Do We Still Need the Term Word Music?

Jiří Moravčík

At a festival in Rudostadt,[1] Germany, I attended a seminar with Simon Emmerson, Martin Carthy and his daughter Eliza, the members of an English [music] project called *The Imagined Village* that combines futuristic techno-rhythms and ancient tradition; they discussed things which I had been interested in for a long time as well. They claimed, for instance, that the music they performed was not world music; it sounded daring, considering their mixture of English folk music, Bhangra, reggae, Indian, Pakistani and Irish music. Within the past five years, it has not been the first refusal of being included within world music, so I started to wonder whether this was similar to what we witnessed with a similar general term Celtic music.

So the question goes: Do we really need the term world music? Do we need it now, twenty years after it was offered to the public, media, businessmen, and various music parasites? The answer is both yes and no. The term "world music" is simply a working term. It has been casually used at WOMEX, the world music expo; its president Gerald Selingman addressed the attendees as members of the world music community in his opening speech last year there. The term is a must for music publicists, general audiences and businessmen alike. The term stands in the headings of numerous magazines, festivals, and radio shows. Obviously, if we say world music, everybody would understand it as a term for a musical adventure, a cultural exchange platform, an opportunity for unlikely music encounters, and at the same time a brief term which says nothing, a term which starts to make some musicians to see red. Sometimes this perception proves to be right, because there have been so many changes within the past twenty years.

It was at that time, twenty years ago, when 'exotic music from the third world countries' (as music from outside the Anglo-American scene used to be called) started flowing to Europe via small independent labels. It brought a problem for the owners of companies and related journalists: How to call this diverse mix of music in their business strategy? How to squeeze it within shelf and not let customers aimlessly wander among stores that do not specialize in it? In spite of the fact that nobody predicted it, world music has become a genre, an adventure phenomenon, and a ticket to the world of new colours, rhythms, and customs.

1) Folk und Tanz Fest, July 2008.

Completely unknown musicians started to travel to Europe from exotic regions. People attended their concerts and festivals and bought recordings. These foreigners helped the Europeans get out of the vicious circle of the European hauteur: all of a sudden they could see in their own eyes that great music is being even played in underdeveloped parts of Africa. This was a period of the cooperation between African and European musicians and artists. World music, as an umbrella term, contributed to it very much.

The story of an introduction of the term is well known; let me just remind you of it: In 1987, a pub in the London suburbs saw a meeting of several product managers, businessmen, radio programmers and journalists who were invited there by product managers and editors Roger Armstrong and Ben Mandelson from GlobeStyle. Over a pint of beer they were supposed to think of a solid term that would lead the customer to the right shelf, then to a radio station or a programme, and to the buying of a magazine and a map, all of which was necessary for visiting the consequently growing festivals of that time. Ben Mandelson pointedly commented on it later: "This was an activity of idealists emerged in pragmatism; an effort to fit the music which originated for a local market within one box, that which surprisingly captured an audience in the other parts of the world."

There were various suggestions how to call it (World beat, ethno, calypso, roots music), but world music won in the end. This music involved tradition in all possible means, including its hybrids. Ian Anderson, the chief editor of the prestigious British music magazine *fRoots,* supposedly said: "Why it is world music? Because the term covers very much, and leaves out very little".

The investment to the promotion which followed was about 3.500 British pounds; the sum seems more than funny if compared to the money invested by multinational giants to the promotion of their speaking robots. In fact, it has been one of the most successful marketing campaigns ever. The term world music caught on, which perhaps has its logic; not a negligible part of listeners has been waiting for a similar kind of music and the way how to get to it through the pop music jungle.

The situation has been turning upside down these days. Musician who used to rush under the umbrella of world music now run away from it. They do it in the same way as the Irish, Scots, Britons, Gallic, and Welsh did with the Celts. They leave the term to tradesmen; themselves, they do not consider the term world music significant for their music at all. For instance, many African musicians have great ambitions. They want to reach a success similar to Michael Jackson, they see themselves in pop charts, but being ranked into world music leaves them out automatically. What used to be a dream twenty years ago, that is an African

non-English speaking artist in pop charts, has come true today, but it is not usual. The term world music still does not make it easy.

It should be remembered here that *fRoots* magazine introduced a 'Local music from out here' logo instead of the assumed 'World Music' in its heading already in 1999. At the same time, Charlie Gilett, a BBC Radio DJ, commented on the difference between a direct fusion and a hybrid when local music turns into something completely new in an urban environment, or gains a new, fascinating dimension in union with electronics. Traditionalists and purists in ethnomusicology say that this is against nature, but in that case no African player would be allowed to switch a wooden lute for an electric guitar, and the continent would end up in a real musical ghetto, or, in fact a museum. Such arguments are a product of the Westerners' vain search for a non-existing ideal of authenticity.

I should also mention the famous article by David Byrne, "Why I Hate World Music", in which he predicted a lot of unfairness. He says: "In my opinion, using the term world music is an unfair journey. It is a journey of an exile to a kingdom of something exotic and mysterious, yet cunningly calculating. It divides people, creating the groups of us and them. This labelling is a journey which does not see a musician or a band as a creative individual. This is a label for all that is not sung in English, or for everything that does not fit the Anglo-American pop world."

David Byrne in fact indicated a parallel between Celto-mania and world music. The phenomenon of world music has also partly become a paradise for eager experimenters and various fad opportunists; in the same way as people used to consider themselves Celts for just touching the fiddle or blowing the pipe, now the term world music served the people who brought an exotic instrument home from their holiday, accompanying Moravian folk songs with didgeridoo, or switching drums for djembe.

