

## The Oud, the Bad and the Ugly: Transmitting ‘Roots’ in the discourse and experience of World music in Australia

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The subject of World music has been scrutinized by scholars since the first use of this term by record companies in 1987 (see for example Mitchell, 1993; Erlman, 1996; Feld, 2000; Frith, 2000; Brennan, 2001; Bohlman, 2002; Brusila, 2003; Stokes, 2004; Smith, 2005; Scott-Maxwell, 2008). The following paper builds on this research, discussing tensions between the marketing discourses of World Music in Australia, contrasted views expressed by some of the musicians working in these performance contexts. Drawing on ethnographic data gained in interviews with musicians from culturally and linguistically diverse music styles working in Australia, this paper considers the effects of this apparent disjunct between discourse and practice from the perspective of ARIA award winner and Hindustani *tabla* player Bobby Singh. His experiences working in this space will be positioned within a wider discourse that engages issues of musical diversity in Australia.

There is a sign at Woodford Folk Festival that reads “Reality,” a sign set up to demarcate the space between the magical world of ‘Woodfordia’ and the mundane worlds of those attending. As the organizers explain of their role in the event, and, by extension, in the local industry:

After our festival each year, as you leave Woodfordia, the sign at the departure gate points to ‘Reality’. It’s a metaphor for how we, the organisers, think about our job. When putting the festival puzzle together we imagine creating an environment where you, our beloved patrons, can step out of your everyday and into a place of optimism and nurturing – ‘Unreality’.<sup>1</sup>

The distinction articulated here between the reality of the world “out there” and the imagined, idealistic unreality of the festival space parallels the celebratory and anxious narratives of world music in Australia broadly (Feld, 2000). Whilst there are a myriad of issues pertaining to the role of musicians in creating the spectacle at such events, their dependence on these places for patronage, and who has the power to define the demarcation between *reality* and *unreality* - the central question of this paper can be construed thus: how does the experience of World Music as a musician relate to the promotional discourse of World music in Australia? Are there tensions between these two, and if so, what are they? Here I explore these issues referring to examples of Government and Industry discourse concerning World Music, before considering the perspectives of this musician. For reasons of space, I primarily focus on Singh’s insights, to provide the overall structure of the paper and, where helpful, interject comments made by other musicians I’ve interviewed where appropriate. Whilst it should be noted that this discussion should in no way be taken to be conclusive, my hope is that the issues presented here will be useful in considering the issues surrounding World Music from the viewpoint of musicians currently working in these contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> Woodford Folk Festival website, <http://woodfordfolkfestival.woodfordia.com/index.php?id=88>, accessed 14 December 2011.

## All the World is *on Stage*

World Expos of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries presented music of the colonies, and the discourse of world music in Australia, in disturbing similar ways. Armstrong (1992) recalls some of the terms used to promote the “jumble of foreignness”, the colonised and ethnic “others” presented at World Fairs such as the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the 1889 *l'Exposition Universelle* held in Paris (Armstrong, 1993: 199). Adjectives such as “gorgeous,” “pulsating,” and “riotous” were all utilised in what Armstrong describes as the “subliming of the exotic” (1993: 200). A brief inventory of some of the terms used to promote culturally and linguistically diverse music styles throughout Australia reveal surprising continuities with the World Expos occurring over a century ago.

Sydney’s *Café Carnivale*<sup>2</sup> uses terms such as “Festival,” “Fiesta,” “Party,” “Magic,” “Odyssey,” “Passion” and “Celebration” in the promotion of diverse musical styles and cultures in Sydney. In Musica Viva’s Annual Report for 2007, *Café Carnivale* is described as a space in which “Authentic performances of music from around the globe... evolving from traditional cultures of other countries, [are] performed by artists of culturally diverse backgrounds...musicians exploring ways for their traditions to combine and thrive in Australia” (Annual Report, 2007: 11). Belingen *Global Carnivale* uses language almost identical to those World Fairs of a bygone epoch:

The Global Carnivale presents world class acts from the far flung corners of the earth. Ranging from ancient traditions to cutting edge contemporary music, this boutique festival also offers a children’s festival with spectacular outdoor aerial and circus and a fine selection of exotic food and craft.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar fashion, a small booklet providing information for upcoming music festivals in Australia for 2012, proposed the following question to the promoters of each festival: if your festival was personified in a fictional character or celebrity, who would it be and why? In response to this question, the festival promoter of WOMADelaide replied, “Maybe Captain Planet for saving the planet of course, crossed with Peter Gabriel”<sup>4</sup> And on behalf of the Australasian World music Expo, a representative replied, “AWME would be the Dr Seuss character ‘Cat In the Hat’ because it brings excitement, opportunity and musical adventure to Melbourne.”<sup>5</sup> Whilst such comparisons can be understood as standard journalistic rhetoric to generate reader interest, the terms used to promote world music in Australia - excitement, opportunity, adventure, magic – are strikingly similar to the ways in which the displays of otherness occurred in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries.

