

Sunny Jain's Wild Wild East

Flynn Student Matinee Series Study Guide



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About the Artist



Sunny Jain playing the drums

Sunny Jain is a percussionist, composer, and bandleader whose work celebrates cultural diaspora, blending the modern and the traditional, the personal and the communal, the inventive and the festive. His original music finds inspiration across genres, from Bollywood classics, Punjabi folk traditions, jazz improvisation, and more. Sunny grew up in Rochester, NY, the son of South Asian immigrants. He began playing percussion at the age of ten and went on to study jazz, performing with renowned musicians throughout the United States and around the world. In 2002 he was designated a Jazz Ambassador by the U.S. Department of State and the Kennedy Center, traveling with a trio to West Africa

to present concerts and workshops for dignitaries and community members. His original compositions meld jazz with South Asian music, and he has formed several bands which explore this evolving style, including [Red Baraat](#), whose debut album *Chaal Baby* was voted a top world music album by The Boston Globe. The group has released six albums and has performed at the White House, music festivals, and the closing ceremonies of the London Paralympics. NPR called Red Baraat “the best party band in years.”

During a residency at Wesleyan University in 2023-24, Sunny developed his first musical theatrical show, *Love Force*, an autobiographical immersive performance inspired by the concept *satyāgraha*, a Sanskrit term for “holding firmly to truth.” This show reflects on the many identities so many immigrant families confront in the process of staying connected to the past and imagining new futures.

In February of 2020, he released the album [Wild Wild East](#), which Songlines in the UK listed among their top 10 global music albums of the year. The New York Times called the title track “furiously propulsive” and the band has performed an NPR Tiny Desk Concert as well as touring performances at many distinguished jazz festivals, the National Mall in Washington, D.C., festivals in Pakistan, and more.



An image from Sunny Jain's theatrical show "Love Force"

About the Album

“Wild Wild East stands out as an album that not only deserves to be heard, but needs to be listened to. An understanding of the stories he tells here with such musical brilliance is liable to change hearts and minds for the better.”

--PopMatters Review

While performing a concert at the Global Village in Dubai not long after the 2016 election, inspiration for what would become the album *Wild Wild East* struck Sunny Jain. Like Epcot in Disney, Global Village has representations of many nations and cultures, most of which are represented by notable architecture. But the representation for the U.S. was a person: a massive statue of a white male cowboy. As Jain says in [an interview for NPR’s All Things Considered](#), he was struck by how the cowboy narrative “keeps persisting as this American identity.” Rather than fight that narrative, he decided to expand it.

As described on [Sunny Jain’s website](#), “the traits we think we’ve spotted in the cowboy – bravery, boldness, a willingness to sacrifice the known for the sake of the better – have always been suspect. But the courage to leave behind a homeland and head west, to boldly step into a new place and declare it home, to survey the scene and try to find your place in it? That’s still around. The idea of the American cowboy is this romanticized idea that’s just false. The immigrant is the current-day cowboy or cowgirl.”

The music of *Wild Wild East* highlights the interconnectedness of global styles, incorporating jazz, Indian brass band music, rhythms from Punjab and southern Pakistan, film soundtracks, and West Coast rap.



Sunny Jain (center) and the musicians behind Wild Wild East

The opening track, [Immigrant Warrior](#), is a song he wrote for his parents, who made their way to the U.S. from Pakistan by way of India. Despite arriving with no money, his parents managed to figure out how to build a new life. The song is “an ode to all immigrants really, leaving the familiar homeland and coming somewhere new,” says Sunny.

On *Wild Wild East*, Sunny Jain plays drums and dhol, a traditional Punjabi barrel-shaped drum. Four other musicians complete the project, contributing vocals, saxophone, flute, bass, and guitar.

Watch and listen to *Wild Wild East* live on NPR’s [Tiny Desk Concert](#) series!

Musical Traditions

“My aim is to blur the boundaries and not adhere to genre, but rather bring different musical forms into conversation with one another.”

-Sunny Jain

Wild Wild East draws inspiration from many different musical traditions. Learn about some of them below!

Punjabi Folk Music

A major musical lineage in Jain’s work is Punjabi folk music. According to [Punjabi folklorist Sohinder Singh Bedi](#), the rhythm and beats of Punjabi folk music emerge from daily activities, like the sound of the grinding stone, the drone of a spinning wheel, or the beat of a horse’s hooves. Different regions of Punjab have their own distinct *lok geet*, the Punjabi term for folk songs. Some are linked to particular rituals, such as weddings, funerals, or festivals. Instruments are not central to Punjabi folk music, but songs sung on special occasions are typically accompanied by the dhol drum. *Lok geet* tell a wide range of stories, from romantic to heroic to religious.

Listen to an example of a live performance of a [Punjabi tappe](#), a type of *lok geet* sung in repeating couplets.



Poster for the 1952 Bollywood film *Daag*

Bollywood

Another musical inspiration for the album is music from Bollywood movies. Bollywood is the term for Indian cinema, combining the words Bombay and Hollywood. The first Indian film with music came out in 1931, and featured seven songs. As Bollywood continued to develop, the genre of Bollywood music emerged, combining Indian musical culture and tradition with Western elements. The 1930s-1950s are considered the Golden Age of Bollywood music, a time when composers brought modern orchestration to traditional melodies and incorporated classical *ragas*, the term for a melodic framework in Indian classical music within which musicians improvise. The songs of this era revolved around patriotic themes, capturing the spirit of the struggle for independence and societal issues of the time.

Check out [this clip from the Bollywood film Kati Patang](#), with music by one of Sunny Jain’s particular inspirations – the composer R.D. Burman. This film’s soundtrack became one of the highest-selling Bollywood film soundtracks of the 1970s.

