

Music From the 4 corners; Experiences of running a Multicultural community music ensemble.

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This paper is about my experiences as initiator/leader of the 4 Corners project ,a multicultural music workshop group working in England and Ireland from 1997 to 2001.

The paper will look at the formation of the group, our intentions and methodology, our key projects, our strengths and weaknesses and the spirit of the project.

Set-up

The project was set up by myself and Ghanaian guitarist Alfred Bannerman to do a number of things 1) allow musicians from around the world a space in which to explore each others musical heritage and styles without commercial pressures 2) to encourage creative flow within this group 3) to develop and deliver an interesting body of workshop material from around the world into community settings and to interact with community groups 4) to promote the idea of world musicians as community musicians 5) particularly to promote world music education in Ireland where at this time it was underdeveloped.

All the musicians were London or Southeast England based and were all invited to join. With one exception Manickam Yogeswaran all the musicians had substantial training in community music or workshop skills. This was a key criteria for joining the group and proved crucial in providing a professional approach to workshop and project delivery.

Manickam Yogeswaran is an educator of exceptional ability and was able to both deliver his area of Carnatic vocal work and also blend this with other musical styles without any difficulty.

We made a clear decision about musical styles at the start that we would neither be purist in our approach nor would we try to provide a specifically youth oriented approach to satisfy funders. It is clear that some funders perceive community music to be about developing access for young people to modern urban dance music and not to have any wider implications. This group deliberately did not chase this route but specifically allowed the musicians to jam, workshop and rehearse pieces from their own culture that they felt would travel educationally and that they enjoyed singing or playing. The group looked for commonalities in the music or in the song subject matter or in the groups the pieces would be appropriate for. To begin with we spent some time exploring children's songs from various countries. Rather than keeping them pure we invited afro-cuban drumming to blend with west african song, chinese pipa to accompany an Irish ballad, West African hi-life guitar to accompany a chinese folk tune and South Indian and Gospel vocal styles to blend in improvisation. Because we kept the group small (usually under 6 musicians per project and rarely more than fifteen at a rehearsal) and because the groups musicians were sensitive to each other, these blends tended to work musically. On one occasion we substantially expanded the group including Turkish Cypriot musicians, Zairean musicians and Japanese taiko drummers and with a larger group the music moved towards what I personally felt was a parody of itself. Rightly or wrongly I made the decision after that to keep the group small. This was really because smaller groups allowed the musicians time to listen , discuss and try out things rather than the pressure of forging ahead that we found in the big group.

The group was without any great formal structure with myself convening the group, arranging rehearsals, fund-raising for projects and handling the financial and organisational side. This also included such things as transport, accommodation, liaison with the workshop group or venue and arrangements about publicity etc. I made many attempts to make the group into a true collective and into getting the musicians to take some of the responsibility (and also reward) for the organisation but people were either too busy, disinterested or not suited to this type of work. It is interesting that this was a project where a lot of the artistic power was in the hands of the world musicians but they did not want the organisational responsibility although they loved the group and were involved in much of the decision making. I did not pursue funding for a project director as I had too much else on my plate for the whole length of this project and I think this administration gap more than anything led to the projects lack of growth and eventual decline. This being said had the project the kind of beaurocratic basis that a similar project like Canterbury's Music for Change had it may have had to become more of a booking agency for world musicians (which MFC does very well) than a true cross cultural ensemble.

I was also the artistic director for the group which meant selecting workshop and performance material for the group, discussing arrangements and getting a consensus on how pieces would be workshopped. Essentially we would take a song, rhythm or musical idea and allow community groups to input into it using the original piece as a skeleton. This could mean adding instrumental backing, lines, vocal harmonies, raps, new verses in different languages, writing a new piece using elements of the original or adding samples or scratching. This allowed the pieces to be part created and owned by the community group while retaining key elements of the original. While all the musicians except myself were strongly steeped in their local cultures none had any issues about purism for its own sake. We sometimes joked about the London sound which we described as Dub drum and bass classical gamelan hifi. This being said all the musicians were very strong on the retention of musical quality in the music. Pieces could be blended but not squared off or as Patricia Shehan Campbell calls it Disnified. I found this aspect of working with world musicians the most interesting, where they know their own style well and want to blend it with others but not reduce it to lowest common denominator. Obviously keyboards can square off tuning so at times you only use them as a drone and so forth. Interestingly we found some fine traditional musicians who came to London to play rock and pop music and found that educational projects like this led them back to their roots.