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<sup>2</sup> Café Carnivale was the official world music wing of Musica Viva, supported by Australia’s premier funding body, the Australia Council. At the time of writing however, an announcement on the Musica Viva website has been made which states that Café Carnivale will no longer be a program under the wing of Musica Viva. [www.musicaviva.com.au/whatson/cafe-carnivale](http://www.musicaviva.com.au/whatson/cafe-carnivale), accessed 21 December 2011.

<sup>3</sup> [www.globalcarnival.com/](http://www.globalcarnival.com/), accessed 14 December 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Sourced from The Big Ticket Festival Guide 2011/12. See also [www.thebigticket.com](http://www.thebigticket.com), accessed 21 December 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Sourced from The Big Ticket Festival Guide 2011/12. See also [www.thebigticket.com](http://www.thebigticket.com), accessed 21 December 2011.

Thankfully in 2011, the overt racism expressed at these Expo's informed by the social-Darwinian paradigms of the colonial powers of the time is not as overtly present at such events. At least at the promotional level, celebrating and embracing the sounds of the "other" is one of the key themes present in World Music discourse. Adopting the perspective of the *flâneur* casually walking through the exotic bizarre of the World Music spectacle, receiving the "collage of exotica" projected upon them (Armstrong, 1993: 202), one could certainly relish in the presentation and celebration of diversity. But how far have we progressed in our acceptance and validation of the other from these Expo days until the present? If the Empire could write back,<sup>6</sup> what would it say to the powers that be?

### **The View from the Behind the Stalls**

My interview with Singh revealed that the view from the 'behind stalls' may not be quite as magical as the celebratory discourse of World Music in Australia would have you believe. Singh commented, "None of the world music festivals in this country, none at all, have the right vibe... that sincere, 'we actually care', vibe" (Singh, interview, 3 August 2011). Singh lamented the sense in which the exotic gaze continues to play a role in the unwritten contract between performer and patron. Speaking of *Café Carnivale* specifically, Singh rather damningly stated, "It's about people coming and eating and watching some ethnic music, that's it" (2011). Singh expressed his frustrations concerning *Café Carnivale*, saying that he'd actually had more respect at the *Big Day Out* and *Livid festivals* than he'd had at official World Music events such as *Café Carnivale*, because 10,000 people would "shut up" and listen to him do a 15min *tabla* solo (2011). While playing at *Café Carnivale*, Singh told me he often spends half the time saying, "shh, please be quiet. There's only 20, 80 people in the room and they can't be quiet" (2011).

Exotic voyeurism in the consumption of World Music in Australia seems to provide a double edged sword for musicians who don't necessarily fit the exotic mould, as it is seen that ethnic essentialisms, rather than performance ability, play a crucial role in accessing the patronage offered by institutions such as *Café Carnivale*. In an interview with multi-instrumentalist Kim Sanders, he expressed his despondency in a rather graphic manner, saying:

First of all you can't get a gig because it's too weird...next you can't get a gig cause you're not a proper wog, you're not a shiny black fellow with sparkling white teeth, or a girl with a nice rack (Sanders, interview 30 May 2011).

While this may simply be a case of jealousy or bitterness towards the lack of patronage available in this country,<sup>7</sup> comments such as these are becoming increasingly common in the interviews I have conducted with musicians. A *tabla* player from Melbourne (who has asked to remain anonymous)<sup>8</sup> expressed similar angst in regard to Multicultural Arts Vic, saying: "They won't touch anyone unless they are of ethnic origin. They're very racist in that way" (Anonymous, interview 17 November 2011).

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<sup>6</sup> Reference to Ashcroft et al. (1989) *The Empire Writes Back – Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*.

<sup>7</sup> This may well be the case with Sanders who has a reputation for being pessimistic.

<sup>8</sup> This particularly musician has asked to remain anonymous due to the possible repercussions of his comments getting back to Multicultural Arts Vic.

