When you watch the SherePunjab Bhangra (SPB) troupe roar on stage, there are two things you notice right away. One, there are women in a performance that has traditionally been a male preserve. Two, the troupe could be the poster group for racial integration as it has Chinese, Malay, Indian and Caucasian members.

American Betty Whittaker, who grew up on a small farm in Washington State, moved to Singapore more than five years ago and had never heard of bhangra or the Sikh religion until she saw a performance at the International Community School in Clementi where her husband is a teacher.

"Bhangra was so fun. I had never done any dancing so it was quite a shock when I joined. It shocked my parents. They watched me dance once and they could see how much fun I was having and how joyful I was when I dapped," she said.

Ms Whittaker joined the troupe’s weekly bhangra aerobics class at the Silat Road Sikh Centre, next to the Silat Road Sikh Temple. As she improved her bhangra skills, she became a part of the dance troupe that performs at various venues. In 2008, she was part of SPB’s all-girl dance team Shernia Di Shaan which came in third at a regional bhangra competition. She now choreographs some of the performances for the troupe.

Another non-Sikh choreographer is Singaporean Chong Ai Ling who joined the group in 2006 when it performed for the International Monetary Fund and World Bank meetings in Singapore.

The psychology and sociology major with the SIM University had her first brush with bhangra when she joined the Young Sikh Association’s (YSA) community service project in Punam in 2003. So captivated was she by the music and the dance, she joined SPB. She admitted that prior to the YSA project, she didn’t have that many Indian or Sikh friends.

"It took me a while to bond with them. Being in this group, I opened up a lot. There is so much more interaction with other cultures, learning about other religions and races but within your own comfort zone," she said.

Ms Nurul Badriyah, on the other hand, was very familiar with bhangra as she was part of the Cornell University bhangra troupe during her four years of psychology studies there. She saw the college troupe perform at an event and was so captivated by the energy of the dance, she auditioned for a spot on the team.

She explained that bhangra was very popular on the east and west coasts of the United States as well as in Canada and troupes across the country would compete on a national level.

When she returned to Singapore in 2008, she wanted to continue to bhangra as her family and husband were supportive of her hobby. "One of my concerns was that it would be culturally exclusive unlike in the US. But when my friend asked me to join the troupe, I found them very inclusive. Really like the energy of the group," she said.

SPB, which was formed in 2002, began as an all-Sikh group like most bhangra troupes. Mr Jasbir Singh, who identifies himself as the group’s chief executive officer, told tabla! that when he was in junior college, he and a fellow SPB member introduced bhangra to their friends in school in 2004.

"That’s where the other races started joining in and they wanted to continue after they finished college," said the Singapore Management University social sciences student.

The result, a rainbow bhangra troupe. Registered as a limited liability company, it offers bhangra aerobics classes to local and international schools and performs at least four times a month at various events.

They have performed for church groups, for interfaith symposiums, awards shows and, last year, for President S.R. Nathan at the Labour Day celebrations at the Istana. Members of the troupe, which is largely made up of students from the local universities and young working adults, pitch in to perform or take a class, depending on their schedules.

The group also takes the initiative to interact with the crowd after their performances and events to spread the word about their classes and the dance troupe.

Said Mr Singh: "It is racial integration through dance. We don’t tolerate any form of racism in our team. We want to promote that we are colour blind; just dance and have a good time."

Which is exactly what Miss Chong appreciates about the group. "I was enjoying the music and I knew I could dance. After we bonded, it has become more than about the music or the dance, it was about the bond. That’s why I am still here and for the love of bhangra," she said.