

# **DJ Ritu interviewed by Samenua Sesher** **Respect Due, Museum of Colour**

**00.01**

## **Introduction Music**

'Intro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00:08**

## **Samenua Sesher**

You're listening to Respect Due.

**00.16**

## **Introduction music**

'Elision' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

**00.22**

## **Samenua Sesher**

For this project we've invited UK creatives, journalists and heritage organisations to nominate an individual who's had a big impact on their creative journeys. The individuals nominated for Respect Due are people who have inspired and innovated in their field, people who have demanded change and paved the way for generations to come. Their achievements will be showcased in the Museum of Colour along with portraits by the artists Grace Lee, Erin Tse and Naki Narh. The Museum of Colour is a digital museum celebrating 250 years of creative achievement by people of colour. In this audio series, you will hear from the nominees themselves.

01:09

### **DJ Ritu**

I would describe myself as a complete musical chameleon. When I was a kid, I fell in love with soul, disco and Motown. And, meanwhile in the background, at home, my parents were listening to bits of Bollywood. So, there was always this multilingual, dual music experience that was going on, right from a young age. And I think from then on I realised that I didn't need to understand a language to enjoy the sound of something; I've always been attracted much more to melody and to rhythm.

**01:46**

### **Samenua Sesher**

I'm Samenua Sesher, director of the Museum of Colour, and this is the voice of the brilliant DJ Ritu: broadcaster, event producer, co-founder of Outcaste Records, and world-renowned disc jockey.

**01:59**

### **DJ Ritu**

I was at Chelsea School of Art, and I was going to lots and lots of different clubs all the time. You know, I was at that age where I just wanted to be out and I wanted to be partying, and I wanted to meet lots and lots of people, I was looking for love. And I used to go out maybe five or six nights a week. The DJ thing was just a hobby, and it was something in addition to trying to get my degree in Fine Art. And then it was still a hobby when I became a girl's and young women's development worker in the London Borough of Haringey. And I was in

that job for fourteen years. So, everything I did musically was just simply a bonus on top of my real job, which was working with kids. It was quite a while before music became my full-time profession. The hours were really long and very unsocial, you know, we'd often be working at youth centres till 10 o'clock at night, that was quite normal, and still have to be up in the morning for staff meetings, etc. And I really have no idea where I fitted in the club hours as well.

**03:16**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Soon, DJ Ritu added another job title to her roster: broadcaster.

**03:23**

### **DJ Ritu**

In the early nineties, all of my club residencies just suddenly stopped. And I could just sort of feel that suddenly my club work was not as secure as I thought it had been. And lots of people kept saying, 'You've got a really great voice, have you thought about doing radio?' And so, I just thought I would try and move sideways a little bit. And there was a sound engineer guy that I was working quite closely with and he helped me record a demo tape onto DAT tape - digital audio tape - and I didn't really know where to send it, so I just sent it to BBC Three Counties Radio for the hell of it. And, lo and behold, I got a phone call from them and when I spoke to the assistant manager there, he straight away said, 'Oh my god, you've got a great voice.' And so I was just given a weekly show there.

I didn't know what I was doing, but I think that's been the case through most of my career. A lot of the times I've started off in something I haven't known what I'm doing really and, you know, I think I'm one of those people that beds into a job and gets better, like

a fine wine I suppose, you just kind of mature into the role. So, the first radio slot that I was given... it wasn't called BBC Three Counties Radio then, it was called BBC Radio Bedfordshire, and they had a breakfast show which was called 'Breakfast in Beds', and they decided that they would name my show 'Bhangra in Beds', which is quite a nice, snazzy title in lots of ways. And I stayed at that radio station for the next 22 years.

**05:17**

### **Samenua Sesher**

Ritu went on to make programmes for the BBC and Kiss FM, and her show was later syndicated to Germany, Sweden and Turkey, where it was enjoyed by a growing world music scene. Then, as if that wasn't enough, she co-founded a record company: Outcaste Records.

