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I Like Listening to Awesome Tapes from Africa

By Andy Moor et al

The recent resurgence of interest in African music arguably breaks with existing stereotypes only to replace them with new ones. But who is benefiting from African music's soaring popularity?

How are the existing scenes of living musicians in African countries responding to this interest? Are the popularising efforts of Giles Peterson and Damon Albarn a new scramble for Africa or a case of world music 2.0? Can meaningful collaborations between musicians who share an anomalous or overtly hostile relation to the national and genre traditions they're supposed to come from disrupt normalising anthropological tendencies? Mute invited Andy Moor of Dutch music group The Ex to initiate a discussion over some of these questions and more

World Music

Andy (Andy Moor): I find the phrase 'world music' pretty meaningless and the whole idea of 'marketing world music as a musical genre in itself totally absurd. But it is only a marketing phrase. In the '70s and '80s there were a few enthusiastic labels releasing small numbers of LPs of amazing music from all over the world and a few courageous fanatics promoting gigs and organising festivals, and now the labels are aware and conscious that there is this phenomenon called 'world music' which they can package and sell as a genre in itself. It's a ridiculous phrase but it sells a lot. Every single cassette shop in Addis Abeba sells what these marketeers would call 'world music' and 90 percent is still sold on cassette there, but in the hundreds of thousands, and by artists that most 'world music' fans have or will never hear. Brian Shimkovitz's awesome tape label is a worthy enterprise. He is not a profiteer. He is simply providing a resource of free music that we would otherwise never hear. Most of the artists on the cassettes are probably either dead, or if they are alive and still active as musicians, they may at some point benefit from people over here being turned on to their music, music they may never have heard and, through that, go searching for more. It's hardly third world exploitation. The uploading of obscure music is happening everywhere and with every style of music, not only African music. Brian is a music fan sharing his enthusiasm for this music with the rest of the world. This is not where we should be pointing our finger. I would go more for the bigger 'world music' labels who are constantly meddling with the music of all these African bands and dumping them after a couple of years to go in search for the next new thing. This is far more damaging to the music and the musicians than putting up a few cassettes online for free.

World Music Illustration (group)

All illustrations by Unterschreber

The whole emphasis on the west stealing and looting the culture of Africa seems to overlook the fact that the theft and influence always move in both directions, and what a great thing that is. Folk music is active, alive, organic, constantly changing and adjusting to its environment. Unlike sacred music or classical music it is not a static unchangeable form and this search for authenticity is for me one of the most dangerous and pointless endeavours of some 'world music' hunters of some pure untouched

music that they can peddle to the world. Musics from all cultures flow in all directions and that movement is what keeps the music alive and developing.

Popularity

Andy: I'm not sure African music is more popular today than it was 10, 20 or 30 years ago. Today, access to the music has become limitless and this means more people are likely to come across music and discover things by chance by simply keeping their ears open. It's a great moment in historical terms because so much obscure unknown great music is resurfacing because of this unlimited accesibility. It's about time that this music gets the attention it deserves after having been drowned by years of shit music being forced upon our ears by the industry. Twenty years ago when my curiosity for African music appeared I went to the library and discovered a great pile of old field recording records in a dusty section of the music department ... a great resource but still quite limited in scope ... for someone who now wants to undertake a similar exploration they will never have enough time in their life to listen to what is available, let alone read, and I guess you could call that some kind of development.

Money

Andy: The issue about paying artists is a complicated one. If Brian (Awesome Tapes) attempted to start searching out these musicians and offering them micro payments for a few cassettes he offered for free online, he would end up spending five times as much money in the search and distribution as on the payment. Does that mean he should stop putting them up for free? Not everything has to have a price on it. The same goes for the Hugh Tracey recordings rereleased on Michael Baird's label. In this case none of the musicians are alive and anyway there is very little money left to distribute once all the work - compiling, travelling, remastering, artwork distribution and manufacturing of the CD - has been done. These CDs sell in the hundreds, not thousands. This is not the area of music I would recommend any producer or label boss to start working in if he's looking to make some fast cash. Michael's motive for releasing this music was to share this extraordinary resource with the rest of the world and show people that there is and has been brilliant bizarre and fantastic music existing in these countries that none of us knew about. The music sounds abstract to our ears, though the musicians playing it would never describe it so. This music has been painstakingly and passionately recorded over 50 years ago and for most of that time has been sitting in a library slowly disintegrating. By rescuing this music Michael is reintroducing a small segment of this culture back into the world making it once again accesible and giving it life again. So if a DJ in London in 2008 decides to use a sample from material recorded in 1950 in the Congolese forest it's an incredible cycle and journey that this music has made and that shouldn't be blocked by issues of royalties or ownership.

