



KNOW NO BORDERS

Words: **Frances Morgan**
 Photography: **Cat Stevens**

In the digital now, culture is a bustling marketplace where knowledge is cheap, sounds are fluid, and notions of purity shift like sand on breeze.

Plan B revisits the debate around cross-cultural transaction and meets some of the musicians redrawing maps in their own image: first up, New York's **Gang Gang Dance**, whose *St Dymphna* spins scattered global sounds into a dance both ethereal and ecstatic

There is surprisingly little Francis Bebey on YouTube. One 'video response' has the audio for 'Agatha' over a montage of the musician's life. It has been posted because Algerian fusion star Rachid Taha has covered the song: there's a link to his version, in which a lute and a beefy electric guitar converse pleasantly. The video, shot in South Africa, is supposed to be a funny update of the original's narrative – the tale of a white child born to black parents, told from the confused father's perspective. In folk and pop song, paternity is a theme that rises up again and again, its mood ranging from nervous laughter and machismo to tragedy. I go back to Bebey's version, the rolling shuffle and cleaned-up sonics of commercial Cameroonian pop. Wikipedia says Bebey wrote a novel called *Agatha Moudio's Son*; the song is based on the novel, or vice versa. Somewhere over there is a box of records containing Johnny Bokelo's *Isabelle*, Congolese, early Eighties, which I am thinking of playing. I Google it to see if it ever came out on CD. frommix.org is inconclusive.

Almost no one writes music criticism now without such online peregrinations. They have come to feel like a necessary part of understanding a musician's work. But sometimes, after a 10-minute info grab, you sense to what extent this is a very

superficial understanding and one that only works for those able to absorb and re-present information fast and authoritatively. It does not reward the sonic Rambler as much as it appears to. One is always aware of the vast avenues unexplored, and it becomes impossible to move any way but acquisitively through the information storm.

Often, you hear music that seems to have been made the same way – it appropriates surface signifiers, but rarely ventures deeper into the distant cultures from which it takes sounds. While this has been a common practice, via direct sampling, in hip-hop, various dance forms and mainstream pop for many years, with DJs such as Radioclit and DJ/rupture amassing urban music from around the globe, there's a difference in reception when such plundering occurs in the inherently analytical, 'personal' subgenres of indie and avant-pop. Perhaps because those subgenres are solipsistic at heart, when they take source material from Nigeria, Morocco, Indonesia or Brazil instead of from their practitioners' own experience, questions of ownership and identity are quicker to be raised. But whether we raise them or not, music that could not have been made without MP3 blogs such as [Benn Loxo Du Taccu](http://BennLoxoDuTaccu.com) and [Awesome Tapes From Africa](http://AwesomeTapesFromAfrica.com),



labels like Sublime Frequencies or Full Time Hobby, arrive again and again – sometimes exhilarating, sometimes so wrong-headed as to be infuriating.

But Gang Gang Dance's 'Bebey', the song that started this line of inquiry, somehow washes away such accumulated data. It is insistently blissful, a bassless jam of electronic and acoustic percussion, synth and sporadic guitar, that grows in urgency as its main sequence distorts, ring modulation echoing Bebe's mbira recordings. It is vaguely reminiscent of *somewhere* – but nowhere that can be found via links, tabs, and a cross-referencing relay race.

I do not know when and how the New York-based quartet became fans of Francis Bebe – drummer Tim DeWit included his 'Forest Nativity' in a virtual mix compiled for *Plan B's* Void section back in 2006, a mix that included UK rapper Low Deep, Iraqi pop and Hindi film music – but his name titles the first track on Gang Gang Dance's new album for Warp, *St Dymphna*. It alludes to African pop mainly in the impression that, like much of Gang Gang's output, it is part of a much larger whole, echoing the looping linearity that often attracts listeners to the long-form songs of highlife or Afrobeat.

"Our recordings are about editing as much as anything else," says Brian DeGraw, keyboardist and

one of the processors of these recordings, alongside Tim DeWit, Liz Bougatsos and Josh Diamond.

"We improvise so much that we never really have composed pieces written – it's more about spending hours jamming, and picking out parts."

St Dymphna, while the band's most coherent LP to date, owes its power to its indefinability, its drift in and out of focus: a radio-dial haziness/harshness that Gang Gang made their own on 2005's *God's Money*, where songs blazed militantly out of reverb-laden ambient noise. On *St Dymphna*, the juxtapositions are more varied and obvious: 'Vacuum' feels like a psychedelised update of Lush's 'Deluxe', and tumbles into bouncing grime number, 'Princes'; 'House Jam' is swirling Balearic; then 'Desert Storm' reprises what many see as the signature Gang Gang Dance sound: at once dubby and dense, with synth and percussion offset by the ever-changing colour of Diamond's textural guitar and Bougatsos' elastic, beautifully exaggerated vocals.

Despite its patchwork genesis and stylistic wanderings, *St Dymphna's* mood is a consistent one: hard to place yet instantly recognisable.

