

World Grooves

What is! This thing called.... World Music

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‘World Music’; if you stop and really think about it, what does it mean?

Hi and welcome back to World Grooves. Over the last few years I have been battling to accept the use of the term ‘World music’. This has been fuelled by the fact that I basically don’t agree with the mainstream perception and implications of such term.

The official website of the World Music Awards (WMA) www.worldmusicawards.com says that: *“World music pretty much encompasses everything that doesn't fit comfortably onto an American Top 40 pop chart. From traditional ethnic music to foreign language pop music, the phrase "World Music" covers a whole lotta ground”*.

So long as it comes from anywhere else other than America, England, Australia and Canada it’s got to be World music. Well, that’s a bit extreme perhaps, but since the National Academy of Recording Artist and Sciences coined the term at the American Grammy Awards in 1991, World music has been adopted by the music industry as the general descriptor. Best Contemporary World Music album winners include: Mickey Hart and guests (percussionists from all over the globe); Sergio Mendes (Brazil), V.M.Bhatt & Ry Cooder, Ali Farka Toure & Ry Cooder and Deep Forest. The Awards also include Best Traditional World Music Album, but more on this later.

So what is, or rather, what isn’t World music?

Millions of CDs are sold each year under this banner. Throughout the 1990s most record stores would put African, Indian, South-East Asian, South American and Middle Eastern CDs all in one basket named “World Music”. Presently some degree of cultural and genre identity has been restored by CD shops by at least differentiating between countries. The best example of this that I have seen is the Virgin Mega Store in Paris where a whole floor is dedicated to different types of World music and includes folk, indigenous, contemporary, and World jazz amongst others. It is worthwhile noting though that the prolific French World music industry takes this subject fairly seriously, perhaps this explains the diligent approach to CD classification.

But how about the musicians and record companies that cross cultural borders with their work? They are the ones creating the music, experimenting and occasionally challenging the status quo of the mainstream. How do musicians from all parts of the globe feel about the generalisation and exploitation of their music reduced to a simple word? Well, if you are Ali Farka Toure (see AG, World grooves, Vol 52), Ry Cooder, Vishwa Mohan Bhatt or John McLaughlin’s Shakti you are clearly entitled to cringe (as I do) when their music is referred to as ‘World’; since it raps up four distinct music traditions and hybrids into one neat little box. In this case they are: West African Mali, Eclectic American Blues, Hindustani slide guitar and Indo-Jazz respectively.



Not surprisingly, the effect of such blurring is that the consumer becomes ill informed and, alarmingly, the mainstream media perpetrates the vagueness of it all with very little questioning. This general and perhaps culturally oppressing attitude raises a number of questions about ethics and fragmentation of identity in music. It may be a slight generalisation, but the Music Industry ‘movers and shakers’ are only too happy to create the impression that World music is a homogeneous mass of non-western origin as I have already mentioned in reference to the WMA. Such distorted information is penetrating the greater consciousness at furious pace and even musicians (or aspiring ones) can fall pray to such generalisation.

A question of identity

Recently I had a discussion with my Indian record company director from underscorerecords.com. Aneesh Pradhan. We had an exchange of ideas on what classification would be most suitable to describe the release of my new CD, Calcutta Express; the result of my collaboration with *santoor*¹ player Sandip Chatterjee in India. My view was that the CD should be described as World Jazz or Intercultural World music and not ‘Experimental Music’ (EM) as the record company suggested.

At first I was uncomfortable with the term EM because I felt it would misdirect the CD into any of the EM shelves in record shops; i.e. Contemporary classical, European classical music, Art Rock, Electronica and even the derogatorily described ‘Ethnic Experimental Music’.

Underscore suggested that: *“The record shops will categorize albums as per their choice and that the artist or record company’s descriptions will not in any way impact their decision”*. More significantly Mr Pradhan went on to say that:

“World Music, with or without prefixes, is unsuitable because it has several political overtones, which in fact look down upon any form of music that is other than conventional Western forms. The result is that the rest of the world seems to be a homogeneous mass and a counterpart to Western forms”.

This last point rekindled some ideas of my own from my university days. In my Master thesis - Intercultural Composition and Improvisation - I questioned the fragmentation of cultural identity within the broad spectrum of ‘World Music’ as an industrial and speculative term.

Pradhan went on to say that:

“It is for this very reason that Indian or South Asian music doesn’t have a separate presence in the Grammy, whereas there is a separate award for Latin (Pop) music. I think Indian musicians need to think hard before they can ascribe to the term World Music as it questions their very being as musicians in the larger context”.

It’s easy to see how this viewpoint can apply to a wide spectrum of non-western musicians today.

In the 19th and 20th Centuries the creation of new music resulted from factors such as migration, invasions, wars and slave trade over a long period of time. These melting pot cultures gave birth to styles such as Jazz (Afro-Antillean-Caribbean-European marching band music), Afro-Cuban (Spanish-African-West Indian), Brazilian Samba (Portuguese-African-European classical) and Latin Jazz, (Afro-Cuban-New York Jazz). At the time though, it was never called World Music; each tradition was deep and strong, making it a relatively natural process to experiment and combine the common denominators as the foundation for new music.



Perhaps the Grammy and the Australian APRA might one day adopt the term Experimental World Music (EWM) Awards rather than Contemporary. EWM CDs would be identifiable by content; Afro-Cuban-Mali EW or American-Hindustani EW Blues for example. This way EW would both describe a process and make a clear distinction from folk, classical and indigenous music genres that should not be generalized under Traditional World Music; how do you compare the best of Indian classical music with the best of Traditional Irish music or Native American Indian music, and on what aesthetic grounds? Why not Best Indian Classical or Best Traditional Irish categories? I think it's a joke and a reflection of corporate imperialism in action. I'd be interested in your thoughts; please contact me through the website.

Next issue we change gear when I begin a series of columns on improvisation. Practice from the head, play from the heart.
GS

References

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Taylor D, Timothy. *Global Pop*, Rutledge (GB), 1997.
World Music Awards official website: www.worldmusicawards.com

