

Faces band performing at the ‘Goodbye Summer’ rock concert at the Oval in 1971.

HOW MUSIC

carried Bangladesh’s struggle to the world

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

Wars are remembered not only through dates and declarations, but through voices, images, and sounds that refuse to fade. The Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 survived erasure because it was carried beyond the battlefield—into songs sung on crackling radios, poems recited in packed halls, photographs passed from hand to hand, and films that bore witness to both atrocity and courage.

This artistic resistance did not stop at Bangladesh’s borders. From concert halls and stadiums thousands of miles away, artists transformed grief into solidarity and outrage into action. Without these cultural interventions, it is hard to imagine how the world might have recognised our struggle as its own. Art endures because it does what politics alone cannot: it fixes memory, awakens conscience, and turns spectators into participants. In 1971, artists did not merely respond to history—they helped shape it.

The ‘grand mushaira’ and a poem for Bangladesh
During the Liberation War, India

extended its support not only at the state level but also through an outpouring of individual solidarity. This was true not just in West Bengal, but also as far away as Bombay and Maharashtra. Writers, artists, and intellectuals all across India stood firmly beside Bangladesh.

To support the refugees and the freedom fighters of Bangladesh, a grand mushaira was organised on May 13, 1971 at Bombay’s renowned Rang Bhavan auditorium. The event brought together celebrated Urdu poets Kaifi Azmi and Sahir Ludhianvi, actress Meena Kumari, and many other notable figures. It was here that Kaifi Azmi recited his powerful poem, Bangladesh.

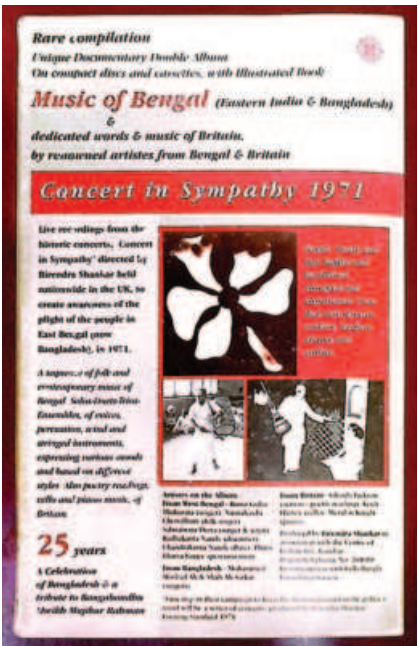
In his book *Bhalobasay Barano Haat*, Matiur Rahman recounts the dedication of the poet through the words of the poet’s wife, actress Shawkat Kaifi. She once mentioned that poet Azmi had devoted himself wholeheartedly to supporting Bangladesh’s struggle. He felt a deep affection and special connection with the people of Bangladesh—whom he saw as progressive, warm-hearted, and profoundly humane—and that love moved him to write for Bangladesh. Poet Azmi also recited the same poem at another mushaira in Kolkata, presided over by the eminent writer Sajjad Zaheer. The poem beautifully captured the unwavering resistance of our people during the Liberation War. Its final stanza read:

*How senseless you are!
The tanks you have received as alms
you roll them onto my heart,
all day and night you rain napalm on me.
Listen, you will tire one day.
How will you shackle my hands?
My hands are one, forty million.
Which head will you axe?
I have seventy million heads on my shoulders.*

Strings & Stars: A stadium full of solidarity
In Bombay, another significant cultural initiative in support of Bangladesh took place on November 24, 1971. That evening, the historic Brabourne Cricket Stadium became a powerful site of solidarity as the Bangladesh Sahayak Committee of Maharashtra organised a grand programme titled “Strings and Stars: In Aid of Refugees from Bangladesh.” The programme aimed to raise funds for Bangladeshi refugees and freedom fighters, and to channel public outrage into collective action.

Tickets for the event were sold from 36 different locations across the city. Special buses and trains were arranged to accommodate the crowds, while the Indian Navy assisted with stage construction and logistics—underscoring the scale and seriousness of the effort.

The programme was directed by actor Pran, with music led by Kishore Kumar



An album published on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of ‘Concert in Sympathy 1971’.

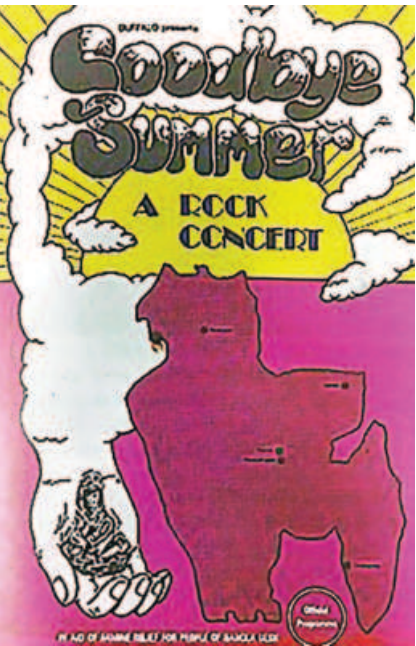


Poet Kaifi Azmi reciting his poem Bangladesh at the grand mushaira.

and Lata Mangeshkar. A hundred solo performers, guided by Kalyanji–Anandji, filled the stadium with music. Pran himself performed qawwali, comedians Mehmood and Johnny Walker brought moments of laughter, and dancers such as Padma Khanna and Lakshmi Chhaya captivated the audience. Leading stars—from Rajesh Khanna to Amitabh Bachchan—also appeared on stage.