"We don't really define the idea of mood," Brian explains. "We just start playing, and by the time two

'Even if I just sing the one word, I try to take that one word around the mountains'

– Liz Bougatsos

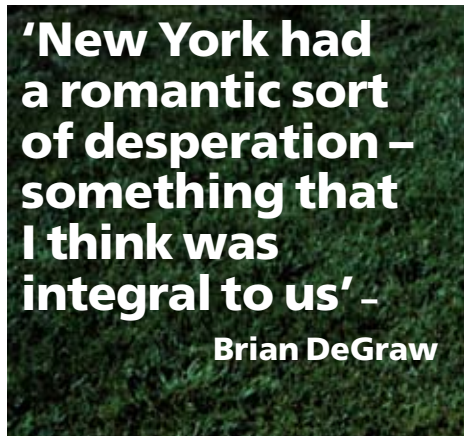
hours have passed we usually have three or four moments – places that we went to in those two hours – that have the correct sort of moods. Once we start playing we sometimes won't speak a word for maybe seven hours. I think that has a lot to do with that quality that you're talking about, just because we're working things out that we aren't working out with words."

like a mirage

Such an instinctual working process can only work when prefaced by long-term musical involvement, and Gang Gang Dance are often heralded as a particularly long-standing institution within the ever-shifting musical environment of New York City. Their first appearance as Gang Gang Dance – initially consisting of the DeGraw, DeWit and Bougatsos and Nathan Maddox, with Diamond joining soon after – can be traced back to around 2000, but DeGraw and DeWit have played together since meeting in the early Nineties in Washington DC, most notably in The Cranium, prior to their relocation to New York.

The early days of Gang Gang saw them honing the improvisational practice – non-idiomatic, unschooled, but soon developing its own distinct vocabulary – that still underpins their work: an early self-titled album and EP *Hillulah* are illustrative of this time, *Hillulah* consisting of live recordings. *God's Money*, though, while containing at least one out-and-out percussion jam, and a number of abstract, ambient pieces, is acknowledged to have been the next level, distilling bewitching pop from noise jams. But perhaps one reason *God's Money* hit a nerve wasn't anything to do with stylistic audacity. Recorded after the death of Nathan Maddox, who died after being struck by lightning in 2002, there's also a deeply felt intent to the record. The unashamedly emotive progressions in 'When My Voice Fails', and its hypnotic climax, seem to cite influences as disparate as *My Bloody Valentine*, *The Associates*, Bollywood romance and disco strings.

"We were never rehearsing, we would book shows and just not know what was gonna happen," Brian reflects. "I think that we did that for a reason: to explore and create a language and react against clichéd rock'n'roll things. But improvisation becomes limiting. You're familiar with all the chaos, and it starts to become predictable. So we started considering structure. Around the time we started making *God's Money* it felt like we were improvising. The idea of structure felt so new and exciting. It felt more freeing than improvising."



'New York had a romantic sort of desperation – something that I think was integral to us' –

Brian DeGraw

Gang Gang's structural revelation is one that's increasingly echoed in bands schooled in the noise scene – in recent years, the band's contemporaries Animal Collective have provided the most dramatic example of this progression, shifting from eldritch noise to multilayered meta-pop, while Black Dice moved gradually towards a mutant dance music not dissimilar to Gang Gang's. For all the adjectives thrown around concerning 'neo-primitivism' and 'ethno' aspects, it's Gang Gang's journey from DIY free music into pop forms that really intrigues me.

"I think about it a lot," concurs Brian. "It's a sensible process too, because by being so free at the beginning of your existence, by the time you start making something more structured, you're schooled in the way that sound works a lot better, rather than starting as a pop band where you play

four chords or whatever...I think there's a huge difference there, especially for a band like Animal Collective, and for us as well: everyone's so familiar with the weird equipment or the strange sounds, and then if you apply that to pop structure, that's when you get much more interesting pop music."

holy communication

Liz Bougatsos uses the word "deliverance" interchangeably with "delivery" when she talks about her vocals. It makes me think of a Pentecostal church in East London that offers 'deliverance' services of a Wednesday night – Bougatsos' high-pitched tones are reminiscent of, if not ritual, certainly channelling or possession, sinewave-pure one moment, with a crone-ish curl the next. Her process is a mixture of chance and composition:

"I come to the studio with five or six complete songs and then I have all these choruses and separate phrases," she explains. "We always keep that option available because sometimes a song will happen and we want to capture that urgency or the deliverance. Deliverance is a huge part of choosing lyrics on the spot; I lay out all my pages – I usually have a vocal room and I pin everything to the wall and I lay my papers on the floor – and if that urgency comes, if I find something that fits, then it makes a good product. I think the song 'Afoot' has that natural urgency or that delivery that I'm talking about. I really like that song because it was the most natural song on the record – and I think it kind of sums up some of the ways that I write."

Around a pattering, clattering beat and an electronic throb like a trance set heard two warehouses away, Bougatsos recites a verse about "a country where cows are sacred"; car manufacturers in "a land where most people walk". The spoken lyric's repetition becomes hallucinatory and hyperreal, a fragmented, cut-up travelogue interspersed with sung snippets from mutant rave anthems, as if overheard on a bus on the way to Goa. Was 'Afoot' directly inspired by travel?