Perhaps a better way of returning this music to its rightful owners, which are the people of whatever tribe or country the music originates from, would be to make these recordings easily available to them either by releasing them on cassette or CD at very low affordable prices. This is something that could be done without any loss of income from sales in the West and ensure that this music is heard once again by its own people as well as by us. These are easy solutions and ones often overlooked because of copyright and legal complications, but applying western copyright laws to countries like Ethiopia or Uganda is pointless and above all unfair. We released ten thousand cassettes of The Ex and Getachew *Moa Anbessa* in Ethiopia. They sell for less than a Euro apiece in Addis. It seemed like the only fair way to make this music accesible to people who don't have much access to computers or CD players yet, and for promotion we visited taxi stands in Addis in the *piazza* and *mercato* and handed out free cassettes to all the drivers so for the next week we heard our music being played all over the streets of Addis.

We don't need to get our money back on these cassettes. We get our income back on selling CDs in the West and touring. If there is a situation where the artist can be reached and contacted, then of course it is only fair to make some kind of arrangement with the artist. In the case of Mohammed Jimmy Mohammed, because we knew him and his family, Terrie could make small payments to his wife and child after Jimmy died and organise a bank account for him that people could even donate money to if they wanted, and I think it worked best on this one to one level. But the payments are small especially now as CD sales slowly collapse under their own overpriced weight. These musicians are more likely to earn an income by playing in Europe or the US and all we can do is try and make those channels open for them so it's possible.

World Music Illustration (money)

Production

Baird (Michael Baird): Most of the Western producers and labels push the high energy âshake your assâ aspect of African music and the performers are pressured to play only this stuff because they are told that that's what the ignorant white audience want and expect from them. In this way, due to our ignorance and expectations and the label's pressure, we have a damaging effect on the music and the culture. There is also meditative music, sacred music and healing music from nearly all countries in Africa, but we tend to look to the Asian continent for this and in fact we are missing one of the most important and incredibly beautiful aspects of music Africa has to offer.

Andy: Western production values aren't only imposing themselves on African musicians. Western production values impose their awful taste on their own music. That's a sad fact, but an exciting aspect of recent developments in computer software especially of music and film is that kids in Angola, Ethiopia and Ghana now have much easier access to this technology and they can learn to operate these things themselves. This would have been impossible ten years ago.

Rupture (DJ/Rupture): A better approach now if you are a Western producer would be to go to Africa and teach the young kids how to use these machines. They want to learn and they will produce very different results from us which is far more interesting and exciting.

Andy: If we have anything to offer or impose on them better that it is our technical know how rather than our production style or musical taste. But it is a difficult area and our tastes are governed by many complex things. On tour with Djibril Diabate once, the malian cora player, he pulled out a delay pedal or distortion pedal and Terrie and I were both saying to him we preferred his sound without it. He took our advice, but it was a question of our taste versus his, and we felt we had the right to express our opinion on it. He could have rejected it and used a flanger, echo, reverb and overdrive all at once. But I think we would have made this comment to any musician no matter where he was from! Rupture describes it as A&R without the âsharkâ aspect. Give musicianly advice which the artist can take or leave, but what's important is that it comes from a musical standpoint. In this case Terrie is running the Terp label and releases Djibril's music, and he likes the cora sound as an acoustic instrument, and it is this aspect of Djibril's music he is interested in putting out on his label. He releases this music because he likes not to make a business out of it. In this situation where the motive is really the music, he has a right to express that preference.

There are plenty of other labels that might be interested in Djibril's cora with effects pedals music. It is a matter of personal taste, and our tastes of course vary widely within our own culture. For me personally, the use of auto tune on any voice usually makes me run for the next track button. It homogenises and masks the inherent individuality and beauty of any voice. Rupture loves it and believes it enhances the essential elements of the voice, especially arab vocals, he hears something very different from me. The singer wants to use it because it's a modern sounding effect and one that

will make them sound like they are pushing the boundaries of their traditional music. It's a tough call. None of us are right or wrong. In the end we can only rely on the result and what we hear and what we want to hear.

World Music Illustration (studio)

Collaborating and touring with Konono No.1, Tsehaytu Beraki, Djibril Diabate and the Mohammed Jimmy Mohammed Band

Terrie (Terrie Ex): When we toured with Konono or Tsehaytu or Jimmy, we worked together. Sometimes we played together, but that always grew naturally. It should always come from two sides. Sometimes it is more musical to choose not to actually play together. And sometimes suddenly it speaks for itself. On the "Ex 25 years Convoy Tour", seven days on the road with 35 musicians, some really unexpected collaborations developed just from listening with open ears and an open mind.

