachural, and Outcaste. For the first time, the children of Asian immigrants were departing from the paths that their parents had taken in more traditional and “safe” careers and pursuing successful careers in fields including media and entertainment.\(^{162}\)

**A dubious honor**

Even if British Asians were recognized to have made these strides within the media, some people still found it difficult to accept that a British Asian had won the most prestigious music prize in Britain. Sawhney commented what it meant that he “still [could not] be regarded as part of the

\(^{160}\)Ibid.


\(^{162}\)Ibid.
mainstream” because the industry gatekeepers would not let somebody Asian through:

It’s almost like it’s impossible for an Asian artist to break through to the level where you could walk into a hairdresser’s and mention [the artist’s] name and everybody would know them... It’s a shame. Where’s the support for Asian artists? There isn’t any. There’s no chance to get to that level.163

This opinion and others like it were supported by at least some events occurring immediately after Singh’s prize. Some critics sneered that Singh had only been nominated as a “token Asian artist,” instead of on his own artistic merits. Singh immediately responded to these accusations to defend his achievement: “It wasn’t that the judges chose just one Asian album, like it was a token gesture, because Black Star Liner were on there too. The nominations were more random this year, a more diverse collection of albums.”164 Singh found praise that referenced his ethnicity just as problematic because it implied his musicianship had not deserved the award:

When people say ‘Wow, the first Asian to win the award’, I just think it’s a bit condescending. Sure, if someone wants to regard me as a representative of something, I’ll be it, but that is not why I do it... Mercury is not about rewarding the Asian Underground but a reward for a good album.165

In winning the award, Singh was caught in a double bind that on the one hand forced him to defend himself against barbs of tokenism by distancing himself from his Asianness; on the other hand, nobody could deny that OK’s innovative incorporation and reworking of South Asian music were what had earned the Mercury Prize in the first place.

As an award winner, Singh was not the only person called upon to defend his award; the competence of the Mercury Prize judges was also

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163 Burrell, "Invisible Superstars."
questioned during this backlash. An unnamed Mercury Prize judge, a critic, took the opportunity to defend the judges’ committee from accusations that they had chosen Singh’s album for political rather than artistic reasons:

The ultimate criterion is that an artist has to have produced the best album project which 10 judges would be proud to declare ‘this is the best album last year…’ Now that’s why, say, Fatboy Slim or the Stereophonics could never have won – their albums are just a great collection of singles. Talvin Singh’s record works as a movement in the classical sense. The composers on the panel, for instance, admired it for that reason. They want to know how well the overall concept is expressed and well it sustains. They talk about note and key changes.  

As the critic corrects the common misunderstanding that the Mercury Prize is given to the best music produced in Britain during a given year (as opposed to the best album), he attempts to explain Singh’s award in the context of its ability to satisfy the most elite criteria of judging music—namely those criteria associated with the western classical tradition, such as a sense of large-scale coherence. While western classical composers often strive to achieve large-scale coherence in their own works, most popular artists do not. Mentioning this criterion in the context of judging a popular music album is odd until one considers that the judges were defending their choosing Singh over other critically praised artists who had been passed over for even a Mercury Prize nomination—specifically, Fatboy Slim, who had earned considerable praise from music critics.

Two years later, Singh’s award seemed already to have been written outside the history of British popular music that the Mercury Prize winners construct each year, according to Frith. Alexis Petrides of The Guardian recounted how Mercury Prize judges’ “outré” and overly “trendy” decisions in the most recent years had for many people diminished the prize’s

166 Ibid.
credibility as a judgment of excellence. Cited earlier to point to the Mercury Prize judges’ aversion to more commercially-oriented music, I draw attention to this quotation from 2002 once again to emphasize Talvin Singh’s rapid fall from grace:

British pop awards have a terrible image problem... [M]illions watch hoping to see something go wrong. The Mercury Prize... has never quite recovered from some dubious late 1990s decisions. In 1998, Roni Size’s drum and bass album *New Forms* beat Radiohead’s *OK Computer*; in 1999, Talvin Singh’s tepid *OK* won in a patronising concession to ‘new Asian cool’. These promoted the notion of Mercury judges as stuffy critics playing at being trendy, attempting to jump on bandwagons that had long left town. However, recent winners Badly Drawn Boy and PJ Harvey have been applauded: deserving, leftfield, but not too outré to frighten off the sponsors.

