



## Bhangra Brass Band Red Baraat Blends New Delhi and New York at Jazz Fest

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Amy Touchette

It was one of those only-at-Jazz-Fest phenomena. The annual New Orleans extravaganza was having arguably the biggest concentration of star power in its history, with nearly all of its 10 stages featuring headlining stars in one or the other genres spotlighted in the wide-ranging "heritage" berth of its title.

[John Mellencamp](#) was at the big stage on one end of the Louisiana Fairgrounds horse-race track while [Tom Jones](#) (yes, that Tom Jones) was doing a set loaded with gospel and blues at the other. In between, there was [John Legend](#) with the [Roots](#), the [Decemberists](#) and even, gulp, [Kenny G](#) in the Jazz Tent (to the delight of smooth jazz fans and revulsion of many others). Each drew a big, enthusiastic crowd numbering in the thousands.

At the tiny Jazz and Heritage stage -- home to the neighborhood brass bands and Mardi Gras Indian troupes that anchor the city's essential parade and party life -- it was a different scene. Only a few dozen people milled around as the headliner stepped up. It looked like another New Orleans brass band and sounded pretty much like one too, with horns anchored by a booming sousaphone and percussion pumping out a steady stream of backbeat-heavy brass funk. But what's with that trumpet player in a turban and long beard? And that guy in front playing some kind of strange drum, not the usual bass or snare that you'd see with Rebirth or the Soul Rebels? And that rap, by the turban guy, is that Hindi?

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with a passing parade of DJA Rara, a voodoo parade band from Haiti, one of many Haitian acts featured at this year's Jazz Fest [in an effort to support the earthquake-ravaged Caribbean nation](#). Just about everyone who walked by stopped to take a look, necks craning curiously. And a lot of them stayed. By set's end, the crowd had swelled to more than 500, dancing away just as if it were a New Orleans brass band.

But it wasn't. This was [Red Baraat](#), based in Brooklyn, N.Y., plying a bhangra beat under the exuberant leadership of first-generation Punjabi-American percussionist Sunny Jain, the guy playing that strange drum called a dhol. The sound, especially in this setting, could be described as New Orleans New York New Delhi. Truth is, though, this was both Jain's and the group's first visit to the Crescent City. Given the circumstances, he was not sure how it would go.

"I was definitely a little nervous given that there were these big-name artists, people I'd like to check out," he admits to Spinner. "'I'm gonna miss the Roots, and would have liked to see the Decemberists.' There was that aspect. These folks were the draws. Definitely a light crowd when we started."

And there was also the coals-to-Newcastle aspect to it, or brass to New Orleans. Bands that don't have that certain something just don't get people to notice, let alone dance.

"It built and built, and interaction between us and the crowd was inspiring," Jain says.

You can hear the excitement on 'Chaal Baby,' a live track the band is making available for free download via [Bandcamp](#).

### **Listen to 'Chaal Baby'**

Despite the non-New Orleans elements, many dancing along seemed surprised to learn that the band was from Brooklyn and not here, so well did the sound mesh with local vibes. That, insists Jain, is a fortuitous coincidence. When he conceived Red Baraat and first put a lineup together in 2008, New Orleans was not part of the mix. Jain was established as a veteran jazz drummer, educator and composer with credits ranging from Dewey Redman and Roy Hargrove to Norah Jones to a performance with Sufi-rock band Junoon at the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in Oslo. But he wanted to find a way to explore and personalize the sounds he remembered hearing as a child on visits back to his parents' native India. Being raised in Rochester, N.Y., the brass bands he heard on those trips -- a tradition that reaches back to the start of the English Raj in the 1700s -- made a lasting impression.

"When I put the band together I had a clear idea of how I wanted it to sound, but wanted to leave room for the sound to develop with the musicians in the group," he says.

To that end, he recruited a crew that included players from rock, ska, jazz and even classical backgrounds. Latin music figured in it from the start, he says, and go-go, the highly rhythmic dance music that spread out of the Washington, D.C. scene in the '80s. That all figures in the 2010 debut Red Baraat album 'Chaal Baby,' available both in stores and as a download on the group's Bandcamp site, that captured the vibrancy that has made the band a rising force in the jazz and world-music festival scene. But he wasn't even familiar with the New Orleans brass sounds until people started bringing it up after hearing his band.

### **Red Baraat Perform at Jazz Fest**

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"To be honest, it was my ignorance," he says. "I didn't know the Soul Rebels, Hot 8, Stooges brass bands from New Orleans. It was coming from the Indian brass tradition. The only thing I did was add the drum set and incorporate the dhol."

It's not just New Orleans where the sort of thing witnessed at Jazz Fest happens. There seems to be some universal quality to this sound.

"There's a Brazilian community that comes to shows in New York and swears it's samba fused with Punjabi," he says. "And people come up and say it sounds like West Indies music or Jamaican music or go-go. Everyone hears something different."

Now that he knows the NOLA brass world, though, he's eager to learn more. Out on the town during the band's stay, he saw ubiquitous sousaphonester Matt Perrine playing in the Tin Men ("America's premiere washboard, sousaphone and guitar trio," as the group's guitarist-singer Alex McMurray describes it) at the d.b.a. on the hot Frenchmen St. stretch of clubs and then sauntered across the way to the Spotted Cat to catch the neo-old-timey New Orleans Jazz Vipers. Later in the week, he got onstage to jam with friend Derrick Freeman, a drummer who helped pioneer New Orleans' hip-hop brass movement and has toured playing with Spearhead, [Wyclif Jean](#) and many others. Red Baraat also played its own night-time gig at the House of Blues' Parish Room, generating another level of buzz around town.

And, with a new album in the works for early 2010, that's the goal. "When we play festivals, the majority of people are not familiar, and people like to hear songs their familiar with," he says. "It's fascinating to us how people are intrigued by what we are doing and stay and really enjoy the music and maybe start delving into it and learn about it. We just have fun playing and want to continue that."

Another goal sure to be met: More visits to New Orleans.  
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