I think the musicians we choose to play with are all very independent of all this. There is a strong similarity between improvisers like Han Bennink or John Butcher and musicians like Konono, Tsehaytu or Jimmy.

On the subject of being open minded and improvising, the first time Konono came to Europe, they played with us and it was amazing how they coped. They had no idea how things functioned here in the West. Everything was completely new to them, but they improvised. In daily life and onstage where they played great concerts. Their music, here.

Mingiedi, the old bandleader, joined us in our van after about five gigs and started singing Ex songs. He really had studied them. And our playing. All our particular individual manners and styles. And he thought he had learnt something about traditional Dutch music!

Meeting Tsehaytu was also impressive. Old and fragile, but still very brave, strong and very independent. Never afraid to speak out. About everything. She had been singing in the frontline of the struggle in Eritrea. To encourage the fighters and support the women and children. Now in refuge, in Rotterdam. Sometimes she supported the Ex. Our audience loved it.

And Jimmy. Suddenly you find yourself working together with an Ethiopian singer, blind, muslim, grown up in the streets of Addis. Quite a different background... But it worked. We had amazing concerts and became big friends. The way Jimmy trusted us, and many other people was so impressive. Being blind, and being in a completely different country. Being dragged in a van to a different place, venue and circumstances every day and taking everything as it comes. So positive and unassuming. I think we learned a lot. And in general this is the exception. Most music is preconceived, it's about fashion, marketing and money.

Andy: The Konono extravaganza was fantastic partly because of how it first arose. A great curator and programmer called Tony VanderEecken from Brussels was trying to get Konono to play live for the first time in Europe and didn't want them trapped in the "world-ethno-museum" circuit. So he contacted us having heard we'd just travelled and played in Ethiopia and asked us if we'd set up a tour on our circuit with Konono. An inspired idea and it worked.

Our audience was open to their music and Konono was totally open to playing in these clubs. People danced like hell. I saw the Kasai Allstars recently, another great group from the same area in Congo as Konono, playing in the Tropen Museum in Amsterdam and it was just sad, seeing a group with that kind of spirit and energy playing in a carpeted seated theatre of an anthropology museum. It was not only a bad choice artistically, it was a bloody insult to the musicians and the music.

Andy: Our approach to collaborations between musicians doesn't really differ too much from how we approach our own music and playing with each other. No matter how unusual or inspired the combination may be, it is the resulting music that is important. We collaborated with Getachew initially because he asked us to. It was his idea after seeing us play one of his songs live a few years ago. That was one of the most remarkable and exciting things about this project. A 73-year-old Ethiopian saxophonist inviting us to be his band. Not going for the 'classic' Ethiopian '70s sound or a jazz sound which would have been the obvious choice for a tenor horn player. In this sense Getachew is way ahead of the game musically. Rupture described it as a 'progressive statement and one that we responded to and approached with a great sense of community and musicianly spirit'.

Getachew had very open ears and he heard something in our sound and in our spirit and that was enough. He is not looking for great virtuosity or authenticity or experts in Ethiopian music. If he is, he made a big mistake choosing us. And it works for us because the way we collaborate with musicians is very intuitive. We aren't a 'rock band' or a 'jazz band' and we aren't trying to recreate the Ethiopian sound. What a pointless exercise that would be. We make our own music and have our own language and it's very fluid and open and can work and include and easily incorporate other musicians if they are open to it and it works best because neither parties lose their own voice. We simply find a way to work together combining both worlds. It's not fusion, it's collaboration. I think Getachew could sense that quite fast, and at the end of the day we are doing this because of the music. It's an exploration, an experiment and above all a celebration of Getachew's songs and how we work and play with them.

Ethiopian Music

I guess by now our knowledge of Ethiopian music is quite deep, but not really through studying the music, though there is nothing inherently wrong with that. But in our case it happened by sheer volume of listening and talking to Ethiopian musicians and people about it. We have been listening to Ethiopian music long enough now and have absorbed enough from it that we know what works and what doesn't. I don't think a deep knowledge of the music would be necessary in order to play this music, but I think you would hear the difference. I don't believe it's wrong to play music from other cultures if you don't understand the music or the words. I don't think that is really the point. The issue is why you've chosen to play this music, your reason for choosing to play this music. We fell in love with this music 17 years ago and have become more and more familiar with it over the years. We visited the country several times, ate the amazing food and met the people, and by the time we got round to rehearsing with Getachew it felt like the most natural thing in the world for us to be playing this music. Great music is great music - it doesn't have to be held as a precious museum piece not to be touched by outsiders. The music we make in the Ex has been influenced by African music for years now, not because we want to play African music, just because their sound and approach to music inspires us and feeds the music we are creating.