By now, the general public seemed to accept that Singh had won for non-musical reasons. Rajan Datar, a critic at *Guardian*, summed up the problem shortly afterwards:

In an open field, it [Talvin Singh’s *OK*] deserved to get the Mercury Prize as much as any of its rivals. But the suspicion will inevitably linger that this was a token nod to the contribution made by British Asians to contemporary culture. After all, last year two Asian acts [Asian Dub Foundation and Cornershop] were nominated for the Mercury as well. Surely a liberally minded arts panel would feel honour-bound to give it to someone like Singh? A pat on the head, a ‘well done, mate, now Asians have had their lot, we can forget about them and go for a good old-fashioned rock band next year.’ Almost like a prominent Asian being given a peerage to satisfy critics who complain about a lack of minority representation at Parliament.

Talvin Singh’s prize in 1999 negated the possibility that another British Asian act could win the following year. Sawhney, whose album *Beyond Skin* failed to get nominated in 1999, had his record release date delayed so he could qualify

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167 Cf. p. 165.
for the following year’s award. *Beyond Skin* had earned considerable praise; *Elle* magazine in Britain had named it the best album of the year, and while a critic from the widely read music weekly *New Musical Express* wrestled with how to acknowledge Sawhney’s ethnicity and offer him praise at the same time, in the end he described Sawhney’s album in glowing terms:

> Ultimately, of course, the only records worth listening to are those which transcend fleeting generic definitions. And ‘Beyond Skin’ is just such a record. Asian, in the sense of Sawhney’s heritage, upbringing, cultural references and identity. But what makes ‘Beyond Skin’ so excellent is Sawhney’s refusal to be chained to unenlightened expectations of what an ‘Asian’ record should sound like... It’s beyond stereotype, and careening close to sublime.\(^\text{170}\)

Even after having received such praise, Sawhney rightly suspected that he would never win the Mercury Prize after Talvin Singh had won it.

Sawhney was understandably frustrated that his music was considered to be even remotely similar to Singh’s, and to other British Asian Mercury Prize nominees:

> I’m nothing like fucking Talvin Singh, but I do happen to have the same skin colour... If a white band had won, no one would think twice about it... What Talvin does is very different from what I do; and Asian Dub Foundation, Cornershop, and all these Asian bands are completely different from each other.\(^\text{171}\)

Between 1998 and 1999, Asian Dub Foundation, Cornershop, Talvin Singh, and Black Star Liner had complained many times about their being conflated into a singular British Asian musical genre. In 2000, a year after Talvin Singh’s album *OK* had won the most prestigious music prize in Britain, nobody could remember why Singh had won the Mercury Prize over other British nominees, much less Black Star Liner. As Sawhney’s last comment suggests, Singh’s

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Mercury Prize had done very little if anything to challenge that British Asian musicians were all performing interchangeable, if not identical, music.

**The BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music**

Intended to recognize British musicians, the Mercury Prize had over the last decade defined itself as the “independent” and thus more desirable prize, in distinction to the more commercial and industry-oriented Brit awards, organized by the British Phonographic Industry. After the BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music were given for the first time in January 2002, the Mercury Prize’s identity as the most prestigious prize for *British* musicians was even more sharply defined. Sponsored by both the BBC and WOMEX—the World Music Expo, a yearly world music industrial fair in Western Europe—the BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music interweave the state-sponsored BBC’s public educational mission with WOMEX’s emphasis on the marketing and sales of musicians who can be promoted through the world music category. As a giant radio and television broadcasting corporation, the BBC reaches millions of homes in Britain; with funding from the British government, the BBC’s numerous channels and stations are privileged in their capacity to influence popular opinion. Respected throughout the world on the basis of its well-researched news reports and innovative programming, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) commands considerable authority; in all probability, their definitions of world music and of world musicians command the same authority.

