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PercuScapes

Urban street culture in the tribal village

BY JOHN DILIBERTO

PRIMAL RHYTHMS ARE MEETING electronic technology. The sound of skin being slapped, wood being struck, and bamboo being blown is merging with the sounds of vibrating circuitry as music traditions shaped over centuries become digitized for the 1990s. This is the new world music, the soundtrack for Marshall McLuhan's global village.

"This is the twentieth century and we now have the technology to learn from everybody in the whole world," says guitarist Matthew Montfort of Ancient Future. "We have all these isolated cultures that have grown up and developed the symphony, the Indian raga, African percussion, Balinese Gamelan. Those are all beautiful in and of themselves just as they are, but there's an opportunity here to develop some new and interesting music by combining these styles."

Ancient Future is among a range of artists who are creating a music born not from one culture, but many. Their latest album, *World Without Walls* (Sona Gaia) speaks to a cultural enrichment that's echoed in the several recent albums, including Michael Pluznick's Afro-Haitian chants on *Cradle of the Sun* (Sona Gaia), Merl Saunder's percussive environmental

suite, *Blues from the Rainforest* (Sumertone), violinist Steven Kindler's new age/world beat *Barefoot* (Global Pacific) and Jon Hassell's music for an African culture of the future, *City: Works of Fiction* (Opal/Warner Bros.).

Trumpeter Jon Hassell's new music postulates an analogy between urban street culture and an African village. "I see things like Public Enemy with a very powerful message which can easily be analyzed in African terms," he says. "Storytelling and politically current things mixed with gossip, jibes at themselves and the record company and the whole idea of the media." These are only some of the voices that are creating networks between cultures that were formerly as separate from each other as East Berlin from West Berlin. But in music, walls have been coming down for years. Only instead of politics and bulldozers, it's sound, electronics, and communication penetrating the barriers.

Jon Hassell has always orchestrated a high-tech merging of Indonesian and African traditions, mixed and layered through digital techniques and coupled with his own Indian-derived trumpet playing. But

DAVID BRASGALLA



now Hassell is adding the United States into his world mix on *City: Works of Fiction* (Warner Bros./Opal). After nearly two decades of formulating what he refers to as "fourth world music," including his previous recording, *Flash of the Spirit* (Capitol/Intuition) with the African percussion troupe Farafina, Hassell is investigating his own culture through a world music lens.

"If I'm looking at other cultures," he explains, "I'm trying to put myself in their shoes in order to find out where their music comes from, by looking at their environment and thinking this is what you hear when you are a Pygmy first thing in the morning. And you imitate bird voices and things like that. Well, here I am living in L.A. with the helicopters going over, cars going by, the beatboxes, and the Toyota trucks on Sunset Strip on Saturday night that have this incredible bass sound popping out of them."

These images infuse the tribal percussion of *City: Works of Fiction*. It could be a soundtrack to Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner*, etching a skyline of decay. "What city and what time is up

for grabs," he says cannily. "Maybe it was a city in Egypt a long time ago. Maybe it's a city in Africa in the future. But generally it's urban."

Hassell's trumpet coils like a smoke trail around dark percussive rhythms and throbbing bass lines. With samplers he sprays out shards of trumpet chords, bits of Public Enemy, and Masai warriors.

Technology is the great leveler in Hassell's music, allowing instruments from different cultures and with vastly different acoustic properties to share the same ambient spaces. It's also the conflict that creates such tension in the new world music, that struggle between the traditional, sometimes mystical past of ancient instruments, and the modernism of new instruments and technology.

Keyboardist Merl Saunders compounds that tension on his recent album, *Blues from the Rainforest* (Sumertone, P.O. Box 22184, San Francisco, California 94122). Not only is it based on African and South American percussion instruments played by Muruga and the late Eddie Moore, but it's also inspired by the destruction of the rainforests. Part of the proceeds from the album goes to the Rainforest Action Network.

