

Right here, right on

Asian Dub Foundation's follow-up to their Mercury-nominated album displays their continued contempt for commercialism, finds Rajan Datar

Friday 17 March 2000

The Guardian

Not for the first time in their lives, the members of Asian Dub Foundation find themselves trying to resist being typecast. This time it's not tired depictions of the band as a bunch of banging bhangra boys from the East End of London or as self-appointed guardians of "the community". This time, the band complain, the media want to portray them as humourless, militant, sabre-rattling rebels and one of the prime culprits, they reckon, is the very magazine that helped engineer ADF's crucial crossover to a mainly white, youth audience.

"The NME wanted us to do a photoshoot where we dressed up as Sandinistas," says samples and turntables artist Pandit G, scornfully. "Not as Sandinistas now - with suits, discussing the policies of Nafta [North American Free Trade Association] reforms - but as Sandinistas then - with guns - because that's what the NME thinks radicalism is all about."

On the eve of the release of their follow-up to the Mercury-nominated Rafi's Revenge, Dr Das and Pandit G, the two founder members of five-piece ADF, are ensconced in their Community Music headquarters in Southwark, and they are in a typically forthright mood. "The rock press are obsessed with celebrity and the cult of the talented individual," Pandit G (aka John Ashok Pandit) continues. "If, like us, you start saying that anyone with the right opportunity can do this, it's scary for them."

The new album, with a typical disregard for commercialism, is entitled Community Music, and has the traits of its predecessor. Chattering jungle rhythms collide with melodic dub-bass grooves and crashing power-guitar chords. On top are cleverly cut-up samples, Indian scales and the insistent youthful rap of frontman Deedar. It's a unique formula that in the last two years has gained them worldwide recognition.

Rafi's Revenge exploded onto the scene in 1998. Predictably, with Tjinder Singh's Cornershop also short-listed for the Mercury, followed by Talvin Singh's triumph the year after, ADF were lumped in as part of the newly discovered "Asian Cool" set. It was lazy pigeon-holing, not least because the group had been sweating out an underground reputation on the live circuit for years before that.

With roaring anthems such as Naxalite and

Free Satpal Ram (a man they say was wrongly convicted for murder in 1983), the band found itself with patrons like Irvine Welsh, the Beastie Boys and Bobby Gillespie of Primal Scream, who memorably described them as "the best live act in Britain". Signed by London Records, they were launched on a series of tours during which their indefatigable enthusiasm mutated into exuberant confidence.

Community Music is less immediate than their previous album and better for it. There is more emphasis on harmony and arrangement and some of the lyrical content is less didactic. Tracks like Crash and New Way, New Life weave classical Indian vibes into the junglist fabric. Others, such as Riddim I Like (featuring a sample of poet Benjamin Zephaniah) and Truth Hides, display an intensity through dub instrumental workouts that are both deft and original.

ADF are unphased by the tinsel of the music business and see their roles as assisting the progress of others. Through their educational project, Adfed, and their work with Community Music, the organisation they helped establish, Das and Pandit G want to nurture new talent. Indeed Das met his precocious frontman Deedar when he was a music tutor and the rapper was a student. Recently another of their protégés, the band Invasian, have been receiving rave reviews and won themselves a place on the NME's

prestigious new bands tour.

Pandit G accepts that the community workshop background "is not sexy" in conventional terms. But that is not the point. "Community Music has led the field in terms of educational and musical policy and spawned many other organisations. It's provided practical support and covers both commercial and experimental music." There is even a song on the album, Collective Mode, dedicated to this ethos.

Could ADF be at the vanguard of a return to agitprop culture? The spirit of the GLC revived, everyone in collectives, Red Wedge tours and protest marches? They have been asked to do a benefit for Ken Livingstone to aid his mayoral bid alongside the likes of Fatboy Slim. It all fits. But Das and Pandit dismiss this analysis. "We are not sure about Ken, the 'man of the people'," Pandit says, sardonically. "The problem is seeing politics disintegrate into an American-style personality contest. But if 'High Street Ken' wants to put his money where his mouth is and talk to us about funding, yeah, sure we will listen."

To their credit, ADF are happy to take risks. They are always keen to play to audiences who may have not been exposed to anything quite like them before. Their recent experience supporting Rage Against the Machine around Europe was not a total success, but they see tangible benefits flowing from it. Dr Das informs Pandit that

recently 10 Rage fans contacted them to find out more about the band and also one of their heroes, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the great Pakistani singer. "There you go" Pandit beams. "That's education in its widest form - brilliant!"

The next couple of years promises the usual round of touring and consciousness-raising for the band. Tomorrow they are staging a benefit at London's Scala to raise awareness of the plight of the imprisoned Zoorah Shah, another Asian whom they say killed in self-defence.

Asian Dub Foundation are one of the least ego-driven bands on the music scene, and so far they have only skimmed the surface of their potential global fanbase. It would be good to see them adopt a modicum of the pop sensibility of established yet thoughtful acts like U2, who have simultaneously increased the profile of the Irish scene and produced some cracking commercial hits. But maybe that's just misplaced wishful thinking.

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