Twenty years ago, Europeans were not interested in exotic countries despite the fact that the gates of London, Brussels, and Paris were wide open for the inhabitants of their former colonies. There was the Eastern Bloc – a Communist concentration camp behind a barbed wire, the Internet was in its infancy, there were no mobile phones, and even travelling was not as easy as it is now. The world music expo, WOMEX, existed only in the heads of its future organizers, and the music of Africa and Asia could be found predominantly in the communities of big European cities.

The situation has radicaly changed. The iron curtain disappeared. Globalization progressed at an unbelievable speed. The distances between continents have been reduced to a minimum, and the communication between them is a matter of seconds. There is YouTube and MySpace. The most important thing is that Europe has realized that its population is decreasing and that it is

necessary to open its doors wider to immigrants of African or Asian descent. And musicians are their natural avant-guard. The term multiculturalism has become a household name. In the same way as the Tango originated in a multicultural environment of the harbour two hundred years ago, and the Fado in Portugal, the African music was turned upside down with electric guitars and music from Cuban radios, now local music from India and Africa transforms itself in the centre of Europe now, and the time has come for the emergence of new musical styles. The harvest music of Panjab turned to popular Bhangra in London, brass bands from the Balkans reach the world, and its Romani music can be heard more in New York that in Bucharest. In the other part of the world, in Senegal, more than two thousands of hip-hop bands were counted; the young hip-hop artists are the most important messengers in Western Africa as they have replaced the griots and their thousand-year long tradition. Let us mention an unbelievable resurrection of the east European Klezmer in Manhattan, or the entering of the throat singing of Siberian shamans into general music scene, where it has been adopted by Frank Zappa as well as the Kronos Quartet. And what about the Rai of Algeria, originally the music of shepherds, which was made popular by Kaheld and Rachid Taha; today it is a natural part of the French pop music. Should these all still be called world music? Shall we call world music the Czech group Čechomor that turns Moravian folk music into the solid folk-rock? Isn't now the right time for the words of the producer John Boyd, one who attended the memorable meeting in London and said in 1992: "We have created the term world music as something which should only be used when it is useful".

It seems that the term world music has lost its meaning. It makes things too simple; it places it all into one box. It has turned into a crutch. Consider for instance these words by a reviewer: 'It is a mixture of rock and world music'. The young generation of musicians from emigrant families, born long after 1987, may not have anything in common with the term. They consider England, the Netherlands, Germany or France their homes. They perceive the traditional music of their parents in their own way, and quite often they approach it through Madonna, Hendrix, Led Zeppelin or Bob Marley, the music they have grown up with in Europe. Instead of Yoruba, Hindi or Bantu, they speak fluently English or French.

An English folk singer Eliza Carthy shocked her listeners in Rudolsadt when she claimed that she never listened to the Steeleye Span or Fairport Convention: "The 1970s, when my father Martin Carthy helped to create the English folk rock, do not exist for me. I'm not interested in them. I have never listened to this type of music." She does not agree with the term world music, she does not like it since it seems discriminatory to her. She can imagine nothing under that term. Simon Emerson, her colleague in the project Imagined Village, shares the same

opinion: "It is just a label of a shelf in a store, nothing more. Or do you want to tell me that you know when world music originated? Was it for instance on Tuesday July 2, 1980 at 5:30? Or when Bob Dylan switched his acoustic guitar for an electric one, or when the Beatles used an Indian sitar in their songs? The last thing I would like to see is to end up like the Irish, who could not believe what happened to their music after several years."

Saying this seems paradoxical, since Emmerson's band Afro Celt Sound System contributed a lot to the general Celtomania. On the other hand, it was a really daring project, especially when the Afro Celts music turned to multiculturalism. The Afro Celts anticipated the time of original and sensible hybrids. They were the first to have noticed that Europeans were no longer the only inhabitants of Europe. English folk music, which is a basic stone of the Imagined Village project, is founded on the belief that traditional folk music can no longer be perceived as it used to be, that is, the music reproduced from the old songbooks. Their version of "The Scarborough Fair", accompanied by the sitar, is a natural thing to them, no exoticism and fusion. It reflects the entire authenticity of English society today, all that can be seen around. In Rudolfstadt, Eliza Carthy said: "Folk music is part of the English society, and it includes Africans and Asians as well. Accept the fact that English music of the future will differ very much. Our traditions have not died out; they just take a new modern form. Do not call it world music then. Calling it so places it to a ghetto. The term world music has fulfilled its task. Forget about it. Call the things real names."

A discussion considering the term world music has to go on; but we also have to understand the musicians who do not agree with it. It is thanks to world music that listeners look for their musical roots. They have discovered the African and Asian roots and then turned to their own roots in search of their own identity. It is not necessary to condemn the term world music; it is important to understand it in its context, both in its limits and its useful links. Looking back to 1987, Ian Anderson said: "It is just and only a label on a shelf in music stores." And look what happened to it.

In the very end, let me cite from the personal interview with Simon Broughton, the chief editor of the influential *Songlines* magazine: "The term is good, and in spite of the fact that many people dislike it, it has made it. World music develops outside of major trends, but everybody has to count with it, it is definitive. It turned to sick fashion predominantly because of the media that bring trouble to musicians. But we know it and we can do nothing with it."