The idea for the World Music Awards developed from an annual poll conducted by *Folk Roots* magazine, which “collate[s] the views of about 100 critics, broadcasters and musicians to determine the top releases of the year.” As a partner, and of course, a significant media platform, BBC Radio 3
initiated its partnership with *Folk Roots* to further highlight world music artists, and to reinforce the station’s existing efforts under its latest controller, Roger Wright, to change its elitist image. Wright has attempted to attract a younger, different listenership to Radio 3 with new programs, of which some of the most prominent are world music-oriented. Wright situates these changes below:

> We’ve always had world music on Radio 3, or course; we just used to call it ethnomusicology... This has never been a classical music network. It’s always been about live music and arts. We have a duty to reflect the wider musical agenda, because that’s where the world is.173

The World Music Awards reaffirm the BBC’s commitment to world music but also—at least in their originators’ minds—serves a more public mission. Lucy Duran, currently a lecturer in music at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies and a member of the Radio 3 World Music Awards jury, views the awards as both an educational tool and publicity outlet for the good of world music: “For people struggling [to make sense of] world music, it’s a guide... Awards are extremely helpful: they focus on achievement and give the press something to get their hooks into.”174 Roger Wright has tried to distinguish the World Music Awards and its ceremony from other existing

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172Once criticized as a “forbidding ivory tower” offering “buttock-clenchingly arcane” programming, the BBC has undertaken a new direction under Roger Wright, who was appointed in December 1998; he was previously the Head of BBC Classical Music. See Peter Culshaw, “The Phat Controller: The Introduction of World Music and Jazz to the Schedules of Radio 3 Has Startled Some Listeners -- and Delighted Others. Station Boss Roger Wright Talks to Peter Culshaw.,” *The Daily Telegraph*, March 22, 2003, 6.


ceremonies—particularly those with close ties to the commercial music industry—in claiming that the World Music Awards ceremony is “not really an awards ceremony at all, ...[but] a celebration of talent. It’s not really a competition in the sense that it has winners and losers.”

Wright’s statement however denies the fact that winners are chosen from nominees, and that winning a Radio 3 Award winner usually results in increased publicity and sales—perhaps even more valuable than the award itself.

Radio 3 Awards are for the most part grouped into regional categories, plus assorted categories that in recent years have also included “critics choice,” “listeners choice,” “club global,” “innovation,” and “newcomer.” Katharina Lobeck of the BBC has observed the contradictions created by such categories:

Rather than identifying winners in specific genres, the scheme has found a more suitable solution in choosing some geographical demarcations. Thus, Okinawan music occupies the same pitch as Indian classical while Cuban timba competes with Canadian trad for sharing continental ground rather than musical language... So far, spillovers are safely caught by the ‘boundary crossing’ category, which will no doubt expand as margins dissolve within all realms of music.

The tension between cultural affiliations and geographical locations results in strange pairings, such as the Cuban and Canadian music in the “Americas” category. Diasporic artists also contradict a straightforward correlation between location and a music’s cultural affiliations; British Asian artists are thus nominated in those categories such as “club global,” “boundary crossing,” “innovation,” and “newcomer.” These categories do accommodate “spillovers,” as Lobeck points out; more specifically, they deter the possibility

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that British Asian artists could be nominated to represent music of the British Isles in the “Europe” category.

The involvement of WOMEX explicitly situates the BBC Radio 3 Awards within the world music industry. As a mostly Western European operation, it considers national and ethnic identities differently than does the BBC. While WOMEX’s influence on the BBC Radio 3 Awards is far from explicit, a closer look at the actual process through which WOMEX contributes to the Awards suggests its influence on the nominees chosen, and the resulting winners. Delegates to WOMEX choose the majority of nominees drawn from the regional categories. These delegates include writers, musicians, recording industry executives and entrepreneurs; anybody who pays a fee to register and attend the conference is eligible to nominate artists. WOMEX includes a showcase (whose performers comprise the nominees,) a “conference,” and a trade fair.\(^{177}\) Many outside critics perceive the delegates’ nominations (and consequently the regional music category nominations as well) as somewhat arbitrary, mostly because of the “WOMEX effect,” where “artists who have been quiet all year can secure nomination by playing one good concert at WOMEX.”\(^{178}\)

A selected number of BBC World Music Awards nominations derive from other sources. The “Critics Choice” award, for instance, is drawn from

\(^{177}\) It has been based in Germany every other year since 1994, and in alternate years, has taken place in Western Europe. Past sites have included Berlin (1994), Brussels (1995), Marseilles (1997), Stockholm (1998), Berlin (1999, 2000), Rotterdam (2001), Essen (2002), and Seville (2003). WOMEX, About WOMEX: Facts & Dates (WOMEX, 2004 [cited August 18, 2004]); available from http://www.womex.com/special/realwomex/framwom20.html. The substantial price of registration in addition to the location, discourage the participation of most independent attendees, as well as those who live outside Europe; thus the majority of attendees (i.e. “delegates”) are Western European media and industry representatives. Registration fees for the 2004 meeting in Essen, Germany ranged from €220-150; individuals are charged the most, and media and industry representatives are charged the least. WOMEX, Registration Form (WOMEX, 2004 [cited August 18, 2004]); available from https://www.womex.com/womex/registerwomex/wr.cgi.

