

why world music?

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Brian Eno discusses the role of world music and the potential that musical cross-pollination has for bringing people of diverse cultures together as it builds bridges between normally separate worlds. Eno writes of several changes in the way music is understood, and how the differences between all cultures, "high" and "low," "us" and "them," and "Western" and "other," are collapsing. This heralds the potential for a new openness and empathy for different sounds and different worlds, judged not on the basis of pre-established Western codes, but by new, emerging criteria, which include consideration of the way different forms of music personally affect us and of their sources worldwide.

The last decade has seen a huge upsurge of interest in what is now called "World Music." The technical reason for this is that records have become available allowing people to participate in the music of other cultures with an ease and breadth that was not possible earlier. But actually, that situation has existed for a long time—since the "ethnic" recordings of the forties and fifties. But it is only comparatively recently that this has interested more than a handful of specialists.

I believe that this new, widening popularity results from something other than simple availability. One of these factors is the increasing ability of people to listen to songs without being concerned to know what they mean: the "language barrier," in the past always cited as the main reason that "ethnic" music could not become popular, has suddenly fallen. It now seems that nobody minds if Salif Keita sings in Arabic, Youssou N'Dour in Wolof and Zvuki Mu in Russian. Perhaps this means that people are listening to music now, rather than specifically to songs: perhaps it also means that the composers and musicians of the world are making new forms of music that do not depend on language as much as they used to.

But perhaps a more important reason is the breakdown of a world view

that says: "We, and our values, are the hub, the norm, the center, and everyone else is a kind of aberration from us." Of course, this view would lead one to regard other musics as, at best, curiously exotic and at worst, proof of all the nasty things people like to think about each other. And within this "us and them" distinction, there was another subdivision. Our version of it was called the Western classical tradition, and it maintained that there was High Music—the type that the people who wrote the history books liked—and there was all the rest, the stuff that everyone else liked. This picture maintained that innovation always worked from the top downwards—that the pure ideas of the great composers found their way, in degenerate form, into the popular music, and that, therefore, these popular musics were necessarily dilute and comparatively less "valuable" and "enduring." Occasionally there was an acknowledgment that this flow could be reversed—Kodály and Bartók, for example, borrowed from rustic folk dances—but then it was assumed that the raw material of folk culture would be enhanced and ennobled in the hands of a great composer.

Distinctions of this kind are interesting because they notify us about the limits of our empathy. If we really have no feeling whatsoever for the music that so deeply moves somebody else, surely this indicates that there is a part of their psyche that is closed to us. How important is that part? What does music represent in this sense?

Take a particular case: what does it tell you about somebody that they begin to like (for example) West African music? Well, it tells you that their focus of attention as a listener is starting to shift. Nigerian music downplays harmony and melody in favour of extremely rich and complex rhythmic meshes. These engage a different part of you: they are extremely physical, sexual and movement-oriented. They deal with the body, an area that Western classical music (for example) rarely addresses. When a listener is moved by this music, and is allowing herself to accept the idea that her body is a fit focus for artistic attention, she is saying (in the words of the artist Peter Schmidt) that the body is the large brain. Our cultures, which have made such a big distinction between "men of action" and "men of thought," might find this hard to accept; all our hierarchies are based upon the idea that the brain is good and the body inferior. I believe that in the process of being moved by Nigerian music, you begin to empathize with another view of the universe, another picture of how things work and how they fit together. And in noticing how you have the capacity to empathize with that, perhaps you take a further step and begin to suppose that the cultural values are also "possible" for you. It doesn't mean that you are going to become Nigerian, but might mean that

you can begin to get a feeling of what it is like to be Nigerian, what kind of world you might be looking at, through what kind of eyes.

It would be naive to assume that this broadening of understanding automatically leads to something like world peace. (It is, after all, standard operating behavior in the subversion industry to know your enemy at the deepest cultural level so that you can eliminate him!) No, I wouldn't make any such happy predictions—understanding, like a knife, has many uses.

My hope for the future is not that everyone will sit around the lunar campfire discussing, in Esperanto, the bad old days of division and strife. I wouldn't expect that. What I want to see is the demise of fundamentalism in favour of pragmatism.

By fundamentalism I mean any philosophy that thinks it has the final and unique answer, that believes that there is one essential plan underlying the workings of the universe, and that seeks to make sure everyone else gets persuaded to fall in line with it.

By pragmatism I mean improvisation: the belief that there are many approaches, that whatever works in the light of our present knowledge is a good course of action, and that what is the best course of action for us, here and now, might not be for someone else, there or then.

I want to see societies (and people) who know how to improvise, who can throw together a social mode (tuxedo and black Thai) just for the evening, who can move fluently and easily between different social and personal vocabularies as the situation changes, who don't feel lost without the religious reassurance of "thisism" and "thatism." I see these people as hunter-gatherers in the great flux of the world's cultures, enjoying a rich diet of ideas and techniques and styles, creating their own special mixes. There is no snobbism in this picture—no material too common or too exotic to be used, no simple distinction between real and make-believe. This kind of improvisational flexibility entails a continuous questioning of boundaries and categories, a refusal to accept that names necessarily fit accurately onto what is being named. When languages are developing and changing as rapidly as they do now, and everyone is a rap artist, you need all the voices you can get.