"Actually, that came from a newspaper article about India, and the rapid transformation in the consumer industry – how they would build a Porsche dealership right on a farm, and there'll be cows walking around, but there'll be a new Starbucks. I'm fascinated by the way a culture can be so remote, how you can live off the land, but there's this complete opposite, all in one area."

Bougatsos talks vividly, conjuring up strange images that flit around the globe ("Maybe we'll be playing underwater or at the tip of one of the handmade islands..." she reflects, on the property explosion in Dubai), and back and forth in time, describing the Greek Orthodox childhood that inspired 'First Communion': "I remember the feeling of being in church and thinking, If I eat this body of Christ, is everything going to be OK?" she laughs, wryly. "And meanwhile there's people chanting in long black robes...I was trying to channel that, to write a song about getting brought up religiously and how it affects you later on in the world."

Bougatsos' work as an exhibiting visual artist no doubt informs her impressionistic take on vocals and lyrics. Citing Ethiopian, Malian and Greek Rembetika music as inspiration, she says, "Even if I don't understand the language it has affected the way that I sing. Even if I just sing the one word, I try to take that one word around the mountains, so to speak." So it's more like the flavour of a word that is important? "I do try and enunciate and pronounce as clearly as I can because the words are close to me, but sometimes in the delivery of a live song that doesn't really come out so clearly."

Bougatsos has a voice that lends itself well to processing and manipulation, and there is much pleasure to be had in following the swoops, shrieks and cartwheels of her performance. Live, she dances with a smile, but what emerges from her

throat is often as spectral as her work with art-metal outfit Angelblood. "I control all the effects myself," she says. "For live shows I always keep a clean vocal as well, playing at the same time, so people can choose to hear either – they can hear the raw version, or they can open another part of their minds to hear the other versions. You would hope that the audience be in sync – that's the goal."

cloud nine, no hype

The track that burns a hole in the gauzy, opaque fabric of *St Dymphna* is 'Princes', which explodes into life with the appearance of Ruff Sqwad MC Tinchy Stryder. For a London-based listener, the E3 vowels within Gang Gang's Fifth World soundscape is oddly thought-provoking: one can become attuned to the 'otherness' of foreign urban music, the familiar/strange beats of kuduro or baile funk, the teenage Aboriginal rappers featured by MIA on last year's *Kala*, until it is music from your own city. It makes you consider what aspects of the genre have appealed across borders – from grime, with its short history and regional specificity, ends up in Brooklyn.

Brian DeGraw's interest in grime began through a fascination with timbre, typical of the colouristic thinking that seems to inform every member of Gang Gang's sonic aesthetic. Given a cassette of pirate radio five years ago – "when grime was more raw, it's got a little slick lately" – the keyboardist was hooked. "I was just blown away by it, the sounds they were using, the approach...all these Eastern melodies, the rawness of the sound, and the off-ness of the rhythm," he enthuses. "It just made so much sense to me. On that tape I heard, Tinchy was on it – at that time his voice hadn't even changed, he was probably about 15, 14...but I was so struck by this kid's vibe and amazing energy, just his flow."

At a London gig last year, a journalist arranged a hook-up with Tinchy himself, while Gang Gang were recording a session. "We didn't know if he was definitely coming by," says DeGraw. Tinchy eventually arrived, "said hi, went straight to the headphones and just spit over this beat for half an hour straight. It was really amazing."

Tinchy takes a while to find his place within the shingling grooves of live drums and jerky keys which, while recalling grime's frosty melodies and odd juxtapositions, are looser, more indulgent than the genre's blocky structures usually allows. Tinchy collages bars from 'Mainstream Money' with spontaneous utterances, Bougatsos amping up her responses to an impish pitch. "Grime is warped but it's within the beat," Ringo P Stacey writes when I send him the track, "And Gang Gang are warping the structure rather than the contents. Tinchy is a charismatic MC but he doesn't have the superhuman abilities to ride such a grooveless beat, he can't process it so he doesn't try."

Where Ringo hears "grooveless", I hear fluidity. Where Tinchy might have heard confusion, others will hear a delicious mash-up. I like the way 'Princes' faces up to difference and misinterpretation so boldly: this happened in *real time*, not cyberspace.

"We're all interested in, when we travel, actual music from actual places – not the version that you get when you just sit in your own country and wait to hear about things," says DeGraw. "There are things that you can't get by sitting in front of your computer. Experiences with people who turn you onto it in the place it's from – they add a whole level to the music. That's a really important thing for me."

senselessness of placelessness

Gang Gang's own regionality is a peculiar one, indicative of that expressed in creative areas of many major cities – open and secretive, experimental and oppositional and, most of all, transient; territorial yet constantly in flux or in dialogue with itself, fascinated by the urban sense of identity that allows Tinchy to state, over and over, his postcode.



