'I JUST WANT MORE AND MORE PEOPLE WHO HAVE A CREATIVE IDEA TO NOT BE DISCOURAGED FROM DOING IT

An interview between Asia Giuliani and Ahadadream in Hackney, London on 25th September 2024.

Q: Can you tell me about your early musical influences?

A: Growing up in Pakistan, I absorbed the music around me: Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Qawwali music, along with Bollywood music, because the music was just there. Qawwali is devotional Sufi music. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is one of the legends of Pakistan. The first song I play in my Boiler Room is his; it evokes an emotional, nostalgic response. Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is just the G.O.A.T, basically.

When I started developing my own tastes, I began exploring other artists and genres American rock bands like Red Hot Chili Peppers and Creed, and then artists like Eminem, Limp Bizkit, and Linkin Park. When I moved to the UK at 13, my interests shifted. It wasn't "cool" to like rock music there. It was Grungers or Rude Boys, and the Grunge kids were getting beaten up; I didn't need any more reasons to get beaten up, so I thought, 'Let's not add another one!' So, I got more into Hip-Hop, beyond Eminem, and discovered UK Garage like So Solid Crew.

NUSRAT FATEH ALI KHAN IS JUST THE G.O.A.T, BASICALLY

Q: Was moving to Britain challenging for you?

A: Yes, it was. I arrived shortly after 9/11, and there was a lot of Islamophobic sentiment in the air, which seeped into school playgrounds. Kids made comments like 'Do you know Osama bin Laden?' or mocked my accent, which was strong back then. Fitting in became a priority to avoid bullying.



Ahadadream, Hackney, London, 2024. Taken by Asia Giuliani

Music was a bridge. At 14, I went to my first rave, which was a revelation! The underage raves played Garage, Jungle, and Hip-hop, and they became formative experiences for me.

Q: How would you describe the British electronic dance music scene?

A: It's incredibly rich and diverse. Everyone uses the term "melting pot," but it's true. The music wouldn't be where it is without the Jamaican and Caribbean influence – it's undeniable. It influenced UK Garage, Jungle, leading to Grime and everything after that. Britain's colonial history has shaped the scene, and diasporas have brought their sounds into rave culture. This makes British dance music distinct. People sampling Raga vocals is just the norm now, but often the roots are forgotten.

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Q: You've worked on projects in Pakistan, like the Boiler Room event. Can you share that experience?

A: I helped curate a Boiler Room session in Karachi during a British Council-funded trip in partnership with people on the ground there. We conducted workshops on music production, DJing, and marketing in Lahore and Karachi. There are a lot of barriers. Partying and raving are mostly accessible to the privileged classes because, for most people, that's not even what they're thinking about. It's a Muslim country, so alcohol is illegal, and venues are scarce. When we were recording the Boiler Room, the electricity cut out, and one guy had to start his whole set again!



Ahadadream, Hackney, London, 2024. Taken by Asia Giuliani

Despite these challenges, there's passion and talent, but the opportunities available in the West often don't translate directly to Pakistan. I realised how much is shaped through a Western lens, especially when we talk about opportunities that are readily available here, like access to online platforms. In some places, these platforms might not even be accessible due to restrictions. It's important to tailor advice to specific contexts- giving advice on how to succeed in the UK's music industry doesn't always apply to artists in other countries who face limitations.

Q: Can you explain how More Time Records began?

A: More Time Records started in 2017, a collaboration with Sam Interface. Sam was already a curious person about global sounds; we started the label given our complementary skills—his in production and mine in marketing. It was Sam who encouraged me to bring more of my heritage into my music. I didn't want to be pigeonholed. When I first came to the UK, I felt like there was only BBC Asian Network, and it focused on traditional or stereotypical themes, like Bollywood and Bhangra, and that wasn't really what I wanted to do. I didn't see many people doing something more contemporary.

I wasn't confident in embracing my heritage in my music, at first. As I began exploring global sounds—like Gqom from South Africa or Batida from Angola and Portugal—I saw the beauty in it, and I thought, "Why isn't there a South Asian version of this?" That's when I started blending these influences into my music.

