

Asif Bhatti

Asif Bhatti was born in the Punjab, Pakistan's largest province. His family had no history in musical expertise and the talented young singer had to make his own way against severe opposition from both within and outside his family circle. He was amply rewarded for his efforts by gaining critical acclaim from traditionalist musicians from families of long-standing repute. Although an outsider to these close-knit and exclusive musical clans, Asif's accomplishments nevertheless forced them to recognise his indisputable command over diverse techniques: instrumental, vocal and composition. Asif learned his skills at Radio Lahore under the tuition of renowned masters *Ustad Niyaz Hussain Shami*, *Ustad G. A. Farooq*, *Ustad Salamat Ali Khan* and *Ustad Allah Rakha*. During this time he won many student singing competitions and performed live in theatres all over the country.

Between 1974 and 1976, Asif was responsible for bringing Pakistani *ghazzal* (semi-classical) and folk music live to Arab audiences of North Africa and far afield through national TV and Radio. Uniquely, he was invited into the elite Nadi al-Aruba club to play before the Libyan membership on a regular basis. From there, Asif went to the UK where he has been living since 1976.

In 1977 he sang at the Queen's Silver Jubilee Celebrations at the Wembley Conference Centre, winning the EMI Gold Disc Award for the Eurovision Asian Song Contest, followed by first prizes in subsequent contests in 1982 and 1985. By this time Asif had also sung for the BBC and established himself as the 'Voice of Pakistan' in the UK.

After a period away from public view, Asif recently staged a come-back appearing in a line up with *Sir Cliff Richard*, then with international guitarist *Jason Carter* in the International Sacred Voices Festival in London. Not only does Asif sing a repertoire of traditional songs from folk and semi-classical styles, but he has also composed over three hundred of his own melodies in *ghazzal*, folk and 'pop'. Currently Asif devotes his time to the *Noor Jehan Centre* in London where he performs in concerts, networks with international musicians, promotes Pakistani music before multi-cultural audiences and trains others in tabla, harmonium, vocal and composition.

“Vanjaara”: Folk songs from the Pakistani Punjab

The Punjab, divided in 1947 by partition into the Indian (Eastern) Punjab and the Pakistani (Western) Punjab, was in reality divided into two totally distinct cultures centuries earlier. The Sikh-dominated Indian Punjab is renowned for its *bhangra* music, with its mesmerising, swinging, syncopated beat. Less familiar to Western ears is the folk music of the Pakistani Punjab, where an entirely different, but equally distinctive style has evolved over the years.

The largest of Pakistan's four provinces, both in terms of population and territory, the Punjab is home to the nation's biggest ethnic and linguistic group, and can justly claim to be the heart of Pakistan. Unlike Indian Punjabi music, the folk songs of the Pakistani Punjab have been heavily influenced by Islamic poets and singers. Sufi mystics, who migrated from Central Asia over a millennium ago, and settled in the Punjab as Islamic missionaries, spent their lives absorbing local culture and then reinterpreting it. Noticing the importance of poetry and music to the Punjabi people, poets such as Hazrat Syed Waris Shah adapted local folk tales like “Heer-Raanja” (a parallel to Romeo and Juliet), and re-told them in song, as spiritual parables. The melody he associated with “Heer” (Juliet) has become such an integral part of the culture that it is now used routinely for any number of different lyrics or stories, and is instantly recognisable to all. Another such “universal” melody is “Mirza-Sahiban”, used in this recording in the first song, “Pani Pharan Noon Chaliya.”

The poetry used in Pakistani Punjabi folk songs is always dense and beautiful, usually with a romantic surface meaning, and a deeper, spiritual meaning for those who have ears to hear. It rejoices in the paradoxical juxtaposition of ideas and is rich in metaphor and analogy.

When celebrating successes and victories the music is often loud, percussive, fast and exciting, whereas deeper songs are slower and more meditative, allowing listeners to ponder the lyrics. The music is also known for its greater rhythmic variation than is usually found in the music of the Indian Punjab. Central to this style are the *dholak* (a double-headed hand drum, used in addition to the ubiquitous tabla), and the flute, forever associated in the culture with *Raanja* (Romeo), who used to play flute when wooing his beloved *Heer* (Juliet). Indeed, so romantic is the sound of the flute considered to be, that even today in the remoter areas its use is prohibited after sunset! Traditionally, the singer would have performed in villages and the surrounding countryside without a microphone, and would have had to project his voice over great distances, without losing the sweetness of vocal tone. This has given rise to a particularly intense vocal style, perhaps best exemplified in the *doha*, a slow, high-pitched improvisation in free rhythm, with which the vocalist introduces some of the songs.

All of the songs in this recording follow more or less the standard pattern for Punjabi folk songs, with minor variations, as follows:

(Optional *doha*, slow introduction)

Instrumental 1

Chorus

Instrumental 2

Stanza 1 (chorus)

Instrumental 1

Stanza 2 (chorus)

Instrumental 2

Stanza 3 (chorus)

Each stanza incorporates all or part of the chorus at the end, with a “seamless” join

(Text written by Zafar Pervez, Noor Jehan Centre, London.)

The songs:

In Pakistan, “folk songs” refer to village life, to the natural world, and of course, to romance. Boys and girls cannot meet openly, but there are ways of meeting! The romantic communication has to be hidden, expressed indirectly through symbols and poetic devices. These 13 songs are from this tradition, telling the story of a young man in love with a beautiful young girl, in typically colourful language...

In a Punjabi village, as the pretty young girls go to the well together to fetch water, they giggle and play and dance. Baba, a young man, follows on behind, one girl in particular catches his eye. He is immediately captivated, he sings:

1. **Pani pharan noon chaliya**

“Beware, beauty and youth live only for a few days, think about good works and protect yourself from evil. The pigeons are dancing, but they don’t realise the cat can come any time! The game of love is difficult, and no-one ever wins! In this world, lovers are always crucified...”