Most of us have our musical map of New York City, drawn to according to genre lines – avant-garde, VU, disco, punk, no-wave, Talking Heads, Sonic Youth, hip-hop, DFA-style disco-punk, No Fun Productions’ radical noise – and redrawn according to trends in discovery and rediscovery. One particularly strong thread is the city’s tradition of cross-arts experimentation, its reputation for dialogue between academic and vernacular forms of music and other media, characterised in its earlier days by Arthur Russell’s avant-disco or Sonic Youth’s rock-concrete and finding an expression this century in the new psychedelic music of Black Dice, Animal Collective, Gang Gang, and more recently Telepathe, Effi Briest, Dirty Projectors: a futuristic DIY free-pop that could only have found form in the information age. But this itself is an exoticisation. As any city-dweller knows, urban borders are always shifting; sound never stays still. “Everything is so blurred nowadays, so non-specific,” says DeGraw. “At this point, where I live in New York, I can’t really tell that I’m in New York, you know? When we were first here, there was a very specific vibe...more of a dirtiness, a romantic sort of desperation – something I think was integral to us making music. Now it’s just condominiums, wealthy people...in major cities, those special places are disappearing.”

What do you think is the right response to that?
 “I don’t know...I feel like there are a lot of people that are reacting against it, so many people doing it that actual reaction isn’t very powerful. Like there’s this sort of ‘Brooklyn scene’, it’s just a lot of bands trying to be as weird as possible...there’s so many of them, there’s no sort of strength to it, you know? I feel like, at this point, my reaction would be

to leave [laughs]. It wouldn’t be to fight this weird war I don’t even understand.

“When we started playing we were tripping on these older free jazz musicians – they laid groundwork for us to be open and free. And at the same time, when I first came to New York, I was listening to Suicide...those guys would say the same thing about the Velvet Underground, and the Velvets would say the same about something earlier. But yeah, I feel like we’re part of that lineage.”

“It’s more fragmented than it has been in the past,” Bougatsos concurs. “When we started making music there was a lot more of a common ideal or common good – a feeling of community. But once that burst in, I don’t know, 2004, it felt like it was more internal...So now it’s a different process for us. But the community that existed back then is still around, we’re just in different parts of the world now,” she laughs. “That’s the difference!”

When the mundane reality is that of gentrification and displacement, it seems all the more apposite that Gang Gang Dance’s music is increasingly that of a dreamed, liminal city, a changeable and internalised metropolis. Yet it’s a metropolis that, you sense, needs defending: one reason *St Dymphna* is such a seductive listen is that its sense of drift is underpinned with radical intent, and on a more personal level, the struggle to express sonic ambition within DIY strictures. One hears in it both Gang Gang’s intense, communicative live urgency and their need for imaginative escape – and beyond that, the sound of the space where those desires intersect, confusing time zones, fusing continents and influences as a metaphor for sensory overload, bafflement and bliss.

glory in itself: gang gang so far



Revival Of The Shittest

The story began when Social Registry took it upon themselves to reissue the band’s self-released but super-limited CD-R, channelling the raw sprawl of a unit still coalescing into the entropic teenage bedrooms of North America. They may have been self-consciously dead-punning on *Survival Of The Fittest*, but acceleration was building and their self-titled second record was released the same year.



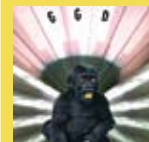
Hillulah

Produced initially as a tour split with Animal Collective, the composition process took that employed for *Revival Of The Shittest* (allegedly amassed from practice tapes) one step further. GGD were now treating each show as a unique event, and workshoping each performance – *Hillulah* patched together the live material into something different again.



God’s Money

They would start spreading the news beyond Brooklyn a year later – their tour experiences dovetailed with a full year’s worth of perfectionist studio time and the media pricked up its antennae, hopped onboard. It was their most mature work yet, and made the name they’re still trading on.



Retina Riddim

But not contained by – as their 2006 releases would show. The ‘Rawwar’ EP led off with ‘Nicoman’, the closest yet to a punchy pop single (albeit one that sounded like several radio stations woven into a fist) and they followed that with the *Retina Riddim* DVD-only release. Brakhage-like overlaps flicker through hyperactive cuts – and somehow the music kept miraculous pace.

kicking_k



hard wired

Words: **Ben Mechen**

Illustration: **Ben Newman**

The web might have dissolved cultural barriers, but not the human connection

So the Information Superhighway is built, and we're rattling stuff down it every day, all day. Over the last few years our relationship with recorded sound has changed almost completely. Subscribe to feed, stream audio, scrobble tunes, like that try this, check the MySpace...we dance with ones and zeroes now.

Music, all of it, is right there for the taking. We can sample it first, download it in seconds, and hoard it without having to worry about finding room or, if we choose, money to pay for it. It is as if a hole's been put in the pipes that channel sound, and there's nobody to plug the leak and mop up the puddle, so we're all gonna have a splash.

Hence indie bands playing highlife guitar. Hence yet another baile funk or cumbia remix. Hence everything from Fela Kuti to Tuareg blues to Sixties Khmer pop drifting "on trend". More examples: South African kwaito producer DJ Mujava signs to Warp after his YouTube video for 'Township Funk' builds up significant net buzz. London-based duo Radioclit produce Esau Mwamya's debut album, a Malawian who they met at his second-hand furniture shop in Clapton, East London. This is how the internet made the world smaller.

