

MAGAZINE

The incredible story of how desi parties are keeping Portland weird

Andaz has the city on its feet



Kerry Harwin PUBLISHED: MAY 19, 2017 | 14:29:11 IST

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On the dancefloor of The Analog Cafe & Theater, the Portland indie-rock venue, everything is beautiful madness. I'm hit with a blast of autotuned Punjabi vocals as the door opens. The music cycles from *pindi* bhangra to a trapped-out "Choli Ke Peeche" remix that transitions into a G-Funk break before landing on "Kala Chashma".

Winding my way past the soundproofed walls, strobe lights and bass that form the universal ingredients of the club, I squeeze between two couples who seem to exist in entirely separate universes. The couple to the left, rotund Punjabis groping and snogging after several drinks too many, are paid no mind by the lesbian couple on my right: a

statuesque black woman bedecked in a red-and-gold lehenga, accompanied by her date, a close-cropped blonde, clad in the lumberjack chic uniform of flannel and workboots.

At the back of the room, the crowd becomes denser and more brown. One group of women, tall, fair, all in black dresses and stiletto heels, look like they might be at ladies' night at a club in Gurugram, or UB City.

For my white American friend, who is accustomed to the city's understated cooler-than-thou crowds, this is his first desi party. He turns to me and says, "I've never seen a Portland party go so crazy."

This is Andaz, a monthly spectacular hosted by DJ Anjali and The Incredible Kid. Since 2001, in several city venues and under a few different names, the pair have played desi music, with a bhangra focus, for Portland's weird and wild.

To understand the role that desi parties play in a city like this, it's important to know a few important facts about Portland.

First, Portland is the whitest major city in America, at 76 per cent Caucasian. (The two nearest cities, Seattle and San Francisco, are 68 per cent and 48 per cent, respectively.) In the 1800s, black Americans were legally excluded from living and working in Oregon, the state in which Portland is the biggest city. Some of that racist language wasn't removed from the state's constitution until 2000.

What's more, Portland is an island of progressive thought in a sea of conservatism. Oregon is, broadly speaking, a large rectangle. To its west is the Pacific Ocean. California is at Oregon's southern border, and Washington state to its north, with Canada a few hours beyond. Conservative Idaho lies to the state's east.

Though most of Oregon's residents live in the western third of the state, the majority of Oregon's area, to the east of the Cascade Mountain range, is almost exclusively white, populated by ranchers and farmers who hark back to the state's roots, when logging was its primary industry. Sparsely populated Eastern Oregon and Idaho are hotbeds for white supremacist organisations.



In contrast, parts of Portland, nestled in the state's north-west corner, have been accepting and open ever since the city was adopted by hippies (like my parents) who were, in the Sixties and Seventies, eager to flee the more straight-laced culture of America's East Coast. Steve Jobs even checked into Portland's ultra liberal Reed College for some time before, famously, dropping out.

So those of us who grew up in the city in the Nineties have watched hipster chic spread across the globe with curious bemusement. Because cold-pressed juices, craft breweries, locally sourced meats and vegetables, kombucha and indie rock have been part of our lives since a time when Brooklyn was better known for gunshots than shots of wheatgrass juice. 'Keep Portland Weird' is the city's unofficial motto; marijuana was decriminalised in 1972 and legalised in 2014, public nudity is legal (unless the nude person has the 'intent to titillate') and the city is rumoured to be the polyamory capital of America.

But Portland's paradise of the bizarre isn't exactly a secret any more. As *Portlandia*, the television show that spoofs the city's over-the-top hipster ways, has caught on, the city has become a brand of its own. In Tokyo, at least one Portland-themed bar exists, and exclusively serves beers from Oregon-based breweries like Caldera and Rogue.

Walking through Portland's affluent west side, what was once a sea of white has begun to be dotted with an increasing number of brown faces. Suburbs to the west of the city, like Beaverton and Hillsboro, house a major Intel campus and the Nike World Headquarters. Both these companies employ thousands of engineers, many of whom are Indian.



But, wherever they find themselves in the globe, the IT crowd doesn't change much. I spoke with a few transplants to find out how they interact with the city. Though their interests are diverse, they fit nicely into an advertiser's idea of Portland Cool. Deepak, an engineer from Bengaluru who works for Nike, mostly hangs out with a predominantly desi group that centres around summertime cricket games. When I ask him what's special about Portland, he waxes poetic about the dozens of local breweries. Rohith, a Gulf-raised Malayali who also works at Nike, chats with me in his brand new condo in the city's Lloyd district, the keys to his leased Jaguar never leaving his hands. He's cultivated an international group of friends, many of whom are colleagues, and says Portland is special because he can drive to the beach, mountains or the desert in only a couple of hours.

Although Deepak and Rohith are surrounded by the things that make Portland different, you're unlikely to find them raising their own chickens, pickling kimchi or soaking in one of the state's many co-ed nude hotspots.

Portlandia is a white concept. I don't know if it's a relatable thing for someone like me," Anjali says, as I sit with the couple in their south-east Portland kitchen.

At home, nestled in their quiet domestic tranquillity, DJ Anjali and The Incredible Kid, known as Anju and Stephen to their friends, seem like unexpected party starters. At 45, his hairline receding, grey patches flecking his beard, The Incredible Kid looks like he was just dragged out of a dusty record store back room. Anjali, 43, has the air of an attentive but mischievous auntie about her, the contact lenses she wears in the DJ booth replaced by heavy black frames perched knowingly on her nose.