the *Folk Roots* magazine’s annual critics poll, the same poll that established the tradition of the awards. Also, the staff of the BBC World Service in respective regions submits one nomination in each regional category, at least in 2003. Lastly, Radio 3 listeners themselves via online ballet chose the Radio 3 Listeners Choice Awards in 2003 and 2004. An appointed jury of world music industry leaders in Europe chooses a shortlist of nominees from the respective categories.\(^{179}\) Four important criteria they consider in assembling the showcase participants include finding artists who represent “the broadest possible variety,” “new artists,” “guaranteed crowd pleasers,” and “established artists.”\(^{180}\) Andy Morgan, a jury member for 2003, offered the following insights based on what he had observed the previous year:

> You learn that merely competent musicianship is really common as muck, but real originality, honesty and passion are as rare as true love... [I]f you’ve got already a reputation, done some well seen gigs here and there, you’ll have a better chance. Sometimes you get unlucky because there’s so much cool competition from your part of the world (Brazilians, you just make too much good music!) or from groups with similar styles (what is this fado thing?) Funnily enough however, being just too famous and established is more dangerous than being totally obscure.\(^{181}\)

Morgan’s comments spell out the most significant criteria: a somewhat established professional career, and geographic novelty.

A subsequent selection process translates the WOMEX jury’s shortlist into distinct categories defined by region and other characteristics. A separate jury “of experts from Radio 3 and our partners” convenes to choose winners from the WOMEX shortlist in most categories, with the exception of the Critics

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\(^{180}\) Ibid.

\(^{181}\) Ibid.
and Audience’s Choice Awards. It is this final process that categorizes WOMEX’s nominees into discrete categories.

In 2002, Nitin Sawhney was nominated for the Innovation and Boundary Crossing Awards, and Susheela Raman was nominated for the Newcomer Awards, respectively; Sawhney won the Boundary Crossing category, and Raman won the Newcomer category, categories unassociated with a single geographic location, that is, a continent. In 2003, no British Asian artists were nominated. However, in 2004, Panjabi MC was nominated for the “Club Global” category—a newly created category that focuses on electronic dance music that integrates non-Western influences. Panjabi MC has been well established in Britain since the early 1990s as a British Bhangra producer and in recent years had attracted the attention of American hip-hop producers. Through this category, Panjabi MC’s music—until now associated with the British Asian community—was transformed into a far less specific genre; in rewarding the presence of different cultural influences, “Club Global” had little need to address the domestic cultural politics that produced it. The “Club Global” award removed Panjabi MC’s music from its explicitly British location and defined it instead as one of many examples of cross-culturally influenced dance club music being heard around the world. As a result, the Club Global category also disassociated Panjabi MC, the producer of this music, from his

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182 The BBC jury includes many names associated with the origins of the British world music industry: Ian Anderson, the editor of *Folk Roots*; Ben Mandelson, co-founder of GlobeStyle Records; Charlie Gillett, a BBC Radio host; Lucy Duran; Mark Ellingham, the publisher of the Rough Guides; and Simon Broughton, editor of *Songlines*, another world music magazine. It also includes some newer members: club DJ Rita Ray, BBC Classical Radio producer Verity Sharp, BBC World Service producer Juan Carlos Jaramillo, British/Rwandan DJ Eric Soul, and freelance world music writer/producer Jan Fairley.

183 More specifically, that attention relied more on his involvement with two immensely popular hip-hop songs, Missy Elliot’s “Get Ur Freak On,” recorded in 2001, and Jay-Z’s [sic] “Beware of the Boys,” recorded in 2003. Panjabi MC provided an extensive sample for “Get Ur Freak On” that lay the groundwork for Elliot’s song. “Beware of the Boys” was actually first recorded by Panjabi MC, who later commissioned Jay-Z to re-mix the song. The re-mix received substantial radio play, and most hip-hop audiences assumed it was a Jay-Z song.
identity as a British citizen. Although Panjabi MC had been born and raised in Coventry, England, the “Club Global” nomination and award constructed him as a citizen of “global” culture—outside Britain’s borders.