That's the story anyway. But, for many artists, labels, even bloggers, on the froth of this outernational wave, things are a little more complex. "We are still a very analogue operation. Much of our music is sourced from cassette, we are still selling far more CDs than downloads. I don't view the internet as having a whole lot to do with our label," says Jack Carneal of Yaala Yaala, formerly of Will Oldham's Palace Music, now running a small US independent releasing West African music. "Internet cafes are still pricey for

most Malians, a luxury...at least not just another psychic appendage like over here."

"In terms of artistic collaboration, the internet has real limits. The internet is context-resistant, and context is critical in establishing meaning in music," argues Jace Clayton, aka DJ/rupture, whose blog Mudd Up! (www.negrophonic.com) documents dance music wherever it can be found (that is everywhere). For him, there's still something to be said for realness, an authenticity of approach and feeling that can lose itself in the global grid. "Really, it all boils down to the local dance. If you like cumbia, do you go to actual cumbia parties with working-class Mexicans, or do you wait until the international hipster contingent comes through putting cumbia in quotes, playing tasteful remixes in swish clubs?"

We're not done with flesh and bone yet

All the old questions are still here to be wrestled with; questions of wealth and poverty, misappropriation and influence, exoticism, paying what you owe.

Alan Bishop of Sun City Girls and the Sublime Frequencies label puts it another way. Has the popularity of major label 'world music' favourites like Tinariwen pushed up sales of his own releases, say his recordings of Group Doueh, who ply a similar sound, minus the studio sheen? "Tinariwen have a huge publicity machine with money behind it. All we have is a small network of social outcasts, street hustlers, audio terrorists, night market freaks and random drifters, and a few hundred rupiah to spend when the rains fall." Networks again, but this time without connecting wires, the old type. We're not done with flesh and bone yet.



diplo

Words: **Ben Mechen**

If there is any such thing as a universal musical language chances are it operates somewhere below 120hz – the level of real no-good bass frequencies – and precisely in intersection with that other magical variable, Bounce. In pretty much all of the world's nooks, and there are a lot, this is near as anything a rule. Bass plus Bounce rumbles all of our bones, from Cowdenbeath to Cairo, in a million variations, every place a scene.

DJ, producer, and transcultural scavenger Diplo has been tracing the veins of this global noise for half a decade now, joining dots between intensely local sounds, digging them up and playing them out, recording them, fusing and infusing, or just letting them speak for themselves. Since becoming obsessed as a teenager with Miami bass, the dirty thump of his own back yard, his attentions have been in constant flux: baile funk from Rio, Angolan kuduro, cumbia, southern strip-hop, Bmore club music, Latin freestyle, grime...

But despite quickly becoming the world's most fashionable ethnomusicologist, he's anything but the musical butterfly collector, draining sounds of life and fitting them up in glass cases. Instead, he's simply trying to find new ways to make you move.

"It's not my mission in life. In fact, I've got to say I'm an opportunist in a way. When Bambaataa first started to play Babe Ruth's 'The Mexican' or Kraftwerk, he saw that shit went off. I'm like him – fascinated by music. He would cover the labels on the records, and that's why you paid him to play. He brought you shit. I just do it like that. I find tracks and try and give people what they've never had before. And until it's not working anymore, I'm going to keep searching it out."

Has he ever encountered hostility? A suspicion that he's little more than a tourist pocketing sonic postcards, and booked on the next flight out? "Not really. Maybe from the hustlers on the streets. But to me there's two different types of places. There's cities with Diplo fans, places where people get it and I don't have to go stupid in my sets. And then there's cities where I gotta pay to record shit and no one likes me. I've been to both, but there's more of the second one!"

It's hard work that's paid off, both for himself, and for anyone whose ever bought his mixtapes, been to his Hollertronix parties, heard his pioneering production work on MIA's *Arular*, or, most recently, anything on his Mad Decent imprint (Bonde do Role, Buraka Som Sistema, Santogold).

So, what's next? Where's fascinating him right now, the next microscene to blow a hole through the blogosphere? "Rotterdam! It's called 'bubbling'. Shit's nuts! But I guess wherever there are kids with imagination there's always gonna be something crazy. And unless I'm just stuck with my traditional Bodhran drum and washboard to make music, I'm going to use everything I can find."



afro noise

Words: **Louis Pattison**

Illustration: **Stefan Danielsson**

The last couple of records by veteran transgressive noise outfit Whitehouse have left the eerie impression of a group evolving towards something, the group's piercing electronic tumult interrupted by a quality their work had seldom featured before: rhythm. Where Whitehouse goes next is unclear, but for now, William Bennett is focusing his fascination with African instrumentation into a new, collective project dubbed Afro Noise. In early cuts slated for the project's debut vinyl airing, *Cut Hands: Afro-Noise 1*, African rhythms lock in to a terrifying intensity. "I have my own theory which is that the mind, usually so adept at recognising musical patterns, can't keep up with increasingly complex polyrhythms," explains Bennett. "When you run out of body parts to move, it invades your mind; adding noise to the equation tips the balance further into the domain of powerful altered states."

