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DISSONANT NOTES ON "WORLD BEAT MUSIC WITH A FILIPINO LILT"

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In the February 20-26 1993 issue of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* Datebook, Nestor Torre called attention to what Prof. Pedro Abraham Jr. refers to as "World Popular Music-Filipino," a term which is indicative of multinational capital's ability to transform subversion into a mainstream product. Muted by this term are dissonant notes masquerading as harmony and cacophony disguised as polyphony.

How is this charade possible? Permit me to count the ways.

First, the signifier "World." More than a geographical construct, this term is a manifestation of the Metropolitan center's internal dialogues, its crises and anxieties, especially when confronted with the reality of hitherto invisible cultures. The encounter with the Other decentered/disrupted the basic assumptions of Euro-American aesthetics, compelling them to realize that their culture is only one amongst a plurality of ways of conceiving reality and organizing its representations in art and social practice.

"World" then performs a double function - a meaning acceptance and assimilation of the world's peripheral multi-cultures, as well as a hegemonic attempt to contain these diversities under one all-encompassing category. Attached to the word "world" is the construct of universality - no matter how wide we differ and diverge, we are imagined to be, in the final analysis, one and the same Word/World.

The binary opposites along which "difference" is constructed are brought to high relief in the qualifier "popular." Though grudgingly assimilated as a "legitimate", it occupies a less privileged space in the pantheon of artistic canons. "Popular" because not classical, high brow and avant-garde; popular because commercial.

"-Filipino" for its part signifies the way racial pride has been commodified and neutralized as one among many of a plurality of ways to express and articulate the metacategory "World" and its artistic expression - "World Popular Music." For while difference is encouraged and the value of the Other is acknowledged as different, it is never allowed to function in a way that will challenge and dismantle the hegemonic metropolitan culture's canons and values. As Hazel Carby says in her analysis of the presence of blacks and Black American Studies in American universities: "we are performing animals and trapeze artists. Allowing black folks to play the sideshow is not threatening to the main event (Carby 1990: 84)."

Such is the case with World Popular Music, a fusion of "authentic" Afro-Latin strains on the one hand, and "Western" Euro-American elements, on the other. This is evident for instance, in Paul Simon's *Graceland*, a result of his journey to apartheid-racked Africa. One recalls the Beatles, too, who in one phase of their experimentations, collaborated with Ravi Shankar to produce a fusion of pop and Indian music. In more recent times, other worthy musicians come to mind, notably David Byrne, formerly of *Talking Heads* and Peter Gabriel, among others.

To complete the multicultural set-up, *Yothu Yindi*, an Australian aboriginal group has already earned its niche in the World Popular Music canon, aside of course, from Cugat, Mendes and the like. This is the canon that World Beat Music with a Filipino lilt hopes to penetrate, but not dismantle. As Abraham puts it, World Popular Music-Filipino hopes to do for the Philippines what Xavier Cugat and Perez Prado did for Cuba and what Villalobos, Jobim and Sergio Mendez did for Brazil. After all, why would William Jefferson Clinton's New World Order listen to a "Gary Valenciano, when in Detroit alone, there are thousands of Jacksons (*Inquirer* 1993)?"

World Popular Music and its Filipino mutant did not however, arise out of a vacuum, springing fully blown so to speak, from the forehead of contemporary times. Debussy and Stravinsky, as early as the turn of the century, were among the first to incorporate some of the principles of The African to what we now know as "Classical Music." The fascination with Africa and The African (later to be expanded to include the Latin-American, the Asian, the hyphenated and all the other Others) and the artistic vocabulary that would arise from this fascination, are offshoots of what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin would call as the Modernist "Scramble for Africa" in the 1880's to the 1890's. Even while the dominant cultures were engaged in violently suppressing the "savage" cultures they encountered in West and East Africa, "they were importing into Europe as loot, the revelation of an alternative view of the world in the form of African masks, carvings and jewelry - artefacts which were, for the most part, stored away in the basements of the new museums of ethnology and anthropology (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 1990: 320)."

The discovery and plunder of Africa would in turn represent a moment of profound crisis which artists like Jarry, Rousseau, Rimbaud, Artaud, Lawrence, and Picasso felt immediately after the First World War, one in which the claims of European art to universal validity are questioned,

and in which the constructed and impermanent nature of "civilization" is exposed.