The Musicians

There were in total between 20 and 25 musicians involved in the project at various times but with a small core group; these were:

The late *Pato Fuentes* a Chilean percussionist, educator and human rights activist. Pato was in many ways the soul of the group, a founder member of the London school of Samba, founder of samba schools through Europe, knowledgeable and patient teacher of afro-Cuban and afro-Brazilian music and leader of the drumming group in the protests against Pinochet. Pato had a huge commitment to music education as a means for personal growth and community development and fervently believed we Europeans should take our music out in the streets and celebrate life. Pato passed away earlier this year and with him passed my own motivation to continue to develop this project. I have many memories of this gentle educator but I wish to share just two. The first was him leading a drumming group for six hours in the August heat of Notting hill carnival just a few days after chemotherapy. The second was when he came up to me after a particularly difficult project and jokingly complained that the other musicians got to work with motivated young people many of whom had musical experience while he always had complete beginners, rough kids and troublemakers. I of course apologised and promised I would change this, knowing I was always going to send Pato the rough kids and the troublemakers because he was the one tutor who could quietly gain their respect and who could motivate them to focus and achieve. A man who is missed.

Gwen Sampy from Texas, a gospel and Jazz singer and someone highly knowledgeable in the music and contexts of the African diaspora. Gwen helped us to take gospel songs, ring shouts, field hollers, calypsos and african chants and make them come alive with teenage groups in Irish convent schools. A wonderful woman who can make a rational case for learning about voodoo in religious studies to a nun. I often felt that when working with Gwen we were blowing the lid off western education, challenging behaviours and assumptions of staidness and conformity and offering an alternative that was politicised, anti racist, intellectual, informed and funky. Gwen essentially dictated that world music could not just be all singing all dancing but had to tackle issues like racism awareness, gender issues and so forth.

Alfred Bannerman from Ghana. Alfred possibly the most recorded West African guitarist is a member of Osibisa and a deeply spiritual man. I feel that in projects about raising awareness of racism and working towards a genuinely multicultural Europe Alfred's contribution of humour, wisdom empathy and great musicianship have helped him act as an Ambassador for west African culture.

Wen Shin Zhao; Wen is a chinese pipa player who emigrated as a political refugee after the Tiananmen square massacre. Working with a highly accomplished musician from a musical tradition who brought grace, dedication and musical beauty to her work was an education for everyone and I feel that it has been a source of great knowledge for all who have worked with her to find out how music education is in such an essentially closed culture. Unfortunately because of asylum policies in England Wen had to leave the group and emigrate to Canada.

Manickam Yogeswaran is a Carnatic singer and percussionist and music educator from Sri Lanka. Like most of this group Manickam is dedicated to using his music in the cause of peace and has made recordings and done concerts for peace. A great listener and encourager he also works with the improvising group Shout.

Karamoe Darboe is a village musician from the Gambia who brought us his own self penned songs of peace and unity. Because of asylum laws in the UK he has now been deported and we have lost touch.

Martin Harwood a Quaker fiddle player from Scotland. Another gentle soul with a complete belief in music as a means for unearthing human potential.

Paul Bartholomew Saxophonist from London who leads a South African band featuring the Manhattan Brothers and is in many ways the music educator of the group. As a professional musician Paul has played with Blur, Pulp, Chaka Khan, BB King, Van Morrison and others and it has been wonderful to get someone of his ability to work with young musicians just starting out, teaching them African reed and brass lines as well as pieces like Chocholosa.

Projects

One of the nice things about this group was that we got to do variety of different projects in very different venues. These included;

- ⊗ Summer schools for under 10s in the Horniman Anthropological museum in South London,
- ⊗ A series of workshops and performances in the Ark children's arts centre in Dublin,
- ⊗ A world voice festival for secondary schools in Monaghan in rural Ireland,
- ⊗ A world music for youth festival for young people in Limerick and Dublin,
- ⊗ A major outreach programme for Kent and Sussex schools focussing on Gospel and Afro-Brazilian music,
- ⊗ An open air festival in Cork,
- ⊗ Womad festival,
- ⊗ Winter music festival in Drogheda on Ireland's east coast,
- ⊗ Several summer schools in Antrim Northern Ireland working with cross community groups etc.
- ⊗ A multicultural week at Brixton involving a song cycle composed by the participants on the triangular trade.

Most of these projects involved a group of three to six tutors working together with one or more community groups, learning, workshopping, writing and rehearsing material which was then performed to the public. This was by far our most successful model and consisted of a morning of warm-ups and orientation, followed by one or two large quite directed pieces involving the whole group which allowed some leeway for individual or small group contributions.

These pieces would have very set templates and for instrumental ensemble reasons tended to have an African, Afro Caribbean, South American or African American base to them.

This was followed by about a day and a half's small group work with groups working on drumming, voicework or a particular world style.

These groups would learn something about the particular performance styles and either learn — or write a piece which would incorporate elements of this style. At times it was possible to hook small groups up with other ones if musically appropriate to try new blends. These pieces would then be brought back to a dress rehearsal in which decisions about staging, running order and such things as solos would be made. We always encouraged participants to take improvised solos sometimes trading licks with the world musicians.

When we came to performance it was important to orientate the participants in a briefing session and to assign tutors to different specific cues. In this session it was possible to boost the participants confidence and to keep a very strong team identity. After the performance it was always vital to have a private debrief with the participants to let them know what the project meant for us and to give them a space for feedback.