What's quickly evident is that many of the key themes that underpin Whitehouse – a taste for cribbing from diverse cultural texts, sound as a route to transcendence – remain. Bennett, though, is no mere dilettante. As a grounding for the project, he took courses in African instruments including djembe, doundoun, and ksing-

'The mind can't keep up with increasingly complex polyrhythms'

ksing. But, he insists, "I wouldn't want anyone to think of this as trying to imitate. It's an attempt to create something new certainly with *inspiration* from West Central Africa and Haiti but more in terms of the resulting desired responses than with technique."

So far, Afro Noise has been aired in public only through the medium of DJ set, at Optimo and Edinburgh's Cut Hands club night. Bennett, however, has plans to pound the skins live. "It's a goal of mine to move towards incorporating live instrumentation, especially once we can get more people on board. I remember even on day one of the first beginners' course we were all sitting in a big circle banging away making an unholy din and it was just so much fun, and you're immediately reminded that music's far more about your passion and intent. Music and art are things for *everyone* to enjoy doing – not just 'musos' and 'artists'."



return voyage

Words: **Frances Morgan**

Illustration: **Gwénola Carrère**

Revisiting David Toop's *Exotica*

David Toop's Exotica was published in 1999. The book followed Ocean Of Sound, regarded now as the foremost text on ambient music, and in many ways was a continuation of the themes raised in that book. However, Exotica looked specifically at the ways in which Western culture constructs a sonic picture of the exotic other, with reference to both ethnomusicological recordings and the kitsch, beguiling compositions of Les Baxter and Yma Sumac – taking in film soundtracks, field recordings, colonial literature and Alice Coltrane along the way. I first read Exotica in 2001. Between an awareness of the social and political issues surrounding this subject, and an acute sonic and technical sensibility, Toop seemed to have made a space for the imagination; the subconscious; dreams, demonstrated most obviously in the chapters of fiction interspersed throughout.

Recently I thought about Exotica again, and how it had influenced much of my own writing since, especially on subjects relating to the use of or interpretations of ethnic musics in genres such as noise and electronica. I felt the book was very relevant to this new wave of global audio scavenging, yet I also wanted to talk about how the huge increase in musical availability generated by the internet had impacted on Western reception to and use of music from other cultures.

David Toop: "At the time I was writing *Exotica* it [the internet] was just beginning. It was still hard to access the internet but it was getting easier even as I was writing the book. But I don't think it really was apparent then how much that would change. I sensed it would because I'd been aware of it when

I was writing *Ocean Of Sound* – that sense of information flow. There was a parallel for me in this metaphor I'd chosen for the beginning of *Ocean Of Sound*, which was Debussy hearing Javanese music in Paris at the end of the 19th century and this opening up to other cultural influences and the acceptance of them. People have always travelled and come into contact with other cultural influences, but there was always a feeling of superiority, and Debussy made this statement that in many ways he felt that Javanese music was superior to that of his contemporaries. So that was kind of a breakthrough in perception, and I had the feeling that the explosion that happened from the 19th Century onwards – cultural influences, new ideas and technological change – that there was a parallel in what was beginning at that time."

I've been thinking about whether access to a lot of music makes musicians better informed or whether they just use very specific elements of it. It's indicative of an attitude towards ethnic music that isn't about studying it; it's literally just another sound.

"If you download through official sites like iTunes there's virtually no information about what you're downloading. For example, I've been listening to a lot of classical music and it's very difficult to find, say it's a compilation, who composed what. It's just the titles of pieces or the orchestra, conductor or soloists.

"So if you don't really know what you're doing, that encourages this idea that it's 'just a sound'. That links in very well with musical trends – the whole foundation of hip-hop being based on playing breaks from records and the way that fed into developments in technology and digital sampling, so that the diversity of hip-hop sources led to the situation where it was all about finding a sound that worked really well. So it's not bounded by adherence to one kind of style: this has always existed in music and it's one of the ways in which music develops, this hybridisation and grafting and the way ideas meet and what come from them. The movements of people around the world is incredibly

know no borders

► complex. I'm still getting to grips with that, I think. And the different influences that exist within this crude idea of a national identity is quite astonishing really, so it's not as if it's a new thing; it's just the way that it manifests itself now is new."

In *Exotica* you write that exotica is the "music of ruins", so there's this strong suggestion of the past in exotic music. I feel as if what I hear currently *is* exotica, but it doesn't have that sense of the past: it's more a kind of idealised view of an urban future. It's all about street music and bazaar culture...yet probably as ersatz as anything from the Fifties about ruins and tropical islands...

"That's a trope that has been around certainly since the cyberpunk writers first emerged, like William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, and *Blade*

'The idea of sound as an agent of instability is very important to me'

– David Toop

Runner, of course: this idea of the very complex cityscape which is a collision, a layering...bury down into it and you find this constant hybridisation.