This crisis in its turn, would form the basis for the formation of the central texts of the modernist canon, among them Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Stravinsky's riot-causing *Rites of Spring*. The production and reproduction of this canon shows that "the 'discovery' of Africa, in a very significant way, became the dominant paradigm for the self-discovery of the twentieth century European world in all its self-contradiction, self-doubt, and self-destruction (Ashcroft, et al: *Ibid*)..."

One of the stark images of Europe's uneasy response and unequal relationship to Africa in particular and to the non-European world in general, is cut by the dying Rimbaud journeying through French Somaliland on the backs of native bearers. For it is through its journey from the Light of Reason to the Heart of Darkness that the dying West found its self-image, or more appropriately, its negative image - the black Other to the White Norm, the demonic opposite to the angels of reason, the Dionysiac liberation force to the Apollonian certainty of 19th century bourgeoisie society. The formation of Western man's "Self," in all its decadence and instability, was seen to depend on the existence of a Non-European Other and on the other-ing of a Non-European World.

Unwittingly or not, this process of suturing a splintered identity by other-ing an Other World is repositioned/restated in what World Popular Music-Filipino. Put in the context of an anti-imperialist populist movement, this practice could be traced back to Pinoy Rock of the 70's, Pinoy Punk, Pinoy Rap and Pinoy Pop of the 80's and the 90's. In the 70's, Heber Bartolome unequivocally declared: "Tayo'y Mga Pinoy," Florante batted for our own national language in "Ako'y Isang Pinoy," and Joey Smith called attention to our own music in "Ang Himig Natin."

Let us not forget Francis Magalona's rap-ist admonition to unite as a people in "Mga Kababayan Ko" and the Dawn's assertion, with a little help from the Irish U2, that though we have our own gender, class and ethnic groups, we are in the final analysis, all in the same boat ("Isang Bangka Tayo"). However, unlike Pinoy Rock/Rap/Pop which derive heavily from Afro-Latin and Euro-American folk, pop and rock traditions, World-Beat-Filipino aims to insert the specificity of the "native" or "indigenous" within a Southeast Asian matrix. Asin with its "Maaden Mo ang Kapaligiran" and Penpen with its "Pen-pen de Sarapen" has started this trend as early as the 70's. Highlighted were such populist issues as environmental degradation and the search for our national identity. A return to a more innocent, ecologically safe bygone era was invoked through a fusion of Euro-American strains and the instruments, melodic lines and other elements appropriated from minority groups of Mindango, the Cordilleras and the like.

Before it could fully explore the possibilities of its experimentations however, Asin was fated to melt into other groups with Lolita's Nene and Pendong's Grupong Pendong, each moving into other directions. Hopes for an artistic reunion is further irrevocably shattered by the murder of Cesar Bafares, Jr. Meanwhile, other singers will later catch on: protest movement veterans Susan Fernandez-Magno, Gary Granada, Pedro Abraham's Kontra-Gapi or Kontemporaryong Gamelang Pilipino, and Patatag; Joey Ayala and his Bagong Lumad; Loka! Brown, a conglomeration of individuals from other hands, including Lolita Carbon, Pendong Aban, Jr., Chikoy Pura of the Jerks, among others.

Although, as Abraham says, the exponents of World Beat-Filipino "have yet to penetrate the consciousness of the man-on-the-street (what happens to woman-on-the-street?)," they have more or less gone mainstream and have taken advantage of the perks of technology, print and broadcast media. Kontra-Gapi gets out of the confines of its

UP home base and from time to times invades such shows as "Vilma!" and such venues as Kuh Ledesma's Music Museum. Joey Ayala and his Bagong Lumad, which came of age via the campus concert circuit, is now rubbing elbows with the stars of "That's (Entertainment)" and the Apo Hiking Society.

At first glance, the mainstreaming of these groups represent a positive development in the Philippine music scene. No longer relegated to alternative venues and channels, the artists' experimentations are now reaching a wider audience. The dominance of American top 40's is somehow challenged, making us realize that there are indeed other universes out there aside from Detroit and Hollywood. Through massed gongs, drums, flutes and similar instruments, World Beat-Filipino hopes to foreground the Southeast Asian furthered/enriched/enhanced by Western Elements.