In a discussion panel on World Music at the Australasian World music Expo in Melbourne 2011, Rhoda Roberts<sup>9</sup> spoke about how this exoticism is still present in the industry, particularly in regard to expectations of what it is to be an Indigenous musician. Roberts recalled an occasion where she had booked ARIA Award Winner Gurrumul Yunipingu to play an event, and after the gig, the event organiser came up to her and accused her of lying, saying “You told me he was primitive! He’s western! He plays a Western guitar!” These tensions between discourse and experience, the continuing presence of ethnic essentialisms, and the power differentials between dominant and sub-dominant cultural practices continue to present real problems for musicians working within this space.

In addition to this theme of exotic voyeurism, the ways in which subdominant music styles and musicians are subject to stratified representations of power relationships seems to be a continuous theme carried over from the time of the World Fairs to the present. Concerning the 1878 *L’Universelle Exposition* in Paris, Armstrong (1993) described how France’s colonies were structurally reminded of their sub-dominant status in the physical demarcation of space. Countries such as Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Persia were allocated a pavilion of 5 metres in width, designed by French architects, whereas countries like England and America were allowed more width (Armstrong, 1993: 208). In the same way that the colonial powers at World Fairs designated the physical spaces allocated to the colonized, it is the hegemony of the market that has become the unquestioned organizing power of the presentation of foreign sounds in the Australian World music scene. Thus for Singh, one of the biggest problems with world music in Australia, was a lack of cultural understanding. He commented:

None of the festivals, none of the associations, Kulcha in Western Australia, multicultural arts in Melbourne, Kultoor...no one, not one of them, has the right thing in their mind. It’s simply got to do with ‘how can we sell this?’ (Singh, interview 3 August 2011).

One of the major critiques that Singh leveled at the World Music industries in Australia was the seeming lack of respect for the cultural practices of those musical traditions on display (Singh, 2011). Examples such as sound engineers or stage managers walking across the carpet with their shoes, kicking instruments (in their hard cases) out of the way to create more space on stage, patrons eating and drinking alcohol during performances, and the need to have some sort of stage rise for the performers were all issues that Singh brought up in our interview (2011). While the average rock guitarist would probably object to their Gibson Les Paul getting kicked around the stage (case notwithstanding), there appears to be additional layers of significance here.

The cultural practices that Singh speaks of are tied to the customs and etiquettes surrounding the lived experience of these traditions. At this point, it should be noted that there is a significant gap in the literature on Hindustani music in regard to the customs and etiquettes associated with different *gharanas*<sup>10</sup>. Singh’s (2004) reference to ‘customs and etiquette’ as part of the socio-cultural features of a *gharana* is the closest reference I have found in the literature that articulates these issues (Singh, 2004: 123). At least in the traditional models, it appears that these customs and etiquettes are not so much spoken of, but rather demonstrated as the *shishya* imitates the

<sup>9</sup> Head of Indigenous Programming at the Sydney Opera House  
[www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/away/saturday-31st-march/3921226](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/away/saturday-31st-march/3921226), accessed 25 May 2012.

<sup>10</sup> *Gharana* literally means ‘tradition,’ referring also to the lineage of various schools of playing within the broader scope of Hindustani music (Singh, 2004: 94).

*guru* in all aspects of performance and in certain behavioural patterns (Sing, 2004: 104). Sydney-based *tabla* player Chris Fields, confirmed this when he spoke to me of his period of training under *tabla guru* Sumanji, in which over the course of more than 10 years of training, a knowledge of these customs and etiquettes is gradually built (Fields, interview with author, 14 December 2011).

Annesh Pradhan, Singh's (Bobby) *guru*, helpfully outlined some of these customs and etiquettes when I questioned him in regard to Singh's comments. In an email correspondence with Pradhan, he explained the reasons behind some of these customs and etiquettes:

The reason for not using footwear on stage and on carpets, is to keep away the dirt - particularly since most musicians sit on the carpet, and to also show respect to the instruments that are placed on the carpet. Incidentally, showing your soles to someone is also considered insulting (Pradhan, email correspondence, 20 December 2011).

Additionally, Pradhan spoke to me concerning the kind of respect that is given to musical instruments, explaining further that (in the same email):

Instruments are to be treated with utmost respect and reverence in India. They are worshipped as are other tools of trade in different traditional occupations, but in the case of musical instruments, books and such material that signifies knowledge, wisdom, intellect, they don't remain mere tools of trade but in fact assume a larger proportion (Pradhan, 2011).

Cultural practices such as these – the removal of footwear on stage, respect shown to the performer in not consuming alcohol, respect verging on worship of instruments - are evidently really important in the lived experiences of this tradition. But what is the big problem here? If the Indian, Arabic, Thai, Malay or musician from whatever culture agrees to perform at an event they know will be a presentation of music from around the globe, why is it important that the engineers and space managers understand the cultural practices of these traditions? In most cases, the stage managers and personnel involved in the production of a live concert do not originate from these cultural contexts and are therefore likely to commit a large number of cultural *faux pas*, considering the number of different cultures they are dealing with.