To some extent that is happening all the time, but not quite in the way that they imagine it. Also I think the Fourth World thing in music I wrote about in *Ocean Of Sound* and *Exotica* connected very strongly with those ideas, and again the influence of writers like [Italo] Calvino, the 'Invisible Cities' idea.

"Music connects very strongly with memory but it also connects very strongly with loss, because sound itself is a transient medium. So it's always gone by the time you think about it. And so it connects very easily to ideas of loss and death; nostalgia is very powerfully expressed through music. So the idea of the impossible – the idea of manifesting the imagination through an intangible medium – is very strong, perhaps stronger than manifesting it through a visual medium. Because it's never *there*, is it? And it's incredibly subjective, our response to music. So it is possible to create these imagined urban environments that communicate very strongly because we all have our own take on it. We all bring to it almost what we would like to take out of it.

"And I think the real problem is the distortions and projections onto all this source material. That's what makes ethnomusicologists such an anxious group of people. The earliest ethnomusicologists had this open-mindedness: they were fascinated by this very alluring music. But that started this very powerful sense that this music was disappearing, so they become protectors and conservationists. They realised that despite all their efforts people have very bizarre ideas of what the music means, where it comes from and what it's about – people have very crude and even racist ideas about 'tribes' and 'rituals'. So this anxiety builds up that it has to be protected as a cultural activity, and then you get this uncomfortable situation where the meaning of someone else's culture is being protected by experts. And it's a conflict that can never be resolved, because on the one hand you've got this incredible access to material, but the nature of the way we

access that material and the very thin contextual backup that comes with it encourages a very slight relationship to it. You sort of own it as soon as you've got it."

I also wonder if my generation are so aware of what feels like the unstoppable-ness of information and of also of the presence of businesses and brands and so on that you feel you can take ownership of music because it's almost as if everything has taken ownership of you. Some artists almost make a point of the fact that they don't know much about the music they use.

"I don't think there is a definitive answer, partly because it's an ongoing process and our relationship towards material is evolving. I think that was one of the problems with *Exotica*: my attitude is very ambivalent and mixed and sometimes confused. Sometimes I really dislike it if people take source material and come out with ridiculous, stereotypical ideas of what it's all about, and use it in a way to dress up something mediocre. But then on the other hand, sometimes I like really trashy, exploitative distortions, and sometimes it's hard to say why.

"My ideas on this change. I think I've moved in my own music to just going to musicians – so if I want Japanese flutes I'll find a Japanese flute player – and actually getting to know musicians and working very directly with them. It's still a convergence of influences but it comes from much more of a one-to-one connection with other people."

I suppose one thing about distance from the source material is that it gives you more freedom to create a fictional space. I find the fictional element to *Exotica* fascinating – the way it reflects the subject matter.

"That was partly about writing, because I am as interested in writing as I am in music, and when I wrote *Ocean Of Sound* I had to find a new form, I felt. I was writing a book in which I played a part and that created an awkwardness. Also, I didn't want to write a strictly chronological book – I wanted it to begin with Debussy as a metaphor almost, but I didn't want to trudge my way through the 20th century up to techno. The way I dealt with that was to write quite a personal book, but in a way that was influenced by cut and paste and hypertext. And [in] *Exotica* I just wanted to go further with that. I was influenced by Wong Kar-wai...Asian cinema at that time was fantastically stimulating; their approach to narrative was very bold, in a fairly accessible way. The other thing was that I was writing about music that was in a sense fiction, so it was very hard to get close to it without approaching it through fiction. The book was semi-autobiographical as well. I was going through some very extreme stuff, and I couldn't ignore that, but it was a question of how to deal with all these different strands.

"But you know, I just liked these characters who invent lives for themselves and live totally through music. I've always found that fascinating, that you can construct a whole universe just through music and live that completely, all your life. It's an ultimate kind of exoticism, really, it's a rejection of how we're supposed to be and the lives we're supposed to live. People like Sun Ra – there's no point in looking for consistency or rational explanations with somebody like that: he decided to be a certain type of person and he was going to follow that through no matter what. I think that's admirable. So in a very tiny way the book was intending to do the same thing: to construct something in which you were never quite certain about the truth of it. The idea of sound as an agent of instability is very important to me."



worlds collide

Words: Marcus O'Dair

Illustration: Cath Elliott

Before 'world music', there were **Brian Eno and Jon Hassell**, musical academics making the globe their playground. Thirty years on from their first meeting, they reconvene to talk ownership, surrender and reconciling the poles of intellectual rigour and incredible hedonism

In 1980, Jon Hassell and Brian Eno released *Fourth World Vol 1*. Subtitled 'Possible Musics', the record married Hassell's famously lyrical trumpet with Eno's synth textures, underpinned by a bed of African and Asian percussion. It wasn't the first time Western musicians had dabbled in so-called 'world music', but it was a landmark nonetheless, one that set the turf for everything from Paul Simon's *Graceland* to Vampire Weekend, plus a glut of 'ethnic' chill-out albums about which the less said the better.

