

Babar Luck

A Pakistani Cockney cross between Billy Bragg and Spike Milligan? Chris Nickson is impressed.

Babar Luck was an impressive, but strange, sight at Womex 2005. A Cockney songwriter with an acoustic guitar and definite punk overtones, backed by saz (played by the wonderful Lu Edmonds) and drums. He'd stalk around the stage, on and off the mic, singing, his monologues between songs running into a bizarre stream of consciousness, so that he came across like a mix of Spike Milligan and Billy Bragg.

"I love Billy Bragg, man," Luck says with a smile as we talk in a noisy café at Sheffield station. "He's from Barking, not where I'm from, but he stood up. And I've always liked Spike Milligan, I have some of his books at home."

By his own admission, Babar Luck loves to talk, and he's got a lot to say, not only about music, but about the plight of the underdog, an overwhelming concern in his music, as his album *Care In The Community* shows, with pieces like the title track and the evocative *War Fever*. He's a man who strives to do what's right, although he acknowledges, "It's very hard to do the right thing in a society that has set up these moral structures. We've all got someone with a big bat above our heads and they'll bring it down if we step out of line, and I've been stepping out of line since I was 15."

He was born in Pakistan and when he was eight the family moved to London's East End, in Silvertown. "I was raised in Canning Town, which was very white working-class. There was me and this girl, Jasminder Singh, we were the only non-whites, apart from a black guy. I learned to be very comfortable around white people. When I was in my teens I moved to another

area that was more multicultural, and I rediscovered qawwali singers, Hindi films, the Bollywood films I'd grown up watching. Then I got into reggae music. That's a root, it's a nub, it's rebel music and it was always that way, made by the lowest of the low, people who thought their stories would never get told. The other art form I love is hip-hop, and again it was created by people who lived in the projects, and the projects are just an extension of the slavery system. It was a way of creating music that was cheap and easy which would feature their personal voices."

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Although he says, "I wasn't very sharp in school," Luck was an avid reader, devouring everything he could, and arriving at music by a typically unusual route. "I'd hang out with these old Rastamen who talked about history," he recalls. "They'd sing songs and we'd all clap hands. There would be people of black background, Asian background; my friend would bring down a sitar, and another friend would play electric guitar, and another friend would play bhangra beats."

But he fell irrevocably in love with music when he was 15. "My brother was a musician, my mum was the black sheep of the family, a social worker and one of my great inspirations. She told me to go out and speak the truth. If I did, she said, a lot

of doors would close, but some might open. But it doesn't matter if you speak the truth. Sometimes you have to kick the door. I started learning songs, and writing my first song before I could play a chord. I was playing with words. All I ever wanted to do was make music I wanted to listen to, combining reggae, hip-hop, jazz, folk, country. My brother got me all sorts of records."

From there he served a long apprenticeship in bands: "Rock bands, soul bands, funk bands. I played in reggae bands and bhangra bands. I did that for many years. We worked in the underground scene. People would come up to me and say 'You're the leader of this band', but I wasn't the leader of anything. I was the guy sitting in the corner writing poetry and wanting to be left alone."

He ended up playing bass in a group called King Prawn, who made it out of the underground to play festivals and tour Europe, releasing records and becoming a small force on the alternative scene. Since he was the one who loved to talk – in spite of his claims of wanting to be left alone – he became the de facto spokesman for the group.

After they split up, Luck recorded a new bunch of his own songs, demos made just with his voice and acoustic guitar, and gave them to the band's manager, who was suitably impressed. Luck also went and played for Lu Edmonds, veteran of bands including the Damned, the Mustaphas, the Mekons and Billy Bragg's Blokes, and recipient of a grant to investigate Central Asian music. "I went round his house and played, and he listened very politely. Then he said, 'I like them Babar, but it's going to take time to work on them'."

But work on them they did, and *Care In The Community* is the result. They used quiet studio time, with Mark Roberts engineering (who also sometimes plays drums with Luck live). It's a reflection of his concerns and influences (although you'd be hard-pressed to really find any hip-hop on there), with plenty of attitude, and a new perspective on growing up Pakistani in the UK on *Raj Kapoor & Nargis*, a sense of hope on *101 Spiritual*, as well as a leavening of surreal humour with *My Friend Used To Be (A Madaxeman)*.

Certainly things are opening up for Luck. He's supported Tuvan rock band Yat-Kha on a British tour, been on the BBC Asian Network and recorded a Locked Up session for Radio One. "I wanted to, and am, reaching out to the mainstream with a world that is not known or understood by that mainstream of opinion. I want to speak for people, and to people."

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Photo: Jak Kilby