

Hello again and welcome to As It Is, from VOA Learning English. I'm June Simms in Washington.

On the show today, we take to the dance floor with an exciting new mix of music that blends northwestern Indian and Pakistani bhangra with jazz, funk, hip-hop and other forms of music.

But first, we hear how musicians in newly liberated South Sudan are using their music to spread news about problems facing their country.

South Sudan Musicians Spread Message Through Music

South Sudan is still struggling to overcome huge difficulties just two years after its war of independence with the north. Almost two million people were killed in the war. Millions more were displaced. Many refugees of that war are now returning home. One such returnee is rising hip-hop artist Lual D'Awol. Mario Ritter has more.

Lual D'Awol found his love for hip-hop growing up in the American city of Baltimore, Maryland. There he listened to Tupac Shakur, Notorious B.I.G. and reggae artists like Bob Marley. Lual started rapping in 2010. Since returning home to South Sudan, he has used his music to talk about problems in his country.

“My stage name is L-U-A-L, which stands for Lyrically Untouchable African Legend. I just rap about a lot of the things that are going on in South Sudan politically, socially. I talk about corruption, I talk about tribalism, I talk about nepotism, I talk about all the -isms that are not going well in this nation and trying to expose them.”

International producers filmed Lual’s video for his hit song “I’m the King Around Here”. It was recorded in one of South Sudan’s many cattle camps where some say stealing cattle has turned into a blood sport.

Charles James Oman is one of the few music businessmen in the country. He came from Khartoum, where he learned music in church and then started writing his own at age 13.

“The music is not about the style you sing, but about the message, about the words. We are civilians, so we don’t have any weapons. So my weapon is the song I sing.”

He says he and other artists use music to speak out against issues like early pregnancy, rape and abuse. And they call for an end to political fighting and ethnic violence.

Singer-songwriter Mer Ayang says songs like her “South Sudanese” call for unity. She says they are a message from the younger generation to those at the top.

“We are the future of the country. We are the leaders of the country. If the current leaders are not doing it right, there’s nothing wrong with correcting them.”

The name Mer means “peace” in Shilluk, one of the many languages spoken in South Sudan. With her songs, Mer Ayang calls on young people to take part in building their new nation.

“Life is not about partying and just being home finally. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done and they have to feel responsible for this.”

Mer’s experiences at home and overseas have helped to shape her music. But most of all, she has her father in mind. He was a freedom fighter who died exactly one year before independence on July 9, 2011. Mer says she wants to honor him in her own way.

“There’s a struggle, and even being home now, things are not easy. And if we sit and wait in the name of enjoying the fruits of corruption, what’s the point of our parents and our previous grandfathers and mothers who died in the war? What is the point of the war if we’re not focused in making it well now?”

Many of the artists in this country that is so new and so unknown say they want to take their message to the world. I’m Mario Ritter.

You are listening to As It Is, from VOA Learning English. I'm June Simms.

Red Baraat Band Brings Bhangra to Brooklyn

New York's multicultural environment is a hot spot for new art and music. Red Baraat, an eight-member horns and percussion band from Brooklyn, is a product of that environment. The group mixes northwestern Indian and Pakistani bhangra music with jazz, funk, hip-hop and other forms of music. One critic calls it an "explosively happy meld of bangtastic funk, Bollywood drama and marching band swagger."

Bandleader Sunny Jain is a first-generation Indian American who grew up in Rochester, New York. He formed Red Baraat in 2008 after looking for a traditional Indian bhangra band to play at his own wedding. The jazz drummer and singer fell in love with the musical instrument, the dhol, on a trip to India in 1997. The booming double-sided drum is used in bhangra and in Bollywood musicals.

"It was just a different energy for me, you know. It's slung on the shoulder. I'm not sitting stationary on a drum set, but I'm able to move around. And it's enormously loud."

Red Baraat is named after a joyous wedding procession in India. The music is a mix of horns and drums, bhangra and jazz, go-go, Latin music and even a bit of klezmer.

Sunny Jain calls it “Brooklyn bhangra.” He says the band members all come from different backgrounds.

“Sonny Singh is a trumpet player who grew up in, you know, with Sikh gurdwaras, going to temple and praying, and also grew up with ska music and reggae music. MiWi La Lupa is a bass trumpet player. He grew up with like R&B. He grew up with jazz. Ernest Stuart grew up in the black church in Philadelphia. Everyone’s coming from different arenas.”

Red Baraat released its second full-length album, “Shruggy Ji,” in January. The album reached first place on world music charts. The band has risen from unpaid performances in a Brooklyn bar to playing music festivals across the United States and Canada. Red Baraat also performed at the White House last year.

And that is As It Is. Thanks for sharing part of your day with us. For the latest on what’s happening in the world, VOA news is coming up at the beginning of the hour Universal Time.

Enjoy the rest of your weekend.