Saunders has recorded with the Grateful Dead as well as a duo album with Jerry Garcia, *Live at the Keystone Corner* (Fantasy), and he wrote the theme for the TV revival of *The Twilight Zone*. On *Rainforest*, he's concocted a dreamlike world music soundscape,

full of pulsing primordial rhythms, ethereal synthesizer effects, and sparse, plaintive melodies.

For Saunders, *Blues from the Rainforest* is an emotional album, full of human interaction. Sitting in his kitchen in San Francisco, he recalls how the album was inspired by pictures he was shown of the deforestation. "I was getting sick at the stomach looking at these pictures," he says. "Horrible pictures of the natives, the way they looked, how they were cutting down the trees."

Perhaps coincidentally, Saunders had already been working on music that evoked these images. He added environmental recordings of a rainforest, and orchestrated a jungle journey with a combination of synthesizers and percussion, including some homemade instruments by Muruga, like the nada drum. "It's a cross between an African drum and a dumbek," Muruga says as he bends notes on the drum. The nada drum, balaphon, ektar, and tablas lend *Rainforest* an earthy feeling, even while Saunders is spinning out electronic ambiences and Jerry Garcia is triggering dolphin sounds with his MIDI guitar, adding an entirely new spin on the world music concept.

Michael Pluznick is a Jewish American who has been captivated by the percussive traditions of Africa and South America.

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"You go to temple and a bunch of old men mumble," he says, "but when I go to an African ceremony I lose myself and leave feeling great and blissful."

For his collaborator, vocalist/percussionist Pedro DeJesus, that's what it's all about. "One of the hallmarks of African music is that you have to participate, you have to play a clave, clap your hands, dance, or do something to even understand it," insists DeJesus.

In Pluznick's home studio in Mill Valley, congas, gourd drums, and bongos share space with his synthesizers. His 1989 debut *Where the Rain is Born* (Sona Gaia), is an exotic recording of melodic percussive music and electronics that recalls Patrick O'Hearn. But his newest album, *Cradle of the Sun* (Sona Gaia) takes a plunge deep into Afro-Haitian and Cuban ritual chants. "The pieces are traditional African pieces via Cuba," explains Pluznick. "These are traditional folkloric pieces and chants, and Pedro does his own versions of them."

Pluznick, who's been studying drums since 1975, talks like a man on a mission to bring these rhythms to America. On songs like "Solar Safari" and "Desert Caravan" from his first album, the rhythms were a subtext. "My purpose was to take traditional African rhythms and integrate them into a

format of music that Americans would find palatable," he claims with maybe just a little condescension. "I took the rhythms, programmed them into a computer, used my own samples, and then built melodies around them. That was like an appetizer. The new album is like dinner."

Violinist Steven Kindler takes a more radio-oriented approach to his world music sound on his album, *Across the Rainbow Sea* (Global Pacific) as well as with the group Barefoot, a collaboration with percussionist Clay Henry resulting in a self-titled release also on Global Pacific. "It's like jazz only for dancers," explains the lanky violinist who has played with Kitaro, Jan Hammer, and the Mahavishnu Orchestra and has recorded a few new age-styled albums of his own. "People haven't really been dancing to jazz for thirty or forty years since the jitterbug went out, the big band era."

Kindler looked to the percussion of Africa and South America to provide his new dance rhythms, also making a cagey marketing move towards the current world beat trend. "Yeah, well, the album *Across the Rainbow Sea* was designed for radio," he admits. "There's music from all sorts of different Caribbean and African and South American influence in the percussion as well as some of the way that the tunes are

set up in the melodic instruments."

Kindler even had dancers in the studio while they recorded some of the songs on *Barefoot*. "They give you a different perspective," he claims. "It's not like you are playing for yourself. You're playing for and with the dancers and, of course, the effect of a beautiful, graceful female body on the male psyche is one that we all know and appreciate. We encouraged the dancers to be crosscultural in their dance too, taking freely from samba and rumba as well as from egbotae or whatever African tradition that they are working from, and to blend them into an amalgam, which is decidedly barefoot music, which is something that is jazzy, but has life."

