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Crossing Music border's: "I Hate World Music!"

I hate world music. That's probably one of the perverse reasons I have been asked to write about it. The term is a catchall that commonly refers to non-Western music of any and all sorts, popular music, traditional music and even classical music. It's a marketing as well as a pseudomusical term -- and a name for a bin in the record store signifying stuff that doesn't belong anywhere else in the store. What's in that bin ranges from the most blatantly commercial music produced by a country, like Hindi film music (the singer Asha Bhosle being the best well known example), to the ultra-sophisticated, super-cosmopolitan art-pop of Brazil (Caetano Veloso, Tom Zé, Carlinhos Brown); from the somewhat bizarre and surreal concept of a former Bulgarian state-run folkloric choir being arranged by classically trained, Soviet-era composers (Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares) to Norteño songs from Texas and northern Mexico glorifying the exploits of drug dealers (Los Tigres del Norte).

Albums by Selena, Ricky Martin and Los Del Rio (the Macarena kings), artists who sell millions of records in the United States alone, are racked next to field recordings of Thai hill tribes. Equating apples and oranges indeed.

So, from a purely democratic standpoint, one in which all music is equal, regardless of sales and slickness of production, this is a musical utopia.

So Why Am I Complaining?

In my experience, the use of the term world music is a way of dismissing artists or their music as irrelevant to one's own life. It's a way of relegating this "thing" into the realm of something exotic and therefore cute, weird but safe, because exotica is beautiful but irrelevant; they are, by definition, not like us. Maybe that's why I hate the term. It groups everything and anything that isn't "us" into "them." This grouping is a convenient way of not seeing a band or artist as a creative individual, albeit from a culture somewhat different from that seen on American television. It's a label for anything at all that is not sung in English or anything that doesn't fit into the Anglo-Western pop universe this year. (So Ricky Martin is allowed out of the world music ghetto -- for a while, anyway. Next year, who knows? If he makes a plena record, he might have to go back to the salsa bins and the Latin mom and pop record stores.) It's a none too subtle way of reasserting the hegemony of Western pop culture. It ghettoizes most of the world's music. A bold and audacious move, White Man!

There is some terrific music being made all over the world. In fact, there is more music, in sheer quantity, currently defined as world music, than any other kind. Not just kinds of music, but volume of recordings as well. When we talk about world music we find ourselves talking about 99 percent of the music on this planet. It would be strange to imagine, as many multinational corporations seem to, that Western pop holds the copyright on musical creativity.

No, the fact is, Western pop is the fast food of music, and there is more exciting creative music making going on outside the Western pop tradition than inside it. There is so much incredible noise happening that we'll never exhaust it. For example, there are guitar bands in Africa that can be, if you let them, as inspiring and transporting as any kind of rock, pop, soul, funk or disco you grew up with. And what is exciting for me is that they have taken elements of global (Western?) music apart, examined the pieces to see what might be of use and then re-invented and reassembled the parts to their own ends. Thus creating something entirely new. (Femi Kuti gave a great show the other night that was part Coltrane, part James Brown and all African, just like his daddy, Fela Kuti, the great Nigerian musical mastermind.)

To restrict your listening to English-language pop is like deciding to eat the same meal for the rest of your life. The "no-surprise surprise," as the Holiday Inn advertisement claims, is reassuring, I guess, but lacks kick. As ridiculous as they often sound, the conservative critics of rock-and-roll, and more recently of techno and rave, are not far off the mark. For at it's best, music truly is subversive and dangerous. Thank the gods.

Hearing the right piece of music at the right time of your life can inspire a radical change, destructive personal behavior or even fascist politics. Sometimes all at the same time.

On the other hand, music can inspire love, religious ecstasy, cathartic release, social bonding and a glimpse of another dimension. A sense that there is another time, another space and another, better, universe. It can heal a broken heart, offer a shoulder to cry on and a friend when no one else understands. There are times when you want to be transported, to get your mind around some stuff it never encountered before. And what if the thing transporting you doesn't come from your neighborhood?

Why Bother?

This interest in music not like that made in our own little villages (Dumbarton, Scotland, and Arbutus, Md., in my own case) is not, as it's often claimed, cultural tourism, because once you've let something in, let it grab hold of you, you're forever changed. Of course, you can also listen and remain completely unaffected and unmoved -- like a tourist. Your loss. The fact is, after listening to some of this music for a while, it probably won't seem exotic any more, even if you still don't understand all the words. Thinking of things as exotic is only cool when it's your sister, your co-worker or wife; it's sometimes beneficial to exoticize that which has become overly familiar. But in other circumstances, viewing people and cultures as exotic is a distancing mechanism that too often allows for exploitation and racism.