2. **Dil de verray vich nach kuriyey**

Young girl, Taba, please dance on the veranda of my heart, and turn my dream into reality. Even crystal, when it sees your sparkling eyes, feels unworthy. Every boy in the village is crazy for you! Oh Taba, protect yourself from the world, dance on the veranda of my heart, and turn my dream into reality..."

The girls just laugh and continue on their way. Baba is left unsure of her response. Aware of the possible consequences if the rest of the village find out about his advances (inter-family feuding, or even death), he is in emotional turmoil, he sings to himself:

3. **Ishq di baazi jittan naalon**

"Better to lose this game of romance, than to win and face the consequences... no, better to die than run away from the battlefield of love!"

Bemoaning his predicament, he rages against the traditions, which seem to restrict his freedom, and prevent him from fulfilling his heart's desire:

4. **Aal dwaley ghup haneyra**

"All around is thick darkness, I'm alone here, living among a thousand snakes... but I still dare to call a wolf a wolf! Oh, God, *my* name is Baba not Moses - how could *I* ever see your face (i.e. I am no saint, so I can't help complaining about these things!)"

Continuing his bitter musings, he sings:

5. **Asee ki kerna ay pyar**

"What's the point of loving someone, when this world is incurably diseased? This world is cursed by God from the beginning! Here people change like the weather - and how can you trust the weather?! Here promises of love are a lie, and deception is their only business - these are the incurable diseases of the world. I have received enough wounds from my rivals - I accept my defeat, because this world is incurably diseased.

Seeing that the other girls come to the well daily, but his beloved is no longer among them, he addresses his complaint to Taba in her absence:

6. **Apnay seyr di vail kerayi**

"I have offered up my life, and gladly crucified my soul for you, but while I was hanging on the cross, you didn't offer me even a sip of water, even though I have shed a river of blood for you! All over the world I have mentioned your name - what more could I have done?! Do you still doubt my love, even though I have given my *all* for you?"

Exhausted he falls into a fitful sleep, dreaming that she is seeking him, searching for her beloved. He can almost hear her singing to him...

7. **Kidhray na paandiyā desan**

“Oh dear stranger - I cannot find you anywhere - yet the crow on the wall foretells your coming! (*a local belief*). I am begging the desert storm to hasten your arrival. When I remember you, I cry, when I think of you, I laugh. Morning and evening I await you - and even for my whole life, if you wish! Everyone else is with her lover - I also want to be with mine!”

Believing his dream, he responds joyfully:

8. **Teyrey laee hameysh nain khulay**

“For you the doors of my eyes are always open - Taba, you don’t know how much I love you! You are my very soul, if you are taken away from me, there will be no more use for this body! Either burn it, or bury it!”

Now convinced in his heart of her response, he concocts a plan to meet her. Buying a few ornaments and trinkets, he pretends to be a “vanjaara” (a travelling street salesman), calling out as he walks down her street...

9. **Mey vanjaara**

“I’m a *vanjaara* - I have pink, black and burgundy bangles, hairbands from Sialkot, and Multani bracelets - every colour and design! Any woman who wears them will look like a queen. When you wear these, all your shyness will disappear!”

But as soon as he nears her house, she catches sight of him and quickly retreats inside. His dream shattered, unable to accept that Taba doesn’t love him as he believes she should, he blames God for this perceived injustice.

10. **Shishey utthey thuran jamiya**

“The window panes are caked with dust, but the people keep on cleaning the mud-house walls! They rip out the pages of the book, but protect the book cover! God, today you must answer me - are you also God of those who have to work on Eid day (religious holiday)? Nobody even looks at those who wear dirty rags, while others waste their money decorating graves! Forget about everything! Let’s go back home, because people here are destroying everything...”

Trying to forget her, he finds that he cannot!

11. **Yaad kisey di mukdi kyu nain**

“Why can’t I forget her? Why does the pain of her absence remain? Why does the branch, which bears my favourite fruit, refuse to bend? When I close my eyes, the whole world disappears - but why do I still see your beautiful face? If this world hates me so much, why don’t they just kill me?!”

Trying again to romance her, he meets with more success, his prayers are answered, he gets what he always wanted - she agrees to be his wife. Too late, he finds out that the real Taba is not the one of his dreams!

12. **Oday naal jedon di yaari**

“Since she became my ‘friend’, even the walls of my house have become my enemies! So wounded am I, that even when I go to the village festivals, my heart has no joy! These days, even children question their parents - this world has become so selfish!

13. **Chal o manna hoon ethay reyna**

“Oh my heart, you thought you had won this game, but you lost! Let us admit our defeat, and leave this world! My life has become like a dry leaf in the river, which neither drowns nor reaches the bank.”

Asif Bhatti - *vocals, harmonium*

Fida Khan - *harmonium*

Sarvar Sabri - *tabla*

Kamal Sabri - *sarangi*

Baluji Shrivastav - *sitar*

Jan Hendricks - *bansuri*

Md. Ali Hussain - *dholak*

Recorded at **ARC Music Studios**, East Grinstead, UK

Engineering: **Pablo Cárcamo**

Mixing: **Pablo Cárcamo, Asif Bhatti, Kamal Sabri**

Mastering: **Diz Heller**

Cover design: **Alex Stokes**

Booklet notes: **Zafar Pervez, Asif Bhatti**

Translations: German: **Diz Heller**

French: **Jeannine Blanpain** <jeannine@frenchlink.demon.co.uk>

Spanish: **Gabriela Gadiot** <gabygadiot@btinternet.com>

Typesetting / layout: **Barbara Papadopoulos**