World Music Illustration (instrument)

Terrie: The 'authentic Ethiopian style' developed in a certain period of time. To do with a lot of elements. Tradition, politics, modernisation. But it was able to develop into this very recognisable 'Ethiopian' style also because of the isolation of the country. In this blast of energy at this time you

can hear a lot of very original musicians. Strange arrangements, weird individual approaches, etc.

I think this is where the connection with The Ex lies. We also developed very much our own personal style. Also in a blast of energy, the punk-beginning - a reaction to fashion, cover bands, slick imitations.

The way Katrin plays her very own drumming style and the guitars that doesn't fit into any traditional category, makes it possible to play with so many different musicians and in so many different styles.

We choose by ear. What we like. Then it works. On intuition. We never ever play with jazz people because we learned to play jazz, or "Ethiopian", rock or anything. We play ourselves. Very individual. With open ears.

Andy: Ethiopian music, especially the music from this post Haili Selassie pre-communist period held a real fascination for us. It was a burst of exuberance and a celebration of a new found freedom. Combine that with beautiful irresistible tunes using soul and motown beats and rhythms but then with incredibly bizarre and wonderful vocal lines on top that make it unmistakably Ethiopian and you have a wonderful multifaceted style of music that till very recently had been largely unheard. And the slower more hypnotic songs in very specific scales is some of the most beautiful trance music I've ever heard. We could feel right away that this music had a depth to it way beyond anything we were familiar with.

And Getatchew is simply a great great musician and great human being. When we first heard his music it captured our attention immediately. The whole sound and atmosphere of his music was very powerful and compelling and really had the effect of pulling one into his world, and his playing is unmistakable. You can hear even on very old scratchy recordings if Getatchew is playing in the band. He clearly has his own voice and is one of the few saxophone players I know who actually "sings" with his horn and in fact most of the melodies he plays are vocal lines that he has transposed to his instrument.

The whole point of doing a project like this only works if you have the idea that you are creating something new and different and not simply playing covers of old Ethiopian tunes. And one way to do this is to avoid studying the old songs in too much detail. We always work from a very rough palette first and try to find a general sound that works together and then work on details and arrangement. This works because we are not busy reading notes and trying to "get it right". We are listening and adjusting the whole time and the first rehearsals are essential for this. In fact it's the same approach we use when we are making Ex songs. I have a project with Cypriot composer Yannis Kyriakides working on a collection of *rembetika* songs together. At first we played them together on guitar and lute and simply played the songs quite straight and soon found that we weren't really doing anything special or different by approaching it from this angle. We abandoned this and Yannis began working with the original recorded material of *rembetika* songs from the '30s and began to alter and process the music using electronics and sampling and created a kind of backing track that he and I later both improvised over live. This was really exciting because we had reinvented the sound.

Yannis: In a way it's a dangerous territory because we were messing with the original material, but we did it in the right spirit and with a lot of emotional impact and it became a genuine authentic expression different from the original one but our own. Then it made sense and the result was not just an exercise or an experiment, it was transplanting the music to a new place. We could never live or really express what these people felt at that time so we found our own voice again. I think this is the only way these kind of projects work. Musicians should be free to experiment and be influenced and inspired by any music, and the deeper you go with these influences, the more profound will be the change in you as a musician.

Andy: And that has to happen in all directions, African musician to Western musician, Western musician to Asian musician. That's what creates new exciting music, this amazing mixture of influence, borrowing and outright stealing of ideas and sounds.

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<http://www.myspace.com/andymoortheex> and <http://www.unsounds.com>

Contributors

Michael Baird, who runs the amazing SWP label re-releasing vintage Hugh Tracey recordings in Southern and Eastern Africa from the 1950s onwards

<http://www.swp-records.com/>

DJ/Rupture, Brooklyn's finest ... with wide open ears and an unhealthy attraction to auto tune

<http://www.negrophonic.com/>

Terrie Ex, guitarist with The Ex and founder of the label Terp Records

<http://www.theex.nl/>

<http://www.terprecords.nl/>

Yannis Kyriakides, Cypriot composer and improviser with electronics and co-runs Unsounds label

<http://www.kyriakides.com/> and <http://www.unsounds.com/>

Info

The International Library of African Music based in South Africa

<http://ilam.ru.ac.za/page.php?pID=4>

Brian's Awesome Tapes from Africa blog

<http://awesometapesfromafrica.blogspot.com/>

Konono No.1

<http://www.crammed.be/konono/>

Ethiopiquest, great collection of classic Ethiopian music compiled by Frances Falceto

<http://www.ethiopiquest.info/>