Maybe it's naïve, but I would love to believe that once you grow to love some aspect of a culture -- its music, for instance -- you can never again think of the people of that culture as less than yourself. I would like to believe that if I am deeply moved by a song originating from some place other than my own hometown, then I have in some way shared an experience with the people of that culture. I have been pleasantly contaminated. I can identify in some small way with it and its people. Not that I will ever experience music exactly the same way as those who make it. I am not Hank Williams, or even Hank Jr., but I can still love his music and be moved by it. Doesn't mean I have to live like him. Or take as many drugs as he did, or, for that matter, as much as

the great flamenco singer Cameron de la Isla did.

That's what art does; it communicates the vibe, the feeling, the attitude toward our lives, in a way that is personal and universal at the same time. And we don't have to go through all the personal torment that the artist went through to get it. I would like to think that if you love a piece of music, how can you help but love, or at least respect, the producers of it? On the other hand, I know plenty of racists who love "soul" music, rap and rhytm-and-blues, so dream on, Dave.

The Myth of the Authentic

The issue of "authenticity" is such a weird can of worms. Westerners get obsessed with it. They agonize over which is the "true" music, the real deal. I question the authenticity of some of the new-age ethnofusion music that's out there, but I also know that to rule out everything I personally abhor would be to rule out the possibility of a future miracle. Everybody knows the world has two types of music -- my kind and everyone else's. And even my kind ain't always so great.

What is considered authentic today was probably some kind of bastard fusion a few years ago. An all-Japanese salsa orchestra's record (Orquestra de la Luz) was No. 1 on the salsa charts in the United States not long ago. Did the New York salseros care? No, most loved the songs and were frankly amazed. African guitar bands were doing their level best to copy Cuban rumbas, and in their twisted failure they came up with something new. So let's not make any rules about who can make a specific style of music.

Mr. Juju himself, King Sunny Adé, name-checks the country and western crooner Jim Reeves as an influence. True. Rumor has it that the famous Balinese monkey chant was coordinated and choreographed by a German! The first South African pop record I bought was all tunes with American car race themes -- the Indy 500 and the like. With sound effects, too! So let's forget about this authenticity bugaboo. If you are transported by the music, then knowing that the creators had open ears can only add to the enjoyment.

White folks needed to see Leadbelly in prison garb to feel they were getting the real thing. They need to be assured that rappers are "keeping it real," they need their Cuban musicians old and sweet, their Eastern and Asian artists "spiritual." The myths and clichés of national and cultural traits flourish in the marketing of music. There is the myth of the untutored, innocent savant whose rhymes contain funky Zen-like pearls of wisdom -- the myth that exotic "traditional" music is more honest, more soulful and more in touch with a people's real and true feelings than the kid wearing jeans and the latest sports gear on Mexican television.

There is a perverse need to see foreign performers in their native dress rather than in the T-shirts and baggies that they usually wear off stage. We don't want them looking too much like us, because then we assume that their music is calculated, marketed, impure. Heaven forbid they should be at least as aware of the larger world as we are. All of which might be true, but more important, their larger awareness might also be relevant to their music, which in turn might connect it to our own lives and situations. Heaven forbid.

La Nueva Generación

In the last couple of years, there have been any number of articles in newspapers and magazines about how Latin music in particular was finally going to become hugely popular in the U.S. of A. Half -- yes, half -- of the current top 10 singles in Britain, that hot and sweaty country, are sort of Latin, if you count Geri Halliwell's "Mi Chico Latino," and why not? The others are watered-down remakes of Perez Prado's hits from the 50's and 60's. The Buena Vista Social Club record is the No. 1 selling record, in any category, in funky Germany. Les Nubians, a French-African group, is getting played on urban (translate as "black") radio in America. So is this a trend or what? Are these more than summer novelty tunes for anglos? Are we really going to learn to dance, or is this some kind of aberration?

But what about the alterna-Latino bands that are touring the United States and Europe in increasing numbers. The Columbian band Bloque (which, I confess, is on my label) was named best band of the year by a Chicago critic; Los Fabulosos Cadillacs won a Grammy last year. Both bands, and many, many others, mix the grooves of their neighborhoods with the sounds and attitudes of the North American tunes they also grew up with. They are a generation with a double heritage, and their music expresses it.

It's tough for this bunch to crack the American market: they're not always cute, safe or exotic. Their music is often more innovative than that of their northern counterparts, which is intimidating. And as cool as they are, they insist on singing in their own language, to an audience that identifies completely with them, thereby making it more difficult to gain a foothold in the States.

These bands are the musical equivalent of a generation of Latin American writers, including Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, José Amado and Mario Vargas Llosa, that was referred to as the Boom. These musicians are defining their generation, finding a unique voice, and will influence countless others outside their home countries. Here, I believe, is where change will happen. Although they don't sell very many records yet, these and others (for things analogous to this are happening everywhere, in Africa, in Morocco, in Turkey) will plant the seeds, and while I enjoy hearing Ricky Martin's merengue on the radio, these others will change my life.