Rekha Malhotra
India/UK: DJ, producer, educator, creator of Basement Bhangra

Object: Record Gur Nal Ishq Mitha by Bally Sagoo featuring Malkit Singh

Experiencing the sounds on that recording was a life-changing and a career-igniting moment.

My parents were born pre-Partition in what is now Pakistan and grew up in New Delhi, India. They moved from India to London, where I was born. I was just shy of five when we arrived in the United States, first living in Bushwick, which makes me an original hipster. Drawn to the emerging Indian community, we moved to Flushing, Queens, and then to Long Island. I am now based and have a lot of connections in Queens, including graduating from Queens College.

Growing up in the 1980s in the predominantly African-American suburban neighborhood of Westbury, I was fortunate to experience the birth of hip hop. When I was 15, my mom visited family in London and brought me back a cassette tape by the Punjabi singer Malkit Singh. A few years later I heard that same voice on a remix track spliced with different hip-hop and reggae elements by Birmingham, UK-based DJ/producer Bally Sagoo. It blew my mind and sparked me to find a way to engage with the music.

In the early 1990s, several DJ crews, including my cousins and I, formed in the South Asian community. The core of our sound was music sung in Punjabi, but produced with a bhangra and contemporary Jamaican dancehall and hip hop aesthetic that would come to be known as UK Bhangra. It synthesized genres I loved but that were not embraced by others in the emerging South Asian club scene. They were read as too black and too low class. This resistance prompted me to start the monthly Basement Bhangra dance night in 1997.

I devoted my love of hip hop and bhangra music to create a dance space infused with activism and politics. This 20-year run included lecturing about the music, recording an album, touring, and producing remixes.

Bio:
DJ Rekha Malhotra pioneered the merger of bhangra and Bollywood sounds with contemporary electronic dance music. She is the founder of Basement Bhangra™, Bollywood Disco, and co-founder of Mutiny Club nights. Dubbed “Ambassador of Bhangra” by The New York Times, she has done remixes for artists that range from Meredith Monk to Priyanka Chopra. Her debut album is DJ Rekha Presents Basement Bhangra. In 2009, she was inducted into the NYC Peoples’ Hall of Fame. She has curated events for Celebrate Brooklyn and Central Park SummerStage, and has performed at the White House for President Obama and internationally. DJ Rekha was a Grand Marshall of the 9th Annual NYC Dance Parade in 2015. In January 2017, she was one of the official DJs for the historic Women’s March on Washington. You can hear her weekly podcast, “Bhangra and Beyond,” at btrtoday.com/listen/bhangraandbeyond