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Sunny Jain and Red Baraat at the World Music Festival Feeling that Indian rhythm



Photo credit: Amy Touchette

By Jonathan Gramling

Although he grew up in a household in Rochester, New York hearing his mother's religious music and his father's Bollywood cassettes and began playing the drums when he was 10 years old, Sunny Jain didn't study Indian music until he was in college and developed an instant love for the dhol, an Indian drum that serves as the joyous base for Northern Indian Punjabi music.

Jain has taken those traditional Bhangra rhythms and fused them with Brazilian music, funk, hip-hop, African music and other musical forms in the repertoire of Red Baraat, a drum and brass group that he will be bringing to the Wisconsin Union's World Music Festival September 17. "Bhangra music is really like the dance and festive music of Punjab, said Jain during a telephone interview with The Capital City Hues. "That grew up out of the harvest season when everyone would celebrate by singing and dancing and used dhols, the Indian drum that is synonymous with Punjabi music and Bhangra. While everyone was out in the fields, people were playing the dhol and dancing and singing. It's about the rhythm, the feel and the joyousness of the music." It was the joyousness of his own wedding that led to the formation of Red Baraat. A baraat is a dhol and brass band that leads a processional at the beginning of a Punjabi wedding. "Since all of my friends are musicians, I wanted all of my friends to bring me in," Jain said. "So I transcribed some traditional Punjabi music and pop music and I also wrote my own music and my own wedding. I gave it to my friends and said 'Can you bring me in?' I had 30 friends bringing me in and it was just a crazy party and good times. The word kind of spread throughout the south side Asian communities that

there was this marching band around. There was absolutely no intention of starting a band, but I started getting calls from a few close friends like 'Hey, I was at your wedding. You had that band. I would like to do it. My sister is getting married next year. Can you put something together and do it?' I thought sure, why not."

Four years later, Red Baraat has grown out of the wedding scene and has developed its own unique fusion sound that makes you just want to get up and dance. "The group slowly developed in terms of its sound and really depended on the players in the band," Jain said. "When I assembled them together, I said I had some ideas in mind of what I wanted it to sound like. Really what I was going for was a tribal sound. I just wanted drums and horns. I didn't want any amplified instruments. I didn't want guitars, keyboards or anything. Just for then, I just wanted to go with that tribal, gut sound, that root feeling of music. We started rehearsing along my originals and transcriptions of baraat music. The sound slowly developed out of everyone figuring out their role, figuring out exactly how they were going to play with certain instruments and really getting comfortable with the material. This nine-piece band I've been working with for the last 10 months or so, it was just a very random act, almost a godsend."

Red Baraat has cut its musical teeth playing some clubs and festivals in Brooklyn, New York and is now off on their first tour, playing at World Music Festivals in Chicago, Milwaukee and Madison. Jain feels that the term World Music Festival is somewhat of a misnomer because although it might conjure up thoughts of indigenous classical music and dance, it is anything but that.

"I think that concept of world music is becoming blurred as the years go on," Jain said. "World music nowadays should just be global sounds connected together. If you're running Brazilian music with Indian music and African music, it is all out of this world, out of America or Africa or India or Brazil, to just say that a certain type of music like juju music out of Nigeria is world music. I'm sure the Nigerians wouldn't think it is world music. They would just think of it as juju music and that's it. It all relates to how we want to approach looking at what type of music this is. It seems that a lot of world music has just taken on that genre name for the sake of promotion and putting it out there when in fact it's just music from another person's culture perhaps."

While Red Baraat has grown out of the Northern Indian Bhangra music tradition, it has grown out of its roots with its fusion with funk, jazz and many other musical genres to form its own unique sound that demands that your feet start dancing.