**World music as Apartheid**

While the Mercury Prize is categorically awarded to a British musician, the BBC Radio 3 Awards are awarded to international “world” musicians—musicians who may or may not be British citizens, but who are categorically not citizens of British culture. Thus, in receiving the Mercury Prize nomination for the album *Beyond Skin* and the BBC Radio 3 Awards for the later album *Prophesy*, Nitin Sawhney suffered a net loss in prestige, and a loss in British cultural identity. Sawhney’s rejection of national and ethnic identities in 1999 appealingly corresponded to Britain’s desire to cast itself and its citizens as cosmopolitan and multicultural. In 2002, however, his rejection transformed him into a world citizen. This transformation had the ironic effect of excluding Sawhney from British identity and thus marginalizing him through the very terms he had protested against. Presumably because many people no longer felt Sawhney identified with British culture, Nitin Sawhney’s comments during his appearance at the first annual BBC World Music Radio 3 Awards in January 2002 took many people by surprise and caused considerable controversy, as noted by Louise Jury from *The Independent*:

> The eclectic Asian musician Nitin Sawhney was last night honoured for crossing boundaries at the World Music Awards in London – and promptly criticised the prize for imposing barriers of its own... He added, however, that to turn down the prize would have been “patronising and arrogant”. 184

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Sawhney stirred particular controversy after suggesting backstage that the world music category created “apartheid in the record shops.” Sawhney explained the reasoning behind his criticism in a later interview:

[I]n record shops... you’ll see a lot of marginalized people in this section called world music... [Y]ou’ll see under India 5 records or under Egypt 3 records... And for me – what’s the difference between that and apartheid, I mean it’s the same principle. You ... have a world where, say 57% of the world is female or 52% is female or whatever and you kind of don’t feel that these things are represented.

Sawhney’s critical response to his award addresses the central issues of this chapter: ethnic minority artists’ inability to be considered outside their ethnic and racial identity, and their systematic exclusion from mainstream culture via the world music industry. Alluding to the abhorrent former practice of apartheid in South Africa in which a white minority ruled over a non-white majority, Sawhney compares, somewhat hyperbolically, the world music category’s marginalization of non-white artists to an oppressive political regime based on racist ideology. In his reference to apartheid, Sawhney concretely situates the everyday marginalization of non-white British citizens in the context of a practice that was universally condemned by countries outside South Africa.

Sawhney mentions women’s contradictory status as a marginalized population (a contradiction because their raw numbers in fact constitute a majority) to draw an analogy with the “minority” status of non-Western musicians, who produce the majority of the world’s music, but not the majority of recordings. When Sawhney states that one doesn’t “feel these

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185 The relative invisibility of many world music performers on recordings reflects a small but powerful group of “gatekeepers,” namely the four multinational corporations (based in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan) that dominate the music recording
things are represented,” he most likely refers to non-Western artists’ relative invisibility within the Western music market in general. As he mentions the artists whose recordings appear (besides his own) in the world music bin—particularly those artists who fall under the labels of India and Egypt—he implicitly distinguishes himself as a British citizen from these foreign-born artists, and highlights the fact that his legal citizenship lacks the power to distinguish him from being viewed to be as “foreign” as they are.

Conclusion: Post-Orientalizing Orientals

Talvin Singh’s Mercury Prize winning album OK focused on creating a global landscape, interweaving classical Indian music with modern electronica; the result was an album that failed to correspond in any obvious way to a pre-defined genre. Not surprisingly, the confusion as to which country Talvin Singh belonged—so characteristic of comments in the previous sections—also permeated the realm of his music; the fact that most of the articles cited earlier about Singh’s cosmopolitan lifestyle were written well over a year before he even won the prize almost encouraged some people to forget that he was actually British. After he won the Mercury Prize, Singh was forced to reestablish the legitimacy of his claim to British identity—and to a British prize. For example, immediately after the Mercury Prize awards ceremony, Talvin Singh rationalized why the Mercury Prize fit his music and in the process also restated why his music was British:

I can’t win any awards at the main Indian ceremonies, because I hold a British passport, and I wouldn’t really fit in with The Brit Awards, so this [Mercury Prize] is the most appropriate award for me to win.\textsuperscript{188}

His reasons in this case served to draw attention to his “proof”—his British passport, and his transcendence over conventional national boundaries.