While *Across the Rainbow Sea* exudes the breezy South American grooves favored by lite jazz, *Barefoot* is like a late-fifties beatnik coffeehouse, with congas churning out hypnotic rhythms in the smoky darkness while flutist Sulubika wails an interior dialogue. I half-expected Allen Ginsberg to step out screaming "Howl!" at any moment. Other pieces like "Roundabout" recall the afro-funk of Fela.

While Kindler is riding a wave of opportunism in his world music melange, a group called Ancient Future is in a Northern California recording studio putting together

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their fifth album of global fusion since their debut, *Visions of a Peaceful Planet* (Ancient Future) in 1980. Amidst the studio gear, Ian Dogole sits in a corner, surrounded by dumbeks, tablas, caixixi, and other percussive exotica. He doesn't claim to be an ethnomusicologist on all the instruments he plays, but brings his own synthesis to bear on them. "They are my global fusion music approaches," he says, while tuning a tabla. "I take all the jazz and world music that I've heard and I really try to assimilate all of these various elements into a style that is definitely mine. That's why I take the talking drums and play Monk tunes on them and Gershwin and things like that." Talk to any member of Ancient Future and the first influence they'll cite for their unique fusion is John McLaughlin's Shakti. Matthew Montfort even plays a scalloped fretboard acoustic guitar, much like McLaughlin's, with a sound that's a cross between a guitar and the string-bending glissando of the Indian vena.

But Ancient Future isn't one of those groups turning inspiration into dogma. Their 1989 recording, *Dreamchaser* (Sona Gaia), incorporated music of Bali, Peru, and India with seamless fire and grace. "The whole thing started out just Indian instruments and sitting on the floor and all that," recalls Montfort. "Now we are encompass-

ing South American rhythms and African rhythms and Balinese rhythms and jazz and rock and western classical."

Their latest album, *World Without Walls* (Sona Gaia) continues this fusion, a melding of world culture with Ancient Future's own lush sense of melody and rhythmic drive. With Jim Hurley on violin and Doug McKeehan handling keyboards, including samples of world music instruments, they storm through an electric delirium of music including pieces like "Lakshmi Rocks Me" dedicated to violinist L. Shankar.

These cultures inspire new ways of thinking about music and new ways of composition. Montfort finds that the intrinsic quality of an instrument like a charango — the South American guitar made from an armadillo — leads to certain kinds of composition. "When I play that, a lot of times it really seems like it makes up its own song for me in a way," he says. "You know, the instrument has a personality. Especially with it being made from part of an animal, somehow you get this eerie feeling of maybe a little extra personality than you might find in, say, a guitar."

Most of these artists speak of their fear of homogenization, that the unique characteristics of these cultures will be lost in the blender that is the heritage of American

music. But Michael Pluznick doesn't see it as watering down the purity of this music, but expanding its potential. "We're in America and we're combining and creating something new," he asserts. "These rhythms and cultures came here to the new world, so obviously they want to be part of what happens in this culture." ●

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me discipline."

In the end, *Rhythm Deep* didn't sell as well as the record company had hoped, says Mark Wexler, vice president of marketing at GRP. "It kind of fell in the cracks (between jazz and R&B). Part of the problem was that we lost some of the loyal following among jazz buyers." Hakim's next album scheduled for release in January will try to please both R&B fans and jazz fusion enthusiasts. Yes, there will be vocals. But there will also be more instrumental songs. "I think [GRP Records President Larry] Rosen's main concern is that I have a lot of instrumentals. He thinks I didn't take care of the ordinary jazz people with *Rhythm Deep*."

Hakim thinks the next CD will keep both audiences happy. "I want songs with more

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