

(UK)

NITIN SAWHNEY IS A VERY BUSY MAN. I MET HIM at his house in South London on the morning his new album, "Human" (V2 Records), was released. The interview had been rearranged on a couple of occasions due to Nitin's hectic schedule. His last album, "Prophesy", propelled him into the consciousness of the general record-buying public with a nomination for the much-lauded Mercury Music Prize. Talk with Sawhney and it's obvious that, in spite of consistently delivering albums of amazing beauty and critical acclaim, he doesn't take much for granted. But he needn't worry; the album is a fitting chapter in a career that has produced six albums over the past 10 years.

In 1995, Sawhney released his second album, "Migration", to coincide with the Independence

Day celebrations for India and Pakistan. In 1997, he followed this with compositions for the 50th anniversary of the same celebrations, writing music for three plays performed around the U.K. His music tells stories, not in a didactic sense, but the information can be found should you explore.

Sawhney grew up in Rochester, Kent, during the '70s when racism in the U.K. was at near fever pitch. Rochester was an epicentre of militant right-wing groups, such as the National Front, who use violence as part of their manifesto for a white Britain. He was the only Asian boy in his school where, ironically, the music teacher was a NF supporter who positively discouraged Sawhney's love for music. Yet Sawhney shows no sign of bitterness. "People try to treat the symptoms of racism rather than

the cause, which ultimately is how we educate," he explained. "When we feed our insecurities into our children they become competitive rather than equipped with the tools of self-discipline. For instance, if they were taught martial arts, meditation and yoga in schools, I think we would have more well-balanced kids."

"In reality, nationality is meaningless and yet it's used as a big hammer to beat people into submission. Patriotism is what the neo-conservatives thrive on, a culture of fear. Bush has linked good and evil with nationality, if you're American you're good, and if you're from the Middle East you're probably evil. At the moment there are 25 million people starving in Ethiopia, and yet if four American or British soldiers died it would make world headlines. So the message is that humani-

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ty is not respected over nationality or power."

The son of an Indian classical dancer, Sawhney had piano lessons from the age of five and then moved on to flamenco guitar, then jazz piano with some tabla at a local temple.

"Something I learned about Indian classical music was how intricate its rules are. It's quite complex, mathematical, as well as emotional, although it became devalued in the West with the hippy movements of the '60s which really didn't appreciate its intricacy." As a consequence of Asian music's "Disneyfication", Sawhney avoids the labelling of his music under categories of 'Asian' or 'world music', partly because he does not believe in attaching himself to a fashion, or accepting the concept of nationality. "There was a trend marketed as 'Underground

Asian' but I felt it was ridiculous because it wasn't recognising the genuine cultural change going on in society. It's as if society cannot accept that Asian people can be just as relevant as anyone else on this planet."

It's a problem that anyone of colour faces in an industry that tends to target on the basis of race or culture. Yes, Sawhney has Indian parents, but why should this distinction alone position his music under a specific and often marginalized genre? The consequence of this labelling drastically affects how an album will be marketed. Nevertheless, it is genuinely difficult to categorise his music, which must be a bugger for the marketing department, but I guess that's the point. It's good to hear music that hasn't been born on the spreadsheet being released from

labels like V2; perhaps they've figured out that good music is what will save the record industry.

Sawhney's music flows from flamenco guitar to Brazilian house, hip hop, R&B, 'sexed up' with Asian flavours. His new album features collaborations with an ear tingling array of vocal talent including Tina Grace, Reena Bhardwaj, Kevin Mark Trail (The Streets), Taio, and Alani (Blur).

Sawhney regards music as an art without boundaries. He told me: "I tend to float between forms as they seem to fit. I can't conceive of creating music of singular culture, to me that smells a bit racist. People ask me how I mix different forms together; well I say 'it's the default fucking position!' It's where I start from." ■

Nitin Sawhney's album, "Human", is out now Nitiinsawhney.com

In Sight: Fusing his Indian musical heritage with London's cultural reality is all in an album's worth for Nitin Sawhney.

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