However Singh has drawn attention to the fact that music produced by ethnic minorities is often more commonly expected to offer musical influences that can be traced to a specific location, usually an exotic location far away. Singh warned the press early on: “Don’t categorise us and don’t categorise my music. I don’t actually have such a big Asian following. People come to hear good music – not Asian music.”\textsuperscript{189} When asked directly to categorize his own music, Singh, instead responded with a culinary metaphor that critiqued the question asked:

[The potato]’s a universal food – fried, boiled, roasted, garnished with a variety of spices, accompanying any number of foods – potatoes fit in everywhere and everywhere… When you eat McDonald’s French fries anywhere in the world, you don’t ask, ‘where did this potato come from?’ A potato is a potato. People can’t ask, ‘Where is this music from?’ Music is music. I make potato music.\textsuperscript{190}

For Singh, the act of locating these influences in a particular foreign place has the effect of reducing the music into discrete, identifiable ethnic essences, which are assumed to emanate from the musicians’ ethnicity itself. In his humorous reference to ubiquitous McDonald’s French fries, Singh points out that people do not need to associate McDonald’s French fries with any particular physical location, ethnicity, or political identity—despite their being designated as “French.” More to the point, he has offered this comment about

\textsuperscript{188} Clerk, “Talvin Singh Wins Mercury Prize...” 4. Singh’s own preference for the Mercury Prize also infers his disdain for the commercially oriented music, less adventurous music that often dominates the Brit Awards.
\textsuperscript{189} Sherwood, “Sari, Sari Nights.”
his music: “I refuse to be pegged. I make Talvin Singh music.”\textsuperscript{191} In an American issue of the popular men’s lifestyle magazine, \textit{GQ}, Singh proclaimed, “They’re not going to put OK in the world-music section. They’ll put it where it can be seen. And the music is actually more ‘other’ than what’s put in the ‘others.’”\textsuperscript{192} Thus while Singh acknowledges that his music may in fact sound different than most mainstream artists because it incorporates international influences, he joins Nitin Sawhney in demanding that his transnational outlook be seen as part of mainstream culture—indeed, of any racial category, or any of the cultures that their recordings incorporate.

Sawhney and Singh’s demands to incorporate and highlight international influences and retain a domestic cultural identity makes more sense if considered alongside other “internationally influenced” musicians such as Paul Simon, Peter Gabriel, or Mickey Hart. Simon, Gabriel, and Hart’s music is usually explained as being motivated by their interest in other cultural traditions; their being interested in other traditions, however, never impinges upon people’s recognition of their identities as American and British cultural citizens. Given that British identity was shifting so rapidly during this time, British Asian artists such as Singh and Sawhney—already compromised in their claims to British identity—were particularly vulnerable to being called upon to alternately demonstrate their Britishness and/or to translate their Indianness for a British audience.

While Singh and Sawhney both critiqued the racism within British culture that marginalized them, eventually even that critique was ironically incorporated into an essential component of their identity as “global Indians.” Timothy Brennan notes that the “cosmopolitan celebrity” (akin to the “global

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.

Indian,” and mentioned in particular relation to the Indian author Salman Rushdie) performs the seemingly contradictory roles of “the freewheeling oppositional intellectual and the slightly unwilling cultural spokesperson, dispensing wisdoms for the embattled mother country from the relative comfort of the diaspora.” Singh and Sawhney do not provide “wisdoms for the embattled mother country” of India as much as they translate and transmit India’s “wisdoms” to Britain itself. Singh and Sawhney are considered “oppositional” because of their vocal critiques of British culture and racism; furthermore, their readiness to offer their unique perspective as British Asians has helped establish their authority as legitimate critics of British society because the public sometimes assumes that their being British Asian gives them a valuable outside perspective, that is, a perspective outside English culture. Their allusions to Indian culture—in conjunction with their race—suggest their authority to represent the Indian state (and more generally, South Asia as a whole.) In short, musicians such as Sawhney and Singh are called upon to provide wisdom from rather than for “the embattled mother country.”