**05:36**

### **DJ Ritu**

Yes, Outcaste Records... I mean, it was probably one of the most exciting things that I've ever been involved with. I think as a natural artist with an activist streak - perhaps more than an activist streak - I mean, the idea of starting a record label that could potentially elevate the opportunities for British Asian musicians... I mean, it was just a perfect thing for me to be involved with, and so needed. I think one thing I've always done is looked at where the gaps are in the market, but not from a business point of view, but from a 'gosh, you know, we need to address this imbalance', it's from that point of view that I come from a lot of the time. And at that point, in the mid... the early nineties, there were no openings for British Asian musicians. Their choices were: they could go to a Bhangra label, and they could make Bhangra or Bollywood, or they could try and get into the mainstream, into the major record labels, and that route was almost completely

sealed to them for obvious reasons. There was lots and lots of assumptions and stereotypes and myths that anyone who was South Asian only wanted to make Bhangra anyway, and of course that was not the case. There were lots of British Asian artists that wanted to make drum and bass, and there were some that wanted to make, you know, hip hop.

So with Outcaste we were very much about responding to that British and Asian and east-west mentality. And it was also clear for us that we wanted to open up new performance opportunities and platforms - radio, airplay, etc - for these artists. I think with Outcaste we had a very specific mission statement, and, aside from trying to create new platforms and avenues and openings for British Asian artists, we very much also connected with the British connecting angle, if that makes sense. Because with the 1990s you had the birth of drum and bass, and jungle, and you had the birth of trip hop, and you had the Madchester Manchester scene, and so on and so forth - there was so much happening. So we had a lot of connection, a lot of affinity, with clubs like, you know, Metalheadz, for example, and Acid Jazz Records and Talkin' Loud. And, as a DJ, I was also buying up lots and lots of house at that time, lots of house music. I mean, my favourite label was Positiva. And for me, I was working in so many different kinds of clubs, with so many different types of music, and with so many different types of people. So, I didn't really see the South Asian or the British Asian side of what I was doing as exclusively my domain; I had fingers in so many other pies as well.

## **8.47**

### **Samenua Seshar**

Can you name a couple of highlights of your time with Outcaste?

## **8.50**

## **DJ Ritu**

There's a number of highlights. I mean, one would be when I discovered Nitin Sawhney, and that happened, you know, because his manager approached me when I was DJing at the first ever big world music conference... International World Music conference in Berlin. And I was there for about four days, and she approached me, and she said, 'I've got an unknown artist I'm representing, could you have a listen to this CD by him, and let me know what you think? Cause I know you've just started up a label called Outcaste,' and I said, 'Yep, no problem.' And then when I got back to London, and I listened to it, and I just thought, now he is what we were trying to do. He is *it*. And I went to see him in his bedsit in Tooting. And, gosh, you know, yeah, it was quite a messy bedroom. He had a load of DAT tapes, you know, strewn over his single bed. And of course, he blew up... and to be part of the launch of his career was incredibly exciting.

I can't forget, of course, when we set up Club Outcaste, because I think clubs somehow, in some shape or form, have become my natural habitat. And I don't know at what stage that happened. I think it must have been in my student years; that bond with clubs was forged then and it's on a very emotional level. So yeah, Club Outcaste was incredible. We opened that at the end of 1994. It was the second regular Asian underground club night in the UK. We opened at Ormonds in Piccadilly, so it was on two floors. Björk and Goldie used to come to the club... And yeah, it was... it was such a special place. And not long after that, we then moved Club Outcaste to the new club that Mr. C from the Shaman had built, which was called the End, which was in Holborn and it was like a super, you know, purpose built club - a place where you could, you could feel the bass from a track, you could literally feel it rumble from the floor, through your feet, right up through your body.

**11:03**

**Samenua Sesher**

It wasn't long until Ritu made another transition: from DJ, broadcaster and record label exec, to bandleader.

**11:12**

**DJ Ritu**

Okay, so this, this big world music conference that I went to DJ at in 1994, where Nitin Sawhney's manager approached me, it was called WOMEX. And, connected with WOMEX, there was this huge world music scene growing in Germany. And the founder of WOMEX, he said to me, 'Okay, so we're going to bring you back to WOMEX. This year, it's going to be in Brussels, we want you to DJ there, but next year, I would like you to come and play at Heimatklänge, which is a five-day festival in Berlin, we have 15,000 people every night. My one slight problem is that DJs look really boring. So, I'm going to give you a budget and I'd like you to see if you can try and do something to make yourself look a bit more interesting.'

