

## Comments on "World Music: a medium for unity and difference?" by Carsten Wergin

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The empirical identification and description of local music processes as enacted by the band Bastèr from La Réunion makes a very interesting case study of world music. As a sociologist with an interest in the social organisation and cultural significance of music, whether world or not, I believe it is essential that this type of empirical work is carried out, as world music literature is dominated by theoretical and abstract concerns, especially in relation to globalisation debates. Moreover, accounts of its empirical meaning help to provide further purchase on it as a cultural process that reflects both local and global influences.

The following questions arose in my reading of this article. I have first tried to explain the thinking process behind some of the issues that stimulated such queries.

It is argued here that world music is demonstrably an artistic genre and not simply a marketing concept, achieved through a particular kind of musical practice, with a style defined by its expression and representation of ideas about culture and identity. The typical understanding of the history of world music as a marketing concept is shaped by the idea that music industry movers and shakers at a point in the 1980s needed a more convenient label for heterogeneous music in order to sell more units to western consumers and thus, unlike jazz or hip hop, there is no one identifiable sound or style. Often this leads to some taking the perspective of world music that it is an empty or meaningless creative category. However, I think that the relationship between industry and creative practices that shape what eventually comes to be called world music are fraught with tensions and ambiguities.

Inglis and Robertson (2005: 157) suggest that music per se "is one of the most geographically portable of all artistic and cultural forms" that are "particularly prone to syncretisms and fusions of different styles". In this sense, apart from the particular locally inscribed political references and aspirations of Bastèr, surely the combination and reworking of their sounds and contrasting of instruments and voices through Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song' is typical of what musicians (mostly?) always do.

1. What makes the practice of world music making as described here qualitatively distinct from any other kind of music making that may also deal with issues of identity and culture? For example, hip hop also is constructed around ideas of culture and identity and is usually associated or taken up by urban groups on the periphery in a social, economic or political sense, often reinterpreting the original cultural formation of hip hop by combining with local or traditional music, politics and languages.

In fact, the one thing that would (does) cast a different light on this process is the ideas associated with the label world music itself, i.e. the fact that from the end of the 1970s the fledgling world music industry began to notice the 'authentic' music of La Réunion and it is from this point that they tried to make their music fit within a certain global aesthetic that valorised authenticity and the exotic or hybridity, which are both key aspects of the commercial definition of world music. The ideas underpinning world music as part of a 'genre culture' (Negus, 1999), which includes the practices of the industry, is in fact how the musicians discussed here proceed to orient their music. This shows how world music is

not simply reflecting but actually contributing to the transformation of the relations between music and ethnic/identity and music and geographical space, such that world music is global in nature (Inglis and Robertson, 2005). This means that it is difficult to separate the 'artistic' or creative aspects of what constitutes world music as a genre from how the music industry has shaped the possibilities for creative practices as described here.

2. Would these changes to the expression and representation of La Réunion music from maloya through to the reworking of Bob Marley and beyond, exist without a global (world) music industry?

3. What therefore is the relationship between the dynamic genre practices as described here and creative constraint brought about by transformations in habits of consumers, market categories and audience expectations music making, marketing and consumption practices that produce the genre of world music? In other words, what is the relationship between creativity and industry that underpins this account of the music making practices of this band?

Some musicians are perhaps more self-conscious than others about the relationship between creativity and industry, depending on how genre savvy the musicians are or want to be in relation to their ultimate orientation to music making, i.e. can they simply make vibrant 'Creole' Réunionnais music without wanting to 'reterritorialise' themselves within a global musical aesthetic as 'world music'? What relationship does the reception of the music have with the reading of the song described here, in other words, to what extent does world music require some form of expertise in order to deliver the cultural politics integral to the band's music making mission?

In short, I guess I am questioning what is being imputed to the Bastèr musicians and their creative output and their imagined audience/market, as well as questioning the extent to which we can make a special case for world music in terms of what it might constitute as a social and cultural process.

Overall, I found this paper to stimulate further questions about how music is used to portray social and political concerns from a musician's and the relationship between creativity and industry. My questions are based on my interests in world music and are meant to (hopefully) stimulate further discussion in this regard.

## References

Inglis, D. and Robertson, R. (2005) 'World Music and the Globalisation of Sound' in *The Sociology of Art: ways of seeing* London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Negus, K. (1999) *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* London: Routledge.

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