Nearly 60 prominent figures from acting, dance, and music came together that night, holding the packed stadium enthralled for hours. The list of participants read like a roll call of Indian cinema and music in the 1960s and 70s—Dilip Kumar, Nargis, Sunil Dutt, Manna Dey, R.D. Burman, Mahendra Kapoor, Waheeda Rehman, Shashi Kapoor, Jaya Bhaduri, and many others.

By the end of the evening, nearly five lakh rupees had been raised—accounting for half of the Bangladesh Sahayak Committee’s total donation



Poster of the ‘Goodbye Summer’ concert.

target. In an interview for Shahriar Kabir’s documentary, Waheeda Rehman, who served as the chairman of the programme committee, recalled that all the artists performed without taking any remuneration. The collected funds were used to supply medicines, warm clothing, ambulances, and other essentials for Bangladesh’s freedom fighters.

A distant war in the London theatre
Fifty-four years ago, hundreds of Londoners also gathered at Sadler’s Wells Theatre to show their support for Bangladesh’s struggle for liberation. That event, along with similar concerts staged across seven different English cities in the following weeks, came to be known as Concert in Sympathy 1971. Though more intimate in scale than the celebrated Madison Square Garden concert organised by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar, these concerts carried a depth of feeling that resonated far beyond the stage. Sadler’s Wells alone hosted three shows in a single day.

The driving force behind the initiative was Birendra Shankar, nephew of Ravi Shankar and founder of the Sanskritik Centre of Indian Arts. Drawing on his experience of organising major performances at venues such as the Royal Albert Hall and the Piccadilly Theatre, Birendra brought together artists from both parts of Bengal, British musicians, and public figures—including Oscar-winning actress Glenda Jackson. His aim, as he described it, was to “show something of the soul of the millions”. The programme became a rare cultural dialogue. Bengali folk traditions, songs by both Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam, and depictions of

rural life unfolded alongside Western compositions performed by British artists. The concert opened with the azan at dawn, followed by a Hindu devotional song and a symbolic scene of a farmer heading to his fields.

Jazz vocalist Norma Winstone, pianist John Taylor and Marilyn Knight, and cellist Keith Harvey took part, while Glenda Jackson recited poetry. A sculpture donated by French artist Jephian de Villiers was also displayed for auction to aid Bangladeshi refugees. The concert flyer captured both grief and defiance: “A battered people’s Art lives.” Supported by parliamentarians, cultural leaders, and intellectuals, Concert in Sympathy bore witness to Bangladesh’s suffering as well as its steadfast hope.

The ‘Goodbye Summer’ at Oval
On 18 September 1971, the Oval cricket ground in South London reverberated with the sounds of rock in aid of Bangladesh’s war. Goodbye Summer may not have achieved the enduring fame of the Madison Square Garden Concert for Bangladesh six weeks earlier, but the day-long festival had its own constellation of stars. Headlined by The Who and Faces, at the height of Rod Stewart and Ronnie Wood’s fame, the concert drew a crowd comparable to the twin shows in New York. The performances of both bands truly transformed the evening. Their electrifying performances, coupled with colourful, flamboyant costumes, turned the concert into a spectacle of noise, energy, and sheer joy. Yet beneath the music and revelry, the concert carried a profound purpose. It helped to raise funds for Bangladesh during a time of extreme hardship. For Londoners and the performers alike, the event became an expression of alliance—a chance to channel grief and empathy into meaningful action.

In a 2019 interview, guitarist Pete Townshend of The Who recalled the event. “Rod Stewart kicked out 500 footballs into the crowd,” he said, “which bounced around for hours, all the way through our show.” The concert was more than a rock show—it was a reflection of a generation that grew up in London’s multicultural neighbourhoods, a mosaic of Polish, Jewish, Japanese, Somali, Caribbean, and Bangladeshi families. “These were our people,” Townshend reflected. “We adored them. We wanted to help.”

Though the event is less remembered today, the funds raised through the concert helped those in desperate need. It made the love and solidarity of Bangladesh’s international friends palpable, and stands as a testament to how music and compassion can merge in a moment that is both celebratory and profoundly humane.

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Advertisement for the “Strings & Stars” event held at Bombay’s Brabourne Stadium.