

We're the World; we're the Music!



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Aiyushman Dutta 29 July 2009 13769 views

Almost five decades back, virtuoso saxophonist Albert Ayler had proclaimed: “Music is the healing force in the universe”. Ayler was right on mark when he said the above words for his proclaimed words are relevant even today, especially in our very own strife-torn Northeast India, where mankind is in sure need of quite a bit of healing.

More than just a healing force, music is a tool which can be used for greater understanding between different cultures around the world. As modernisation and technology makes inroads into each and every aspect of our lives and the entire world becomes one small little village, music is the very medium which can help bind people and their hearts together with each other. For it is the only form of communication, a language transcending borders, that speaks to us all as equals in the most profound way. This is where “world music” comes in.

I have been trying to keep the readers of this weekly column abreast, in my own humble way, about the developments that can be noticed in the field of world music. It has been my humble attempt to even bring into focus those fantastic musicians in our midst who have been experimenting with their traditional sounds to give rise to new musical genres. I would like to refer to their music as also being “world music”. The question that now arises is: What exactly is world music?

Music enthusiast Richard O Nidel, who has written extensively on world music, says: “Any term that attempts to reduce an art form to a single phrase is of course suspect, but world music works better than most as an accurate, descriptive label. It is easy to generally agree on a few things, namely, that the term refers most often to traditional, folk, or roots music: either created or played by indigenous musicians, or by naturally incorporating other musical forms or by being part of virtually every culture and society on the planet. A more succinct definition is that world music includes the many forms of music of various cultures

that remain closely formed or guided by indigenous music of the regions of their origin.”

Besides deliberations on what exactly is world music, many musicians have also listed those musical genres which are not supposed to be regarded as world music - like pop, R&B, soul, Broadway, jazz, fusion, country and the like. And yet, nobody can say whether popular, commercial music falls inside the purview of this new domain. Despite all the different connotations, the fact remains that the entire domain of world music is still in a very nascent stage and no hard and fast rules abide.

The primary reason for this scenario is the lack of adequate resource material and reference guides to fall back onto. Despite the growing interest in world music, especially in the western countries, there are remarkably few books that give an overview on the entire subject. For instance, when we are deliberating on the subject of world music, the first book to come to mind is the, *Rough guide to World Music*, from England but I feel this book is not comprehensive and not designed as a quick reference guide. Then there is of course, the ten volume, *Garland Encyclopaedia of World Music*, but that again, is too cumbersome and not based on popular survey.

As such, it was indeed nice to find in a Guwahati bookstore Richard Nidel's book, *World Music: The Basics*, which can be said to be a one-of-a-kind book. The compendium, which seeks to give a brief introduction to popular musical styles from around the world, is a commendable introduction to the players, the music, and the styles that make world music one of the most exciting new musical genres. Organized in chapters by continent/ region, and then A to Z by country, the book features both background information on the cultural and musical history of each area, along with succinct reviews of key recordings.

The author has included as many as 130 countries in the compilation and virtually every entry in the survey includes a brief statement about the history of the country, a discussion of the major genres and styles, a list and description of instruments found in that country, and references to the most important artists and innovators. The author has also taken the pains to include recommended recordings for each country so that beginners or readers can explore the music in conjunction with the survey. Of course, the list of recommendations is not comprehensive; it would be asking too much to expect that. But yes, it would still be an informed starting point for people here, directing the reader to compact discs which are significant and representative of the kind of music being discussed.

If we were to look at it, ideally all music is world music and there is no way to comprehensively define or even agree on the parameters of the term. Nevertheless, *World Music: The Basics* is based on generally accepted definitions of this new musical genre and is a good base for further exploration into its varied facets and nuances. I recommend this book to all music enthusiasts.

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BY AIYUSHMAN DUTTA

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