It was during this era that Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things emerged as “the latest (post-) Orientalist blockbuster – the latest Westernised novel of the East.” The novel depicts the unraveling of a family and community amidst the turbulent politics of 1960s Kerala, interspersed with vivid descriptions of the lush, tropical beauty of that southern Indian state. One could admire Roy’s attention to flora and fauna without considering her inventory of that landscape as drawing its lineage from British imperial literature that depicts India as an exotic, sensuous paradise. To claim the

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193 Huggan, The Post-Colonial Exotic, 70.
194 Ibid., 67.
existence of a “(post-) Orientalist” era is to imply that the public is familiar with Edward Said’s critique and agrees that Orientalism was indeed a bad thing while it lasted; moreover, a “(post-) Orientalist” era implies that Orientalism has been overcome—for there exists a peculiar logic that if one has heard of Orientalism, then one cannot be accused of perpetuating it. This logic is invoked in a feature on Talvin Singh from the American fashion magazine, Gentlemen’s Quarterly, which mentions Said’s book explicitly:

On a side table in Singh’s studio... sits a dog-eared copy of Edward Said’s Orientalism... Conjuring the East as exotic, sensual, mysterious, Said argues, is a means of controlling and marginalizing those cultures. Singh says... [that] his life and work, in many ways, reflect the relationship between East and West that Said describes. 195

By mentioning the book, the author establishes both Singh’s erudition as well as his own; in contrast to Garratt’s earlier reference to an unread copy of Roy’s The God of Small Things, this copy of Said’s Orientalism is “dog-eared” and has been devotedly read—by someone. Singh soon admits he hasn’t actually finished the book; still he shares with the interviewer why he feels Said’s ideas are relevant to his own life. Said’s landmark study focused on the forms of discourse through which the West constructs itself and its Eastern “Other.” Those monumental and mutually exclusive constructions of the East and the West affected him directly:

As a boy running the streets of East London, Singh was into hip-hop, but at home he was listening to classical Indian music... Caught between and inside two societies, he says that when he arrived in India it didn’t matter how well he played the tabla: He was still treated as an outsider. [Singh comments:] “In Britain, I’m considered Indian, and in India I’m considered British. I’m almost fucking white there.” 196

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196 Ibid.
As he narrates his apparent inability to be accepted in either Britain or India, he implicitly claims that he has no home. In this quotation, Singh complains that neither Indian nor British culture has ever accepted him, and therefore, his cosmopolitan lifestyle is less a choice than it is an imposition forced upon him by external circumstances. Even if his cosmopolitan lifestyle is forced upon him as a result of circumstance, Singh’s comments in this context still mark him as a “global Indian” who cannot be clearly associated with any concrete homeland. His apparent distance from both British and Indian culture provides him with the cultural authority to speak as an outsider, and a traveler, and a “global Indian”; Singh’s perceived value as a “cosmopolitan celebrity” in fact requires that the “global Indian” maintain this problematic relationship with a the idea of homeland. The sense of marginality associated with the “global Indian” is closely related to the sense of marginality associated with playing the role of a “cultural bridge,” as discussed in Chapter 1. 197

In making music that blurred conventional national borders, Sawhney and Singh took a risk when they framed themselves as cosmopolitan British musicians of Indian heritage. For a brief time, they were able to navigate historical barriers against their participation within British culture to the extent that they were actively incorporated within a narrative that cast them as the poster children of a new British era. After that time passed, they retained their identity cosmopolitan musicians, but their audiences soon recovered their memory of these musicians’ historical inability to conform to narrowly defined, white preconceptions of British culture. Although these

British Asian musicians were for a brief period deemed the future of British popular music, they eventually reverted into Indian-looking musicians—whose transnational, cosmopolitan viewpoints appeared for some to compromise their allegiance to British culture.

In the following chapter, I examine the limits of British Asian identity in another context, namely its relationship to British Bangladeshi communities in East London. The rise of Asian Chic incorporated many British Asians, but for the most part, rarely extended to members of the British Bangladeshi communities in East London. As shown in this chapter, British Asian musicians encountered considerable resistance to their being accepted as members of British culture. Those British Bangladeshi communities who were deemed ineligible to participate within the category of British Asian culture were thus doubly excluded—for they were also excluded from participating within British culture. In the summer of 1999, Asian Chic and British Bangladeshis confronted one another in East London within simultaneous celebrations. In order to negotiate the gulf between these discrepant identities, both of these celebrations’ organizers solicited the participation of British Asian popular musicians. The next chapter explores the terms of that confrontation, and the role of music within it.