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MUSIC



Ancient Future: 'Empathizing with the audience is very important to us.'

MUSIC SANS BORDERS

In World Without Walls, the Bay Area ensemble Ancient Future continues to fuse musical styles from around the world

By Derk Richardson

IF ITS name, Ancient Future, only cryptically hints at the nature of the band's music, the title of the new album from this long-standing Bay Area ensemble says it all: *World Without Walls*. For nearly 13 years, Ancient Future, led by composer-guitarist Matthew Montfort, has sought to open the borders between various musical traditions around the globe. Although the group was spawned from studies of Indian music at the Ali Akbar College in San Rafael, Montfort explains that "the goal was to blend more styles than just North Indian classical and jazz or Western classical; to encompass more cultures with a really broad palette."

To that end, Ancient Future has recorded five albums of lush "world fusion music," made with such instruments as sitar, tabla, arod, flute, zither, Irish harp, kajar, kukul, violin, cello, charango, bansuri, kalimba, dumbek, dholak, Balinese gamelan, Tibetan bowls, electric and acoustic guitars, sleigh bells, and synthesizers. Critics have used such descriptions as "trend-setters," "a milestone," "finest in this genre," and "the sound track for Marshall McLuhan's global village."

But don't blame yourself if you don't recognize Ancient Future as readily as you do the pop phenomena of the recently burgeoning New Age and world music scenes, like Andreas Vollenweider, the Bulgarian Women's Choir, the Gipsy Kings, or Strunz & Farah. As Montfort admits, the group has been virtually impossi-

ble to peg in the music industry's scheme of things. "We're very anti-category," he told the Bay Guardian recently, "and that's exactly why we're doing what we're doing — we're trying to break them down."

Ancient Future's music has always been impossible to define within the rigid categories of the music business. Indeed, until the recent advent of the "world music" charts in *Billboard*, the group was often misclassified as New Age because it's signed to the Narada/Sona Gaia label.

"There really wasn't a place to put us in the record store when we started," Montfort says. "Since we weren't really a jazz group, that didn't fit. When the New Age thing happened, it turned out to be the way for us to get in the door, but I never really felt that was what we were doing."

As Montfort discovered, the New Age label is not necessarily a boon. "I think we have suffered some backlash," he says. "I've noticed that we didn't get a few gigs that we would have gotten otherwise. And before New Age music was well-known, the avant-garde was supportive of what we did — they were open to the music in spite of it being tonal. Now that New Age music has gotten so popular, I think there are people who just lump what we're doing in with that, and since they don't like New Age music, anything that has any similarities with it must be bad, too."

Montfort's musical roots are light-years away from New Age. Growing up in Boulder, Colo., he started out playing rock'n'roll, inspired early on

by Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin and gradually expanding his influences to include Yes, the Mahavishnu Orchestra, John Coltrane, Ravel, and Debussy. "I just kept doing different types of music," he says, "and putting them together." One of his first exposures to Indian music was the Diga Rhythm Band album, featuring tabla master Zakir Hussain and Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart, released in 1976.

The following year, attracted by the multicultural music program at the Naropa Institute, Montfort migrated to Northern California, coincidentally moving into the house where the Diga Rhythm Band had held its rehearsals. Upon enrolling in the Ali Akbar College of Music in 1977, Montfort met the other musicians — Mindy Klein, Phil Fong, and Benjy Wertheimer — with whom he formed Ancient Future one year later.

"We were all studying Indian music," Montfort recalls, "and although we wanted to do something that wasn't classical Indian music, the first album [*Visions of a Peaceful Planet*] was really quite Indian and Western. To Indians it sounded like Western music played on Indian instruments, and Westerners heard mostly the Indian influence. So at least we reached our goal of combining things."

After recording a second album, *Natural Rhythms*, Ancient Future began an evolutionary process in which various musicians (Randy Meade, Marcia Sloane, Rick Henderson, Bruce Bowers, Ian Dogole) contributed to the different instrumental emphases on the albums *Quiet Fire* and *Dream Chaser*. The current quartet, which performs this Saturday night at the Noe Valley Ministry, includes Montfort, violinist Jim Hurley, keyboardist-synthesist Doug McKeehan, and the newest member, Iranian tabla player Mehrdad Emam.

"We have never been extremely avant-garde," Montfort says of the ongoing project he's directed for 13 years. "We've wanted to make music that was very accessible, because to us the point is reaching people. While

we might have enjoyed just improvising atonally over world rhythms, we wouldn't expect that it would always be fun for everybody to listen to, and empathizing with the audience is very important to us."

If there's one thread running consistently through Ancient Future's music, it's been Montfort's fascination with international rhythms. "When you study non-Western music," he says, "the aspect that is the most easily and universally applicable is rhythm. I had always felt that I had rhythm down, but when I came out to study Indian music, I immediately realized that there was a lot that I didn't have together. It was a shock to me." In the process of educating himself (and completing a degree through Antioch College), Montfort wrote an extraordinary book, *Ancient Traditions — Future Possibilities: Rhythmic Training Through the Traditions of Africa, Bali and India*, which makes it possible to both understand and play those complex beats.

While advanced studies, including a research trip to Bali, and personnel shifts have altered the shape and sound of Ancient Future over the years, Montfort notes: "The original vision hasn't changed at all. There have been some detours, but *World Without Walls* is my favorite album because in a way we have come back to some of our earliest influences — exploring the North Indian influence with Zakir Hussain, using Balinese interlocking two-part rhythm and harmonized melody.

"World fusion music is still in its infancy," he concludes. "Working together on that level is not something that's built into our culture." Putting that cooperative tradition into a forward-looking context turns out to be the meaning and the triumph of Ancient Future. ■

Ancient Future performs at 8:15 pm, Sat., June 8, at the Noe Valley Ministry, 1021 Sanchez, SF, 647-2272; and with Kitka, July 21, at In Performance at Forest Meadows, Dominican College, Grand and Mountain View, San Rafael, 457-0811.