



Interview

Ghosts of partition: a musical odyssey about the desperate train journeys that divided India

Chal Ravens

Railways played a crucial role in partition, as Hindus and Muslims took crammed, dangerous and often deadly journeys to their new homes. Those momentous days have now been turned into a devastating show by experimental musicians

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In 1988, having turned classical music on its head with his radical minimalism, Steve Reich unveiled what remains one of his most recognisable and admired works. With its three movements of chopping strings, air raid-like drones and repeated snatches of speech, *Different Trains* was Reich's meditation on rail travel, the American composer contrasting the easy cross-country journeys he made during the second world war with the enforced transportation of his Jewish kin in Europe.

In that same grim period, just a few years after the liberation of the concentration camps, train travel again became a symbol of human tragedy. An exhausted postwar Britain carelessly scored a line through India, creating Pakistan, and sowed the seeds for decades of

bitter conflict. In the chaos, Muslim families crammed themselves into carriages bound for Pakistan, while Hindus travelled in the opposite direction, both fearing for their lives. It wasn't unknown for "ghost trains" to arrive at their destination ablaze, their passengers burned to death.

Seventy years after partition, as living memories of 1947 fade, a group of musicians from Britain and India are using Reich's work as an inspiration for their own examination of the subcontinent's scars. In east Berlin, inside the crumbling DDR radio station building, three of them are patiently tweaking mixing boards and rearranging drum patterns on their laptops. In one studio is Jack Barnett, frontman of These New Puritans, the increasingly unclassifiable outfit whose last album featured flugelhorns, magnetic piano and the deepest voice in Britain. In the next is Actress, aka Darren Cunningham, whose mulchy, decaying take on techno has made him a cult club figure in the UK. And in the third is Sandunes, an Indian producer whose global electronic influences stretch from the LA beat scene to London raves.



Different Trains 1947, from left: film-makers Jane Pollard and Iain Forsyth with musicians Jack Barnett, Actress and Sandunes. Photograph: Christian Jungeblodt for the Guardian

Soaking up the sounds are Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, the artist and film-maker couple tasked with providing a visual backdrop for Different Trains 1947 when it's unveiled in three performances this autumn, starting at the world's oldest passenger railway station - Edge Hill in Liverpool - before rolling on to London's Barbican and Magnetic Fields festival in Rajasthan. Music is central to Forsyth and Pollard's art: an early work saw them remake an infamous video of a Cramps gig in a psychiatric hospital, and they recently went inside the mind of Nick Cave for the award-winning movie 20,000 Days on Earth. Pollard says this project feels "a bit like tying our hands behind our backs. But that's what we love - we have no control over the sound, the one thing that usually we have all the control over."

Earlier this year, Barnett and Cunningham travelled to India to explore the history of partition and learn from master musicians. Barnett, a Reich devotee who caught the minimalism bug through a record-shop listening post when he was 13, has taken the most conceptual route for his composition, one requiring the most health and safety form-filling. Played alongside a live drummer, "every sound within my piece is derived from one of two sources," he explains. "The first is interviews with people who experienced the events of 1947 - all the harmonic material is derived from their voices. The second is a recording I made of a steam train that would have existed in 1947."

Barnett's no stranger to gathering weird material. For the last New Puritans album, he

brought a harris hawk into the studio to capture the sound of its wings flapping. His latest strange instrument may not have claws, but it comes with its own unique dangers: figuring out the practicalities of recording an engine. “Most of the ways you’d normally mic something are impossible, because the engine gets so hot that any mic stand would just melt.”

His recording team tried holding booms out of train windows, “but obviously you don’t want to have things going too far out, because they get in the habit of hitting tunnels. It took a long time to find people who were willing to do it.” The result, as he demonstrates in prototype form, is a seven-minute “journey” through steel and steam. “It’s incredible,” says Pollard. “It lurches and it’s off-kilter - you’d imagine it would be really structurally dense and rigid. But it’s not, it’s just amazing.”

In contrast to Barnett’s pared-down approach, Cunningham put himself through a crash course in Indian classical music, meeting masters of the tabla, tanpura and sitar while building a library of field recordings - but was soon overwhelmed. “The idea of using as many Indian instruments as possible became totally unrealistic. You need a certain level of understanding before you even go there.”

So he just asked himself: what would Steve Reich do? Deciding to play with pitch and tempo, Cunningham sampled a train horn and transposed it into a cavernous low drone, and is now breaking down a fiendishly complex tabla pattern (“faster than any Aphex Twin break,” says Barnett) into a set of wobbly drum hits. To add a human element, he’s working with Hindustani vocalist Priya Purushothaman, whose singing - adapted from an Urdu poem by Faiz Ahmed Faiz - “is able to express the nuances I want to get across without it being fully brutal, fully dark”.

The project has a different resonance for Sanaya Ardeshir, aka Sandunes, whose own family was torn apart by partition. “It doesn’t get recognised often enough as the largest mass migration of human beings in history,” says the Mumbai-based producer, who created her own archive of samples for her piece by interviewing her grandmother.

“My grandfather is originally from Karachi,” she says. “He moved to India in 1945, just before partition. If he’d known how difficult it would be to go back, he would not have left his family and gone to India for work. Yet that’s where he met my grandma and got married.” Ardeshir’s piece is shaping up to be the most faithful to Reich’s original, with her grandmother’s story broken into repeated phrases over an awkward time signature, echoing the uneasy lurch of an old train carriage.

The three musicians first met only a few weeks ago. “Sanaya came with something that was extremely developed,” says Cunningham sheepishly. “That set the tone. I was still faffing around.” Barnett had been waiting to receive his engine recordings, while Forsyth and Pollard were in the unenviable position of having to pull everything into a complete audiovisual spectacle in just a few weeks.

To add yet another layer, the film-makers have been digging through BFI archives in search of the hidden history of partition. “The material that’s survived shows you such a tiny sliver of that period,” says Forsyth. “I’ve been reading about the end of empire and Operation Legacy, which was basically the British rewriting their colonial history. The industrial scale on which history has been rewritten and erased really pulls into focus when you see what is

still there, so trying to imagine what you can't see is just beyond comprehension.”

To highlight the inauthenticity of these vintage reels, they're planning a theatrical staging of the footage that will be filmed and then form part of the performance. It's highbrow stuff, riffing on Brecht's "epic theatre" and the video art of Bruce Nauman - but visceral too, with a certain rock'n'roll attitude; the steam engines have even given them an excuse to bring out the dry ice. "Our work," says Pollard, "has always had a fascination with repetition, both inside the moment - a visual repeating - and that idea of the present being haunted by the past."

With so many hands on the wheel and so little time, the pressure's on. For some, the peril is bracing. "It's easy to work with things you know," says Forsyth, "and return to the scene of the crime over and over. But I think, as an artist, it's your job to run towards the fire - to find a way through the thing you don't understand."

Different Trains 1947 is at Edge Hill station, Liverpool, 27 September; Barbican, London, 1 October; Magnetic Fields festival, Rajasthan, 17 December.

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