

Sounds of Britain Dave Warriner examines this month's new issue of special stamps

The theme of this year's Europa stamps is cultural integration – a pretty large concept when you think about it. The challenge of how to present the theme was handed to the London-based design group CDT, a company that had previously worked on the Royal Mail Millennium programme and on the Pricing in Proportion stamps.

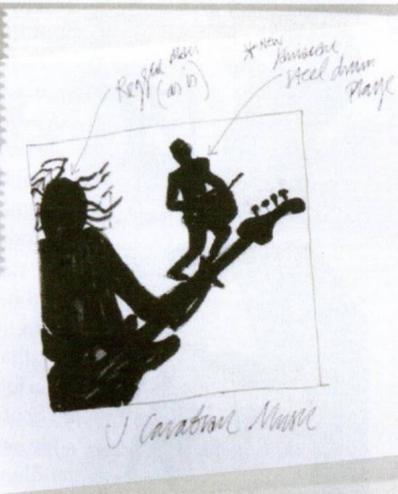
CDT's early ideas focussed around using different types of ethnic pattern-making, and objects like headdresses and jewellery. Work progressed as far as initial photography, where the graphic quality of these objects was emphasised by shooting them in silhouette, an idea which was to bear fruit later.

Although some interesting visual material was emerging, something still seemed to be lacking, until CDT Director Mike Dempsey had a brainwave. 'It came to me suddenly that music crosses all boundaries, not just between cultures, but also between young and old. It was just perfect for the stamps.' As a music fan, it was also perfect for Dempsey as he set about researching the subject.

It was important that the stamps represented the different musical strands at work in Britain today, and to help identify these CDT worked closely with the World Music Department of BBC Radio 3. It wasn't long before the core musical genres began to emerge, and work on visuals could begin. To retain the spontaneity of live music, a photographic approach was decided upon and the idea of the silhouette, which had worked so well with the initial concepts, helped to get around the issue of having identifiable individuals featured as the hero image on the stamps.

For the shoot, fashion photographer Paul Smith was selected and over a weekend a stream of choreographers, dancers and musicians performed what was in effect a miniature version of the WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) Festival for the camera. The outline of the performers together with their instruments created the distinctive silhouette shapes, which were counter-pointed with an area of intense colour that was highlighted by using a snoot spotlight (looking just like an inverted ice cream cone, the snoot concentrates a tiny beam of light on the subject). The images were then cropped, combined and framed digitally before adding the type.

The first of the stamps, with sitar player and dancer (1st class), features music of Indian origin. Bollywood, the world's largest film industry, helped thousands of British Asians enjoy the comforts of familiar song and dance, initially through Indian cinemas, but more recently through video and DVD. Singers and dancers from Bollywood movies have become huge stars, including Asha Bhosle (recently celebrated by the British Asian band Cornershop with the song *Brimful of Asha*). Bhosle is generally thought to be the most recorded artist of all time, with a back catalogue of at least 12,000 songs and 925 films. While traditional Indian music has been an influence on many British artists from the Beatles onwards, British Asians have taken the traditional Punjabi harvest songs, known as Bhangra, added extra percussion and imported elements of reggae, rap, raga and jungle to create Bhangra Beat, a sound that is so infectious and popular that British artists like Juggy D are today exporting it back to India. ▶



Early designs concentrated on textile patterns (centre, top). A development of this concept combined textiles with body silhouettes (centre). The first 'music' designs (left) depicted only one figure each. Top left and above: sketches for final designs for the 72p and 42p stamps – the Caribbean steel drummer was later replaced by an African djembe player. Top right: at the photo shoot.



Music from the Caribbean and Africa features on the 42p stamp with the bass player and drummer. Reggae grew out of ska, which itself evolved from Jamaican mento, Trinidadian calypso and American jazz and rhythm and blues. Ska arrived in Britain with the Caribbean immigrants of the 1950s and 60s. With its catchy rhythm typified by accented guitar and piano on the upbeat, it soon found favour outside the Caribbean community. In Jamaica artists like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh slowed the rhythm, pumped up the bass and added often political lyrics to create Roots Reggae. Championed in the UK by the likes of John Peel, reggae soon entered the mainstream, with artists from Eric Clapton to the Clash adding reggae numbers to their repertoire and homegrown acts like UB40 topping the charts.

The song *Tom Hark* will have been many people's first exposure to African music; in the 1950s even The Queen and Prince Philip had bopped to the contagious kwela tune covered by the Ted Heath Orchestra. Recently the music of sub-Saharan Africa has found a new audience in the UK thanks to musicians like Peter Gabriel and DJs Andy Kershaw and Charlie Gillett.

The fiddle and harp (50p) represent the sound of Britain's Celtic fringe. Traditional Celtic music is still heard at pubs and dances all over Scotland and Ireland, but it isn't just the preserve of bearded men in chunky sweaters; traditional instruments like the fiddle and bagpipes have been bolstered by the electric guitar and bass together with unexpected imports like the Greek Bouzouki as the music continues to evolve. Celtic music has influenced artists like Kate Bush, Elvis Costello and U2, while bands like the Pogues draw a capacity audience. Meanwhile, contemporary artists like the Afro-Celtic Sound System are producing some of the most innovative sounds around.

Jazz and Blues, represented by the sax player and the guitarist (72p) have probably had more influence on the UK sound scene than any other kind of music. Asking where jazz comes from is a big question. Musicologists say it has roots in the spirituals, blues and ragtime music of the USA, which was itself rooted in the music of western Africa, mixed up with holy songs, hill-billy tunes and a little military band music. Constantly evolving, jazz spread across the USA to become the soundtrack for the first half of the 20th century, thanks to musicians like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. In the UK, a long line of distinguished artists, from Humphrey Littleton and Ronnie Scott to Jamiroquai and Courtney Pine, continue the legacy of UK jazz.

Growing out of field hollers, spirituals and praise songs of former slaves, the Blues, with its characteristic twelve-bar progression and its lyrics of lost love, oppression and poverty, was the springboard for American Rock 'n' Roll in the 1950s. While the Beatles were selling Rock 'n' Roll back to the States in the 1960s, British Bluesmen like John Mayall and Alexis Korner were nurturing the talents of Eric Clapton, Peter Green and Jimmy Page. As the 1960s turned into the 1970s, British Blues was to mutate into Heavy Rock as British bands like Cream and Led Zepplin conquered the world.

The last stamp (£1.19) represents the sensual rhythms of South America. With thousands of Londoners turning out to enjoy the Latino beat of the eighth Carnival Del Pueblo in August, a maraca player and a pair of Salsa dancers represent the latest musical sensation to sweep the country ●