Though she radiates joy and confidence, Anjali is accustomed to feeling out of place. Standing at her kitchen counter, fixing a late-night snack, she looks over her shoulder as she tells me about the experience of growing up in Portland raised by an Indian mother divorced from her white father. Disco Dildar, a compilation record of Lahori filmi tunes from the Seventies and Eighties, creeps in from the next room and Anjali raises her voice slightly to be heard: “My mom was excluded from the desi community here because they’re really conservative,” she explains. “So whatever space I’m in here, I’m always the other. Whether it’s all white or all brown.”

“When we started,” she continues, “[the crowd] was super white. There were very few desis who would come out. There was a stretch where I’d look out and see one Punjabi friend. And it would break my heart.”

Stephen likens race in Portland to a party where your friends trickle in slowly throughout the night, see the empty room and decide to leave. If only each of the friends had stayed, the party would have been raging by the night’s end: “We’ve been watching waves and waves of [non-white] people come to this town and leave,” he says. “They’re sold a myth or a dream. And then they realise how isolating and difficult it is to be here.”

(It’s difficult to speak concretely about how many South Asians live in Portland, but estimates from local South Asian community organisations here suggest that, despite the apparent desi boom in recent years, desis account for no more than one per cent of the city’s population.)

But another reason for the white crowd at their parties was that, although Anjali and The Incredible Kid were playing Indian music, it wasn’t the kind that resonated with the desi crowd. “We were dedicated to Punjabi [music]. Bollywood was a minority part of our sound. The majority of the desis who were showing up,” Anjali says, “were like, ‘We want Hindi [music].’”

Though Andaz stays true to its bhangra roots, Anjali and The Incredible Kid have willingly adapted their sound to a shifting crowd, including “more rad desi kids and Latinas.

There is a youthful energy now, but with a sense of urgency and radicalism. That wasn’t old Portland... I feel like I’ve finally found my people. We’re like, ‘Keep Portland Brown.’

This outsider status may have informed the activism that brought the duo together. Before they were Anjali and The Incredible Kid, Anjali and Stephen were employees at Powell’s Books, an iconic Portland landmark and arguably the world’s largest bookstore. The two were part of a successful effort to unionise Powell’s Books’ workers, and began DJing together at a party in 2000 celebrating the unionisation effort. Later, as they gained prominence, Anjali’s involvement with activism – and her status as one of the few non-white female DJs in the area – led her to perform at queer desi parties in nearby Seattle.

In sharp contrast with the often hedonistic club scene, social activism and inclusion have always been foundational for Anjali and Stephen.



I see this at work when I sit in for a guest DJ session at one of the duo’s radio shows, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Kush*, which airs on Portland’s KBOO community radio. (Kush is a pun, referring to the Hindu Kush range, which has lent its name to several celebrated strains of marijuana.) When I enter the studio, Raja Kumari, an up-and-coming Indian-American rapper and singer, is playing on the airwaves as Anjali and The Kid mentor a young new radio host, Jai, a 23-year-old black man from New York.

KBOO also connects Anjali and Stephen to other minority communities in Portland, many of whom have embraced *Andaz* as a refuge for those who often feel excluded from this city of outsiders. When I return to *Analog* for a second visit, I find Jackie and Pamela dancing on the stage. Jackie, 27, a Native American, hosts a radio show that features ‘Powwow Step’, a Native American and Canadian electronic dance music genre. Pamela, 36, is a queer Filipino social activist, who co-hosts a talk show, *Bread And Roses*, about feminist issues. “It makes a difference when [a space] is centred on brown people,” Pamela says, of *Andaz*. “You can come,” she says, indicating people like me – white people – “but this is ours.”

I’m reminded of an earlier conversation I’ve had with another *Andaz* regular, Nafisah, a 30-year-old lesbian and racial justice activist who’s married to an Indian-origin Hindu woman. The racially motivated murder of an Indian engineer in Kansas earlier this year hangs over our conversation. But for her, the killing doesn’t represent something new. It serves as a reminder of the real racial tensions that continue to pervade America.

“If you’re not scared,” Nafisah told me, “you’re not paying attention. I’m not more afraid now than I’ve always been. It’s scary to be brown and queer and Muslim. It has been since before I was born. Before 9/11. Xenophobia, anti-Muslimness and anti-blackness are all core threads of America.”



Anjali and Stephen created Andaz by chance, after their audiences started craving the bits of bhangra that found their way into the duo’s DJ sets. It was a happy accident, touching the lives of many Portlanders – a safe place for lesbian nightlife in a city where most of the lesbian bars have gone out of business, and a reminder of home for migrants from every part of the Subcontinent. For a drunk white hipster who sees my audio recorder out in front of the party, it’s a place to experience India’s ‘delicious zest for movement’. There are other places to experience this too: DJ Prashant’s Jai Ho party provides another chocolate alternative in Oregon’s vanilla city. But the former Intel engineer’s parties, where “Humma Humma” bleeds into Sean Paul and “Sheila Ki Jawaani”, lack Andaz’s distinctive pindi flair.

And though many worlds collide in Andaz, they only mix at the margins. Deepak doesn't make friends with Shah Jahan, a Sri Lankan-born former stripper-turned-watch repairman, artist and model. Rohith hasn't gleaned a deep perspective on queer or Native rights. And yet, Andaz stands apart from other desi parties in America; parties that – with exclusively desi crowds, dress codes, bouncers and a reputation for fights – look a lot more like Chandigarh than Portland.

When I talk to Anjali and Stephen about how the scene they've created fits into 'weird' Portland, Anjali resists the suggestion. For the eclectic Portland native, it seems perfectly natural that all this incongruity should come together on her dance floor.

Because for the duo, everything is just a little better inside of Andaz, where the normal rules of the club begin to dissolve: "You're an old hippy who wants to dance up front? You're a young fly Punjabi b-boy? Cool, you can come to our party."

She pauses for a moment before issuing a dead serious proclamation: "Just don't fuck with the lesbians in the corner."

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