The song “[Aye Mere Dil Aur Chal](#)” from Wild Wild East is his version of a song from the 1952 Bollywood film *Daag*.

Sufi Music

The Sufi religion is a branch of Islam that focuses on the inner aspects of the Islamic faith, and the emotions that drive humanity toward connecting with the divine – compassion, love, and patience. Music is an integral part of the Sufi practice and is characterized by its meditative, percussive, and harmonic qualities. Along with poetry, self-discipline, and contemplation, music is one of the ways Sufis seek to personally experience the divine.

The song [Brooklyn Dhamal](#) from Wild Wild East is a post-punk take on a Sufi rhythm and dance called dhamal, found in Pakistan. Dhamal is an improvised dance form, practiced by spinning in circles to music as a way of connecting with the divine.

Check out [this video of a dhamal](#) at the Lal Qalander shrine in Pakistan.

Ennio Morricone

An Italian composer, Ennio Morricone wrote original scores for over 400 movies and television shows. He wrote the music for many of the most well-known Spaghetti Westerns, a broad genre of Western films named as such because many of them were produced and directed by Italians. Morricone created cinematic landscapes with drums, electric guitar, trumpet, harmonica, whistles, and animal howls, evoking a romanticized atmosphere of the Southwestern United States in the 1800s. Spaghetti Westerns contributed immensely to popularizing the image of the white male cowboy as an American “hero,” to which Sunny Jain’s album is a response and a rebuke.

Check out the title sequence for one of the most famous films Morricone composed music for – [The Good, The Bad and The Ugly](#).



Sufis dancing a dhamal at the Lal Qalander shrine

Context: Punjab & The Dhol Drum



Sunny Jain's family is from Punjab, a geographical region in South Asia, specifically the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent. It comprises areas of modern-day eastern Pakistan and northwestern India. The name "Punjab" comes from two Persian words: *pañj* (meaning five) and *ab* (meaning water) – making Punjab the Land of the Five Rivers. The region is the site of one of the earliest urban societies, the Indus Valley civilization, which dates back to 3000 BCE.

The primary language is Punjabi, but there are several languages closely related to Punjabi which are spoken throughout the region. The oldest religion in the region is Hinduism. In the 8th century Islam was introduced in Punjab, becoming the majority religion by the 16th century. Other religions in the region include Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism – the religion which Sunny's family practices, based on principles of non-violence.

The British colonized the region in 1849. India and Pakistan finally achieved independence in 1947, at which point the state of Punjab was partitioned: Western Punjab for Pakistan and Eastern Punjab for India. This caused the largest mass migration in world history over religious lines. The UN Refugee Agency estimates [14 million people](#) were displaced— Sunny Jain's parents among them.



The ancient city of Taxila, in Punjab



Sunny Jain playing the dhol drum

Sunny Jain has played the dhol drum since 2003. As he says in an [essay](#), this drum “is synonymous with Punjabi culture” and is connected to Bhangra music and dance as well as Punjabi folk music. The dhol is a barrel-shaped, double-headed, wooden shell drum which is played slung over the shoulder. It has a high (treble) side and a low (bass) side and is played during farming, dancing, and on special occasions.

It's believed that the dhol was introduced to the Indian subcontinent by Islamic dynasties of the 13th century, and is possibly related to the Persian dohol drum, a similarly-shaped

percussion instrument. The first written reference to the dhol is in the 16th century in the courts of the Mughal emperor Akbar the Great. The dhol gained more widespread recognition within the South Asian diaspora in the UK with the commercialization of Bhangra music. [Bhangra](#) is an umbrella term for many traditional South Asian folk dance and music styles, originating in Punjab. Traditionally, bhangra dance involves several dancers in a circle, moving energetically to the syncopated rhythm of the dhol. It was originally a harvest dance performed at festivals. These days, it can be found in all kinds of settings – including [this NBA half time show](#) in 2014!



Bhangra dancers and a dholi (dhol drummer)

Reflection Questions

Here are some example questions to prompt deeper engagement from your students, both before and after the show:

Before the Show:

- Have you ever been to a theater before? What are some ways an audience is expected to behave in a theater that are different from how you behave in other places you go for entertainment, like a movie theater?
- When you think about the phrase “the wild west,” what comes to mind?
- When you think about Punjab, what comes to mind? Do you have any expectations about Punjabi music or cultural traditions?
- What do you think music is capable of doing? Can it tell a story? Can it make you feel? Can it be a tool for activism or social change? How do you think it can or can’t do those things?

After the Show:

- How did the show make you feel? Was there a specific moment when it caused an emotional reaction in you? How did it do that? What did the show make you think about?
- If you were to write a review of the show, what would you say? What stood out to you? Would you recommend it to other people? Why?
- Now that you’ve seen the show, what do you think music is capable of doing? Has your answer changed?
- Did you hear sounds that reminded you of your associations with “the wild west”? How were those sounds complicated by other elements of the music?

References

- [Concert Preview: Sunny Jain’s Wild Wild East](#)
- [Sunny Jain’s ‘Wild Wild East’ Is a Western-Inspired Ode To An Immigrant Father \(NPR\)](#)
- [Punjabi Folk Music](#)
- [The Evolution of Bollywood Music: From Classics to Contemporary Hits](#)
- [Sunny Jain’s Wild Wild East - Tiny Desk Concert](#)
- [The Dhol: The Vibrant Drum of North India](#)
- [The Tradition of Now: At the Intersection of Jainism, Jazz, and the Punjabi Dhol Drum \(Essay by Sunny Jain\)](#)
- [Step to the Beat of Love: The Global Movements of Sufi Music](#)
- [Sufi Whirling and Dhamal](#)