**12.17**

**Samenua Sesher**

Wow.

**12.18**

**DJ Ritu**

Yeah, thanks. You know, it's like a backhanded no-compliment, you know. And so, in 1996, I found myself putting together not what I thought was a band, you know, it was still being called DJ Ritu and

Friends. I just tried to pick out dancers that I knew that were coming to some of my clubs, musicians that I knew, vocalists that I knew. And together ten of us went off to Berlin not knowing what we were going to be doing, or how to do it. And all I can say is the first show that we did was absolutely atrocious.

## **13.06**

### **Samenua Sesher**

Oh no! Will I find it on YouTube if I go looking?

## **13.08**

### **DJ Ritu**

Yeah, I mean, there's a DAT recording up here somewhere. But the team that I chose or the individuals that I chose... I took Nitin Sawhney with me, he had never really played abroad before... and various other musicians, a tabla player, bass player, the two dancers, as I say, and JC 001 who, at that time, was in the Guinness Book of Records as the fastest rapper in the world. And I'd met JC at a gig we were all doing at the Rocket on Holloway Road, it was the Asian Dub Foundation, his first gig. And there's something about JC - apart from the fact that he could kind of go '001, 001, 001' (makes beatboxing sound) and he was a beatboxer as well, I mean an incredible beat boxer - and yet, there's something very intense about JC so I wanted him to be our vocal mouthpiece.

What I wasn't prepared for was, after totally bombing that first night, I was awake all night - because you know, when you know you've really, really failed and you've failed publicly and in front of 5000 people, you don't sleep, and instead you go into this panic mode of 'oh my god, it's all gone wrong'. And then my brain sort of started to shift and create some kind of order out of chaos and I scripted a whole way of how we



could do this, and who would come on when, and who would go off when, instead of it being the free-for-all it was at that moment.

And so, the next day, all of us hungover, we had a very long soundcheck during the day and I presented them with... and it had now been written out and it had been, you know, photocopied. And, gosh, we got a lot better. And the great thing was that this chemistry developed between Aref Durvesh the tabla player and JC 001. And they started to do this tabla/vocal question and answer, and it was fantastic. So JC was kind of going [does beatbox impression], and then Aref would play exactly that same pattern on the tablas. And then JC would do one a bit harder, like a more difficult pattern, and then Aref would, you know, [does tabla impression] come back with the same thing. And then... the thing is, with tabla players, is that they're taught to talk the drums. So of course, Aref realised that he could also... he didn't have to just play with his hands, he could also speak the beats. And it was phenomenal. And I was like, 'You've got to put that in, you've got to put that into the show tonight, you've got to put it in.' And, oh my god, you know, the crowd went apeshit when that came on.

So, five days in Berlin, and by the end, we were actually pretty good. And then we got picked up by a promoter in Belgium who wanted us to come there and play on New Year's Eve. And so that's just how the band just developed this life of its own. And we were named by JC 001, it was one of the phrases that he had in one of his raps, 'You're in tune with the Asian equation, the Asian equation, the Asian equation'. I just thought that's a great name. And so, by the time we went to Belgium for New Year's Eve, we were called DJ Ritu and the Asian Equation, and then it became just the Asian Equation, and then in 1997 I got us an agent, and then that's when we started to do WOMAD and the Royal Festival Hall, and you know, those kinds of gigs, and we toured with that band - and also the second band, Sister

India, which was a women-positive version of the Asian Equation, specifically showcasing British Asian female musical talent - we toured in over 30 countries.

**17:19**

**Samenua Seshar**

Today, DJ Ritu is a concert producer at SOAS, a member of the Mayor's London Music Board and the European World Music Charts Panel. DJ Ritu still manages two leading London club nights.

**17:32**

**DJ Ritu**

The two clubs that we run are Club Kali, which started in 1995. And the other club is the UK's biggest and first ever Bollywood club, which is called Kuch Kuch Bollywood Nights, and that's just about to celebrate its 21st birthday.