Three decades later, both men are regarded as titans of contemporary music. Hassell has since collaborated with the likes of Björk, Ry Cooder, Baaba Maal and the Kronos Quartet, *The Wire* declaring him as important as Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix, or the Velvet Underground. Eno, meanwhile, has switched between playing producer to the stars and pursuing a tirelessly creative muse encompassing ambient sound, sampling and generative music. Yet here they are, together, again; not on record, but in Kristiansand, a small town in southern Norway, for the Punkt Festival, where they deliver a joint talk – or, as they have it, a 'Conversational Remix' – based on books which may or not become somehow interleaved and which they may or may not get round to writing at all...



"I think I was always listening to *other* music," Eno tells me, prior to the talk. "I've always been excited by any art that I didn't know the origins of. I'd think: 'How did they get to that?' That was always the most important questions to me."

Growing up in Woodbridge in Sussex, how did you find out about global musical forms? "I grew up indeed in a small village," he replies, "But it was next door to two American airbases, so from a very early age I was listening to what was then extremely exotic American popular music from the South – doo-wop and early R&B. There was nothing like that on the radio in England, and I had no idea where this music came from. It was a huge surprise when, years later, I discovered it was all by black people. That was my first context for what you might call world music. It certainly was another world to me."

Such "extremely exotic" music has since infused into Eno's musical output, from the global collage of his 1981 David Byrne collaboration *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts* to the African-tinted production of Coldplay's latest. "I suppose I started to realise that you could have kinds of music that were interested in entirely different things than my local pop music," he explains. "For instance, it was a surprise to find that [you] could have music where tuning wasn't important. A lot of African music I was listening to, there was huge importance on the precision of rhythm, but the instruments were all out of tune. And it obviously didn't bother anybody – just as our sloppy rhythm playing didn't bother us."

Later, at the public talk, Eno discusses the influence in more abstract terms, implying that he found in the music something he now calls "surrender" – not in the sense of giving up, but a more active usage he defines as going with the flow. He says that while control-obsessed Westerners may regard this as naive and simplistic, it's a quality we tend to admire in "so-called 'primitive' people".

Hassell, who once wrote of a vision of a "coffee-coloured" musical future, has a similar theory. His intended book is "a tale of two equators, one around the planet, another at the waistline". His ideology concerns the need to balance north and

south, both in terms of geography and physiology – the north, in this case, is technological in planetary terms, intellectual in terms of anatomy; the south "underdeveloped" but rich in a global, cultural sense, at one with the emotional and physical.

Coming from a background in avant-garde Western classical, it's not hard to see why both men turned to the music of these "so-called primitive people" in an attempt to shake some booty as well as stroke some chin. "We both come out of the schism of the Sixties," explains Eno. "They were meant to be all psychedelia and free love – but the decade also saw a particularly arid vein of philosophy that may be the most 'northern' [in Hassell's parlance] that thinking ever got. This translated into the music of Boulez and Stockhausen. So you had this intellectual rigour and incredible hedonism. We were interested in both."

Such a dualistic approach not only explains Eno and Hassell's embrace of music from other cultures but also, perhaps, their pick'n'mix treatment of their discoveries. Hassell has pretty much dedicated his life to replicating on the trumpet the vocal style of Pandit Pran Nath, with whom he studied in India, yet his aim is not to replicate Third World music but to create a hybrid style he calls Fourth World. "My aim," he explained in the notes to 1977's *Vernal Equinox*, "Was to make a music that was vertically integrated in such a way that at any given cross-sectional moment, you were not able to pick out a single element as being from a particular country."

Eno too has spoken of a desire to "crash different cultural forms, with all their emotional baggage" – does such a cut'n'paste approach imply less respect for the source material than more reverential folk collectors of previous generations? "Funnily enough, I think cut'n'paste is very much like folk music," he argues. "Prior to recording, people would take that verse from that folk song and that verse from that song, that tune that they heard in Ireland. There was no way of recording it, other than what remained in peoples' heads. It was continually being rebuilt. You hear it all the time in pop music as well, actually. I think there was only

one period in history when we didn't have cut'n'paste, which was classical music, where it was fixed by the score. Otherwise the whole history of music really has been constant remix, basically."

But does he really insist that the old "cultural imperialism" charge of ripping off indigenous people is entirely invalid?

"There are two different issues", he comes straight back. "One of them I think is a stupid one and one I think is a valid one. The stupid one is that ideas are owned by somebody – the history of music tells you that that can't be sustained. The one I think is valid is that I do think it's really tragic if somebody has a wonderful idea and somebody else comes along and makes a huge amount of money out of it. But the song 'The Lion Sleeps Tonight' – that was a huge hit many times over and the people who kept

'I've always been excited by any art that I didn't know the origins of'

– Brian Eno

getting paid for it were three American guys. But of course it was an African tune that was formalised into a composition by an African guy – and his family finally got paid something for it about five years ago. I just think that's extremely bad manners. In that respect, there is such a thing as plunder."

Thanks to the Punk Festival. www.punkfestival.no