I would like to look in a little more detail at three of our projects

1) *A gospel performance project in Dundalk on the East coast of Ireland.*

This is my home town and somewhat infamous as the traditional home of the IRA and now the Real IRA. Gwen Sampy and myself were asked to do a project on a troubled estate where the timers for the Omagh bombing had been found. This estate was a traditional IRA recruiting ground and in fact my very first band had two members from this estate 25 years ago who were also armed robbers and kidnappers. We decided

to work on what we call secular gospel. This means learning some traditional gospel songs and from them analysing the positive message gospel can have in all our lives not just Christians, in terms of self belief and developing a positive attitude . Then using the music as a springboard we would write an original secular piece about issues in the participants lives.

The group we had to work with (about 10 teenagers , mixed gender) had low musical skill and were quite unmotivated at first but we pleaded, cajoled and probably bullied them into shape and they performed three pieces including a lovely song about environmental issues. For me the interesting thing about the project was the youngest of the group a 13 year old boy called Joe who had very low self esteem and was on the margins of this marginalised group. He started by calling himself Smelly which was the name everybody gave him and he was nervous in all his actions. We insisted on finding out and using his real name and including him in all the pieces. His confidence visibly grew while we were there but the trouble began before the performance . He was afraid to play because the local bullies were there and he was 100% certain he would be beaten up. We had to negotiate with the bullies to let him play without fear of reprisal and after the concert he was carried out a hero by some of the young people. It would be foolish to imagine this lasting in this environment but it is a step along the way.

2) Antrim based project with the Irish peace institute.

This was a short project bringing together 25 young musicians from Ireland North and South both Catholic and Protestant. This project involved gospel, African american rhythm games, Caribbean songs and South African pieces and was very much designed to let the young people have fun and break down barriers. The young people were given a lot of free time to mingle and were encouraged to form small groups and perform together. Some community music students were also part of this project and the world music repertoire they learned is now part of many Northern Ireland schools.

What was delightful was that one of the students brought along her Lambeg or war drums, drums that I had never seen outside a sectarian context and we ended using them in a James Brown style funk workout. This project was a good example of world musicians being used to dispel notions of the other and putting sectarian musics in a radically different context helped all the young people overcome perceived difference.

3) Project with teenage rappers, djs and singers in the Roundhouse venue, North London.

This project was with 20 young dance musicians from London's underground culture. What was interesting was that the young people were more genuinely creative partners than in many projects initiating ideas and finalising arrangements. Some of the final pieces included; a Yoruba song over a hip-hop record mixed and scratched by a young dj with a solo of Tuvan style throat singing, a midi gamelan piece with live cello, a sung section and some ambient samples and an ambient piece with Carnatic singing, scratching and a spoken word Peter Pan record mixed in.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The groups real strength was in the musicians, their attitude to community music as a space for personal growth, and the fine blends of music produced. Almost all the musicians had a strong sense of professionalism and there was a real sense of the importance of performance. Nothing was slapdash and the participants were made to feel very good about their music by the musicians.

A real weak point in the group was my role being so all encompassing and the lack of an administrator or strategy or in fact any kind of development plan. All the core members of the group had other performing, recording, teaching lives and none had the time to take ownership. Two core members were deported and it was hard to replace them. For the group to make financial sense it would have had to either expand and become an agency or move from smaller community based projects to more work for big festivals with performance rather than inclusion being the key driver. With the death of Pato and the expansion of the music tech, rock and pop side of my organisation Soundpeople I have gradually wound down world music projects. They still feature as about a fifth of what we do but on a smaller scale with one or two tutors max.

This for me can never replace the buzz of the interaction of the 4 corners project with its sense of celebration and unity.

The spirit of this group was one of respect, listening and working together in new musical areas. The group composed of Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Agnostics and Atheists, half of whom had

come to England from areas of conflict. At all times all the group worked in an enquiring way to find out about the culture and music of the others believing this is the only way forward for our society.

I have spent quite a bit of time in this paper talking about individual musicians and I am very happy to do so for a number of reasons. Firstly it is important to remember in community music that so much, not just ideas and skill but also warmth, empathy, love and human awareness comes from the musicians and it is becoming rarer in England to see projects that work from the musicians up, including their ideas and understandings at every stage and not just using them as freelance guns for hire in projects designed and evaluated by administrators and arts development officers based on strategies and numbers rather than human skill and art. Secondly I have been privileged to work with people from around the world who are great humans, great musicians and great educators and it is the combination of all these attributes and the flow created between them that enabled this to be for me and many involved a life changing project. Thirdly I believe that the children of Europe are in grave need of close contact with artists and musicians like this working in a flexible and at times cross cultural way to enable them to see the immense benefits that can come with cultural mixing and to save them from the dangers of seeing the negative other and becoming tainted with the seemingly acceptable ideologies of neo-facism. Fourthly and finally the work of people like Pato goes on world wide inspiring and influencing children and adults at local level and it is almost entirely unsung. It is not related to the commercial music business, is not concerned with outputs and numbers and is rarely accepted within the mainstream of music education. It is the contribution of people who believe that music can lead us to accept and understand people from different cultures. Let this work be sung.