The point that Singh made, however, is that when these cultural practices have been outlined in the writer sent to the festival organisers, these practices should then be at least considered, if not respected, especially if one is promoting and celebrating the values of multicultural diversity, racial and cultural equality as a defining feature of their event. The lack of respect for the cultural practices of these traditions present in the spectacle of World and Multicultural music events in Australia, whilst simultaneously championing the values of cultural and racial equality, is a hypocrisy that musicians working in this space should not have to tolerate. Singh stated:

If it's going to be done [that is, the presentation of diverse music traditions], it's got to be done on every level. So the person who books the gig, say there's the director of *Café Carnivale*, it's got to be someone who get's African, get's Egyptian, get's Indian, actually gets it. Actually goes 'I understand, I sat with those people that long, I understand where those people come from in that culture'...And so I feel that [we need greater] understanding of cultural backgrounds, and cultural needs...especially if you specialise in them (Singh, 2011).

With Singh's views in mind, I recently met with an advertising group in Sydney looking to put on World Music gigs at Viva's in the Rocks.<sup>11</sup> Here I encouraged the organizers to factor in some of these cultural considerations when booking musicians from diverse cultural contexts in this venue. My comments were welcomed, and it influenced the kinds of acts they decided to book for the first few gigs while they established this place as a new venue. However, when I communicated the idea of not serving alcohol if they were booking a Hindustani musician like Singh, they were much more hesitant to book these artists as it was through the purchase of alcohol that the venue made money on the night. Evidently, there are tensions here between the music cultures and the industrial imperatives of those who provide the spaces for these musicians. Whilst these tensions may not immediately be resolved, I believe it is helpful nonetheless at least to have conversations like these and to communicate these cultural sensibilities to those on the industrial side of the equation in order to ensure that there are at least two voices in the negotiation of these performance contexts.

## Conclusion

The ways in which diverse music cultures from around the globe are respected and validated in Australia seems to have progressed from the heights of colonialism to the present. Australia has made significant gestures towards the validation and appreciation of musical difference.<sup>12</sup> However, it seems that there is still much to be desired in this regard. Whilst the rhetoric surrounding the promotion of diverse musical styles seems to elevate the values of diversity, difference, equality and multiculturalism, the experiences of musicians like Bobby Singh suggests that the proverbial preacher still has some walking to do. An observation of the promotional discourse of the World Fairs and Expos of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries suggests that there is a disturbing continuity with the ways in which World music and Multicultural arts is promoted in Australia. And while the overt racism displayed at these fairs is not so much a feature of World music events in the contemporary Australian scene, the view from the behind the stalls suggests that more subtle forms of exoticism still inform the presentation, promotion and consumption of the sounds of the other. More careful attention needs to be paid to the ways in which world music is promoted and the spectacle created, in order to make sure that the rhetoric matches the practice.

Singh's belief that those employed in the creative industries in Australia need to have greater awareness of the musical and cultural traditions on display is a point with implications that require further consideration. Some of the cultural practices Singh mentioned, such as treading on carpets with shoes and the respectful treatment of instruments could be easily rectified. Of course other culturally sensitive practices, such as the consumption of alcohol at events, will prove to be more difficult to negotiate, and not all these issues may be resolved

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<sup>11</sup> At this stage, a series of gigs have been planned under the name *Equator*, occurring once a month on a Thursday evening. The organisers decided to promote this space as *music from around the world*, giving them a 'carte blanche' to play whatever music they'd like. The hope is that as the venue gets more established, that they may be able to consider and negotiate these cultural practices as they pertain to the different musical cultures that receive patronage from this venue.

<sup>12</sup> In 2009, Australia became a party to the UNESCO Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.  
[www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/Garrett%20UNESCO%20media%20release%2022%20Sept%2009.pdf](http://www.arts.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/Garrett%20UNESCO%20media%20release%2022%20Sept%2009.pdf) accessed 3 April 2012.

easily. Though the circumstances will differ depending on the type of event being held, it is hoped that by highlighting these issues, will at least be brought to the attention of those involved in putting on events that espouse the values of cultural diversity. It is hoped that these musicians and cultures will have more power to negotiate the terms of these performance contexts, which they rely on for income. If not, I believe we risk perpetuating similar cultural stratifications present at the World Fairs, in which the performance contexts of World Music, as seen through the eyes of the musician, contradict nominal affirmations of sonic pluralism.

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