



David Ryle

Nitin Sawhney

Nigel Williamson delves into the impressive career of the British-Indian musical polymath

Composer, producer, obsessive musician and molecular accident, is how Nitin Sawhney describes himself on his Twitter profile. But if you turn to another great transmitter of the digital media age and Google his name, it's the word 'polymath' that recurs more frequently than any other.

Visit his Twitter page and it swiftly becomes evident why. His tweets range from quotations by Noam Chomsky to a complaint about the media time afforded to UKIP via tips on how to make the perfect samosa and links to his own latest musical projects. And that's just in the space of a few hours on the same day. In his interviews he's as likely to discuss Kepler and

Pythagoras as The Beatles and Jimi Hendrix; if the *Spinal Tap* image is that popular musicians are hopelessly disconnected from the world around them, Sawhney is so plugged-in that he's like a one-man national grid.

His Twitter profile could also have added songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, director and social commentator, if space had allowed. He's composed for theatre, film, TV, ballet and video games. He's conducted the London Symphony Orchestra and worked the clubs as a pioneering DJ. He was part of the *Goodness Gracious Me* comedy team on BBC TV and has his own series on BBC Radio 2 titled *Nitin Sawhney Spins the Globe*. His high-profile

collaborators include Paul McCartney, Sting, AR Rahman, Brian Eno, Anoushka Shankar, Jeff Beck and Shakira, among countless others.

Asked if there was anything he wouldn't like to do, he jokingly suggested lion taming. "I like to push myself," he says. "I try to do one challenging thing a month that would be out of character. I was scared of heights, so I did trapeze for a bit at a circus place and I learned to fly a plane." In addition to his pilot's licence, at the last count there were five honorary doctorates and a trophy cabinet that contains awards that range from Ivor Novellos to MOBOs – but no OBE. To his credit he turned down the offer from Tony Blair in 2007. "I felt very strongly about what had happened in Iraq," he explained. "And I thought it would be hypocritical to take any award that included the word 'Empire' in the wake of this country invading another country and killing women and children."

A man who always seems to have half a dozen different projects on the go, somewhere

amid this restless, relentless churn of activity, he has found time to record 11 solo albums between 1994 and 2015 – 2005's *Philtre* won him a BBC Radio 3 Award for World Music.

The albums have ranged over a broad spectrum of styles, a constantly shifting palette of Western and Asian musical tropes in a bold and inventive hybrid that might loosely be dubbed 'world music fusion.' It's a phrase Sawhney hates, although it's hard to think of a better one, so eclectic is his musical vocabulary.

If there is a unifying thread to his blending of Indian forms, flamenco, hip-hop, drum'n'bass, jazz, classical, rock and electronica, it lies in a spirit of openness, sonic adventure, and intellectual curiosity. "For me, music is a language which you use to express the different things going on in your head," he says. "It's like looking at music as the soundtrack to your life and how you lead it. For me music doesn't happen in any meaningful way unless it starts from catharsis or expression."

Born in Rochester, Kent, in 1964 to Punjabi immigrant parents, he grew up playing classical piano, took up flamenco guitar and studied *tabla*, while his parents' record collection exposed him to Indian classical music, Cuban and Brazilian rhythms and Miles Davis.

Sawhney's first steps as a performer were typically diverse and included youth orchestras, punk, rock and funk bands and jazz quartets – "just everything going," as he

puts it. By the mid-90s he was in the vanguard of the emerging 'Asian Underground' movement, alongside Talvin Singh, with whom he briefly played in Tihai Trio. Yet he never felt comfortable with the label; Sawhney's objective was to transcend genres rather than create them, and by the time *Beyond Skin* was shortlisted for the Mercury Music Prize – a year after Talvin Singh had won with *OK* – Sawhney was already leaving the 'Asian Underground' to move overground.

Since then his albums have grown ever more expansive, deploying guest voices from Sir Paul McCartney to the actor John Hurt, as well as a range of Indian vocalists for – somewhat oddly – alongside lion taming, it seems singing is the one thing Sawhney has never fancied.

His latest projects include a sold-out Royal Albert Hall performance featuring tracks from his most recent album, *Dystopian Dream* with specially commissioned choreography by hip-hop duo Sébastien Ramirez and Honji Wang, and he's currently scoring Warner Brothers' blockbuster remake of *Jungle Book*, starring Andy Serkis, Benedict Cumberbatch and Cate Blanchett, due for release in 2018. Could an Academy Award for best original score be on its way? If it's as timeless, masterful, elegant, energising and transcendental as the music Sawhney has been making for the last 20 years, don't bet against it. ♦

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Morah Geist

Nitin Sawhney performing at the Royal Albert Hall, London

BEST ALBUMS

Beyond Skin (Outcaste, 1999)
A loose concept album built around the theme of 'identity,' with brilliant samples embedded into most tracks and lush and eclectic melodies full of charm and wonder. Reviewed in #5.

Philtre (V2, 2005)
Global club beats, Indian classical music, hip-hop, Bengali folk, flamenco, Americana and old-school soul – one reviewer complained you're not sure if you're in 'Arizona or Assam.' Which, of course, is the whole point of a Nitin Sawhney album. A Top of the World review in #30.

London Undersound (Cooking Vinyl, 2008)
Both a dark meditation on the fracturing of British society and a celebration of the capital's cultural diversity. Guests include Anoushka Shankar and Paul McCartney, but the highlight is 'Days of Fire,' an intensely moving reconstruction of the events around the London tube bombings. Reviewed in #56.

Last Days of Meaning (Positiv-ID, 2011)
A 'parable about entrenchment and dogmatism' that developed into a cycle of songs set against spoken-word passages by John Hurt. Hard to think of anyone else who could pull off such an ambitious concept with aplomb. Reviewed in #77.

Dystopian Dream (Positiv-ID, 2015)
Guests include Natacha Atlas and Joss Stone on perhaps Sawhney's most personal album since *Beyond Skin*, partly inspired by the death of his father but touching on broader political and cultural omens that would soon lead all the way to Brexit and Trump. Reviewed in #113.

IF YOU LIKE NITIN SAWHNEY, THEN TRY:

James Taylor Quartet
The Rochester Mass (Cherry Red, 2015)

Sawhney played with old school friend Taylor's acid-jazz quartet in the early-90s and this mass – which fuses classical, jazz and funk and a 40-strong cathedral choir – shares the same sense of sonic adventure that characterises Sawhney's best work.