**17.55**

**Samenua Seshar**

What kind of experience do you want people who visit your club to have?

**17.58**

**DJ Ritu**

That's quite an easy one: I want people to feel absolutely welcomed the way that I would welcome someone into my home. It's kind of old-fashioned Indian hospitality. You know, if somebody comes into our homes, you know, you offer them, not just a drink, you feed them as well. (laughs) There'll be like a ten-course meal thrown in. And you try

and say, 'Okay, my home is yours, make yourself really comfortable here.' And that is primary in the clubs that I run.

And with the first club, Club Kali, I very much wanted people who were British Asian and South Asian – because, you know, we have first, second, third, whatever, generations coming in there - and I wanted them to feel that they were in a space which felt safe, and which felt tailored for their tastes and needs. So, if that meant musically, that was one thing; atmosphere, being in the majority, not being in a minority... A lot of clubs I was going to before setting up my own, you know, I was often very much in a minority.

And I guess I also wanted a lot of cultural exchange, because my thing is, if I'm running Club Kali and I'm playing music by Toni Braxton or Robin S. - or right now I mean it would be Dua Lipa - and I'm also playing tracks by Asha Bhosle, or tracks by Tigerstyle - you know, a Bhangra duo - I can't really get why everyone else can't get all those kinds of music. Why can't they? They can. Because, as I said, right from the outset, the language shouldn't need to be a barrier. And the history of Club Kali is that, although it is tailored... there is a priority for the British Asian experience musically and culturally, it's been a place that's been welcoming of everybody, they just need to be open to all kinds of music. And again, it goes back to this idea of connecting cultures through music. It also goes back to something that I think I've been doing for many, many years without realising it, which is decolonising dancefloors.

I think that started at that very first residency that I had, from 1986 - of course, consciously, I didn't know what the hell I was doing, okay? But when we kind of deconstruct what we were doing, to some degree, back in 1986, everywhere that I played and everywhere I went, it was kind of a bit of a homogenous experience, musically and in terms of the demographics. You know, with that particular six-year

residency, more and more people started to come who were non-white, and they started to ask for music that was a taste of back home, maybe, to some degree. So, it was about trying to make people happy. And that's never changed.

## **21:21**

### **Samenua Sesher**

But, you know, I mean, you've talked about this club experience that is clearly, like, in your *soul*. So, what have the last couple of years been like? Because that's probably one of the areas that has suffered the most. What's it been like? How have you adapted?

## **21:38**

### **DJ Ritu**

The last year and a half, through the pandemic? It was extraordinarily difficult. And for me, that highlighted or underlined exactly what my relationship is with clubland. And I have found myself, just out of nowhere, having flashbacks... Flashbacks to clubs I've played in decades ago, or been in decades ago... I can literally, I've been able to see, smell, feel those clubs. And it's so strange, the way those flashbacks just keep happening. It's almost like, I suppose, like maybe what someone would have with a trauma of some kind. Like I can be in the hairdresser's and a track will come on the radio, like 'We Found Love' by Rihanna, for example, and just these tears... again, it's not a conscious thing, it's just this emotional, overwhelming thing that happens.

So, there's absolutely been some kind of cultural starvation experience for me and every time it's happened, I've kind of thought, God, I'm going to be in therapy at some point about this and I don't know when - but maybe now that we've reopened, perhaps that won't be

necessary (laughs) because as much as I haven't felt that it's a safe time for us to reopen, I do feel that there was a topping up of my empty cup.

23:23

### **Credit Music**

'Outro' by Soweto Kinch from his album *Conversations with the Unseen*.

### **Samenua Seshar**

A huge thank you to DJ Ritu. You can follow her work at <https://www.djritu.com/>. DJ Ritu was nominated by the arts and culture journalist Tara Joshi. Tara is the music editor at gal-dem. Respect Due is presented by me, Samenua Seshar, and is produced by Stella Sabin for the Museum of Colour. You can find out more at <https://museumofcolour.org.uk/>. The music you have heard in this series is from Soweto Kinch's prize-winning album *Conversations with the Unseen*. Further episodes of this series are available across all podcast platforms. Respect Due is supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Thank you for listening.