



Tom Oldham

# Johnny Kalsi

Jim Hickson reflects on the career of the world's most famous – and busiest – *dhol* player

There are few people as synonymous with their instrument as Johnny Kalsi is with the Punjabi double-sided barrel drum, the *dhol*. The drum lends *bhangra* music its distinctive sound and Kalsi has probably done more for this amazing instrument's popularity around the world than anyone. It's clear that there's

never enough music for Johnny Kalsi: he's been involved with almost every world fusion group you could mention. If you've attended any sort of world or folk music festival in the UK, it's likely that you've seen him do his stuff.

Born in Leeds and raised in London, Kalsi didn't come from a musical family. But raised Sikh, songs and music were still part of daily

life, from hymns and prayers to readings from the holy book. This exposure led him to learn *tabla* at age seven ("all the lads do at that age") and music became a passion when he took up the drum kit in high school. The *dhol* came at 14 when he auditioned for a local *bhangra* band on *tabla* – they decided they wanted a *dhol* instead, so he tried it out and it stuck. By this point, it was obvious that Kalsi was something special, his experiences and skills from *tabla* and drum kit helping him develop a unique approach to the drum. Within two years he was touring the world as a member of the biggest *bhangra* group at the time, *Alaap*.

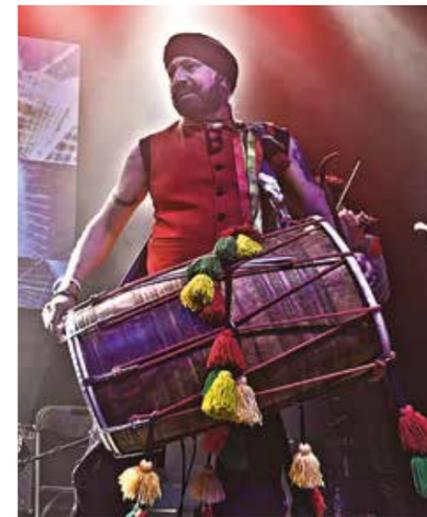
From that point, Kalsi has blasted his *dhol* on the albums and stages of so many legends.

Starting with *Alaap*, he was also there for the heydays of *Fun-Da-Mental* and *Transglobal Underground* in the 90s. On the same touring circuit as these groups were the *Afro Celt Sound System* (ACSS), fresh from the success of their debut album. After many shared bills and becoming friends on- and off-stage, ACSS asked Kalsi to play a few beats on their second album. He ended up contributing more than that – his *dhol* became an important aspect of the *Afro Celt* sound almost immediately, and he joined their ranks for good. He even took a step to the fore in 2016; since they reformed, Kalsi's drum has shaped the band's whole sound. When ACSS frontman Simon Emmerson embarked on a mission to create folk music to reflect the England of today, with its many international influences, Kalsi was of course natural for the project. That became *The Imagined Village* and was hailed as one of the sparks of the latest English folk revival. Again, Kalsi's sound was key.

And, as if being a crucial member and sonic element of many of the most forward-thinking fusion groups of the last 25 years was not enough, he's also taken part in seemingly endless collaborations with international artists. From classic favourites like Peter Gabriel, Khaled, Dimi Mint Abba and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, to more unexpected artists such as Avril Lavigne, the Kaiser Chiefs and Nelly Furtado, Kalsi's *dhol* has enlivened hundreds of recordings and concerts.

But when he gets talking about his work, it's obvious what Kalsi considers his real baby: *The Dhol Foundation* (TDF). First and foremost, TDF is a school for kids to learn the instrument, but they're also an internationally touring and recording band, with four albums under their belt and another coming out this June.

It all started when he was touring with *Alaap*, being approached every night by people asking for lessons. He always said no, until he was convinced to make a one-off workshop to a couple of people in Slough. They persuaded him to come back and there were six students. "By the time that happened, it was too much for me to look back. And that was *The Dhol Foundation*." From that base, the project grew into the first ever institute of *dhol*, and with it, Kalsi created the first *dhol*-teaching syllabus, *The Dhol Bible*. His passion and excitement for the school is obvious. "People are teaching with that bible all over the country, and I'm quite proud of that! That bit was my fault." At its peak, there were 14 schools and 700 members. As with anything that grows, it makes branches: smaller groups formed and broke off, and from these more groups still. Now there are hundreds of schools around the world.



Louis de Carlo

When they perform in public, TDF are second-to-none. Their live band is the 'A-team,' those that have progressed through the ranks of the school to professional standard. This way, they are ever-fluctuating, featuring up to 30 drummers and giving opportunities to promising younger members. It's a powerful spectacle, as Kalsi says: "It's a massive wall of drumming noise, it's wonderful to watch." That noise has led them to perform on some of the world's biggest stages; you may have seen them in the 2012 Olympics Closing Ceremony, the Royal Variety Performance or the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

It's on TDF albums that Kalsi really lets loose his creative side. These albums can be called Kalsi's solo work, but they're much more than that: "If it was just a *dhol* drumming album, it would become very monotonous and boring." Instead, they echo the rest of his career, full of collaborations with international artists – musicians as disparate as Sultan Khan, Etran Finatawa, Michael McGoldrick and Natacha Atlas have graced TDF albums. It's all mixed up, produced by Kalsi and with a healthy dose of *dhol* drumming to top it off. TDF's fifth album is called *Basant*, which is named after a springtime kite festival in the Punjab region. Kalsi sums it up well, saying "they're all different flavours, they all sound different, they taste different, they look different when you close your eyes. And I love that!"

With a new album in the works, running *The Dhol Foundation* schools and now a member of the reformed ACSS, who go on tour this November, Kalsi has, as ever, got his hands full. But you suspect that's probably just how he likes it. ♦

+ **ALBUM** *The Dhol Foundation's new album, Basant, will be released in June on ECC Records*

## BEST ALBUMS



**Afro Celt Sound System**  
*Volume 2: Release*

(Real World Records, 1999)

Kalsi's first recorded outing with the groundbreaking world fusion group came at the height of their fame, and he brought the first Asian flavours to the *Afro Celt* ensemble.



**The Dhol Foundation**  
*Big Drum: Small World*

(Shakti Records, 2001)

The debut album under the TDF name was a *tour de force* of *bhangra* and electronica, and provided the groundwork for their future releases with guests including Natacha Atlas.



**The Dhol Foundation**  
*Drum-Believable*

(Shakti Records, 2005)

TDF'S second album continues with all the fun of their first, brings in more international influences and contains probably their most banging track to date, the Irish-Indian bouncer 'After the Rain', with fiddler Mairead Nesbitt. Reviewed in #32.



**The Imagined Village**  
*Empire & Love*

(ECC Records, 2010)

This is the middle album of *The Imagined Village's* trilogy, their first as a cohesive band and a classic of Anglo-Indian folk music. Kalsi's *dhol* and *tabla* are essential to their sound. Reviewed in #66.



**Afro Celt Sound System**  
*The Source*

(ECC Records, 2016)

The new-look ACSS, risen from the ashes and with Johnny Kalsi as a member of the leading triumvirate, returned reinvigorated with this amazing album, their first for 11 years. The album has also won ACSS a nomination in this year's *Songlines Music Awards* (see p22).

## IF YOU LIKE JOHNNY KALSI, THEN TRY...

### Tabla Beat Science



**Tala Matrix**

(Palm Pictures, 2000)

Indian percussion-led dubtronica of the *tabla* variety. This masterpiece is the only studio album by the supergroup including Zakir Hussain, Trilok Gurtu, Talvin Singh and Karsh Kale, masterminded by producer Bill Laswell.