MUSIC IS A POWERFUL TOOL IN SHAPING CULTURE.

Q: Do you think your heritage has drawn you to diaspora spaces?

A: My heritage has drawn me to supporting other artists. For example, we came across Bryte from Ghana and we were able to release his music and help him get a visa to move to the UK. We were able to use our privilege to support him. This ethos continues at More Time Records—we like talented artists who might be unexplored. We also worked with Mxshi Mo from South Africa, he was losing his eyesight but kept making music, we collaborated with the British Council to document his story through film. It's not always about whether it's going to be a hit, but about supporting musicians we're interested in. We want to create a platform where artists can express themselves—like how Sam helped me when he saw potential.

Q: Can music really shape culture beyond just entertainment? Can it influence political thought or other aspects of society?

A: Absolutely. Music is a powerful tool in shaping culture. The more diverse sounds and artists you're exposed to, the more you break down the fear of the unknown. I think the roots of racism are just fear of the unknown. The more amazing music there is out there, the more it inevitably links and helps shape fashion, TV, movies, or art. It's just being there, being present, and taking up space.

Q: Can you tell me more about the events that you run?

A: No ID nights were born from the idea of bringing together South Asian artists from different genres. It started when I realised there was no space for South Asian DJs, producers, and artists to come together and play without genre restrictions, with no thread or expectation about what a South Asian artist should play. The first No ID night was electric, with conversations and collaborations flowing. Dialled In started in 2021 when Waltham Forest Council approached me. I think they had something less ambitious in mind, but I saw this as an opportunity to create something bigger—my dream of one day running a festival! I reached out to Provhat Rahman, Dhruva Balram and Ahsan-Elahi Shujaat, and in just three or four months, we pulled together the first Dialled In festival! I've honestly never seen so much joy! There are just not many other spaces that cater to such a range of music—from Shoegaze to Grime to Techno—catering to every taste. What made our last event special was the conversations that happened with artists from India, Pakistan, the US, and Australia exchanging ideas. The festival is a platform for connections, especially given the visa barriers between countries like India and Pakistan. Dialled In has become more than just a festival; it's a space for communities to collaborate.

Q: How did the collaboration with Skrillex and the creation of "Taka" come about?

A: "Taka" came together in a pretty organic way. I met Skrillex in 2019 at a secret back-to-back in Hackney. A while later, during the pandemic, he reached out for a Zoom call. We chatted about music, and I showed him some random beats I was working on. One of them caught his attention, and we started developing it right there. That track eventually became "Taka." Fast forward and Skrillex came to Dialled In and loved the atmosphere. He called me up the next day and asked if I had anyone for a vocal on the track. We brought in Priya Ragu for vocals, someone I had been following. The collaboration came together in the studio with Priya and her brother Japhna Gold. The song evolved, and soon after, major DJs started playing it. The chorus, "Taka, Taka," was something Priya ad-libbed, and I was like, why don't you just do that over the dhol?

It's being used by Apple for a phone launch and features in FIFA 25. It's amazing to see it all come together. While it's had commercial success, I just want more and more people who feel that they have a creative idea to not be discouraged from doing it.



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Q: What advice would you give to young people who want to create or get involved in the music scene?

The best advice I got when I was young was at uni. I was doing student radio, and we got to Radio 1's Big Weekend. I saw Radio 1 DJ, Mistajam, in the crowd, and I decided to just go up to him and ask him, "Can I have an internship?" And all he said to me was, "Keep working, bro." And that's it. That's what stuck with me. It's so true. It's such a simple piece of advice— a bit cheesy, but true.

Q: How would you like to see diaspora spaces shaping the future of music?

There could be a whole South Asian festival on the scale of Glastonbury. There could also be a record label that pushes these unique sounds in a nuanced way. One of the biggest barriers right now is the difficulty of travel, particularly between India and Pakistan, due to visa restrictions. Easier movement between these countries could lead to greater musical exchange. The dream is to create bigger and more inclusive spaces for music festivals and events, where global sounds from Afro-diasporic and South Asian cultures can be together.