It would however be naive to rejoice at the popularization and expansion of musical vocabulary alone. For suspiciously missing in this rhetoric is the unequal power relations between the Manila-based Center and its peripheries. The encounter with cultures other than the Non-Tagalog and Non-Christian could be our own Manila-based, Christian-middle class-heterosexual version of the "Scramble for Africa," a scramble that does not undo, in a meaningful way, the center-periphery dichotomy operative even with our relations to the imperialising West. As the West colonizes satellites by savaging and ravaging, not only their cultures but also their economies, ours included, we unwittingly colonize our own "backyards." While the apparatuses of the Manila-based nation-state continue to disenfranchise and marginalize the peripheries politically and economically, the same nation-state continues to import its cultural artefacts, as loot, to the Center.

Elements of the native find their way, not only in museums of art, anthropology and ethnography, but also in the homes and bodies of the elite and

middle class, and the shops of Megamall. They find their way too, in so-called indigenous Art, where the "native" is appropriated as exotic ornamentations or "palabok" to contemporary/modern Manila-based "fine arts."

With World Popular Music-Filipino, the native has also crept into Manila-based music, spicing up and lending exotic air to popular music forms, and even to the National Anthem, as recent performances of Kontra-Gapi will show. In describing his latest cassette, Abraham would say that "the numbers featured there attempt to put in Filipino flavoring and lilt to Euro-American forms (Inquirer 1993)." Isn't the alter-native mere icings on a pre-dominantly Western, Manila-centered cake?

I think this is the case, with very few exceptions, if we are to make a brief survey of the current alternative music scene. In the process of popularization/contemporization, the "native's" more intense and improvisational characters are domesticated, neutralized, mangled. The fluidity, the dissonant and melismatic flourishes of say, a T'boli chant, are tamed, whittled and pruned to conform to the limitations of the Western diatonic scale. Patatag insists on bel canto harmonizations, while Grace Nono, the latest of the alternative artists, ends up with esoteric, oftentimes tortured, overly conscious vocalizations more apt for consumption in polite drawing rooms and yes, such yuppie havens as Club Dredd (which, as of this writing, is out of business).

Ayala, who showed promise in his first two albums, has himself produced sleeker versions of "Agila" and "Ordinaryong Tao," polished to high-tech perfection. The dramatic microtones and polyphonic textures of say, the *hegalong* are muted to the point of paleness, draining its drone of its rightful hue and vigour.

Lyrics are carried to the height of inanity in Lokal Brown's "This is Not America;" the environmental

issue, so vigorous in Lolita Carbon's "Masdan ang Kapaligiran" degenerates into invocations to "Kalayaan," "Kasaysayan," "Kalikasan" in Nono's bordering-on-the-obscene "Ay! Ayayay! Salidumay, Salidumay Diwaalay."

The above examples only demonstrate that while such efforts are welcome, they must at least be informed with a more thorough knowledge of what Guillermo calls as "indigenous" musical traditions. While a purist approach is untenable, Guillermo nonetheless urges the artists to innovate in a way that will not sacrifice these traditions' more vigorous elements. They must be able to study carefully the differences between Western and indigenous tonality, vocalization and instrumentations. They must be able to understand, too, the ideologies embedded within the Western diatonic scale and indigenous dissonance; the bel canto with its precision of tone and the chant, a highly mellifluous and communicative delivery; harmony and heterophony; the artist/author-centered and the communal/ritual-oriented. Otherwise, innovation and appropriation would result, "not in genuine development and popularization, but in sterile commodification in which art and culture are produced and packaged according to the tastes of urban bourgeoisie patrons for whom Western criteria still prevail (Guillermo 1988: 174)."

Admonishing artists to be more sensitive, respectful and knowledgeable about the musical forms that they appropriate does not however confront the central problem—that of the imbalance of power between the "native" on the one hand, and Westernized Manila-based center on the other, matched in a complex and disturbing way by another imbalance: the "Filipino" musician and the consuming world beyond the "indigenous," where the Filipino sells his/her work. In the process of recuperating/appropriating silenced cultures, indigenous musical traditions negotiate the journey from communality to commodity; from village to world; from community to multinational. Although many traditions are still being practiced for

non-public ceremonial rituals, most of them are now being produced as products for sale at the global market.

No amount of "research" and "more authentic" approaches, by natives and non-natives, will bridge the gap between one mode of production and another; between object and symbol. For even as the artists go on to identify the various elements of the indigenous, they are inserted and overdetermined by the complex interaction of processes and modes that the so-called indigenous undergoes. Perception and grasp of "authentic" characteristics are unavoidably filtered and mediated through eyes that proceed to reconstruct and re-image "data" the very moment they are perceived.

Endeavoring to remain true to communality and vigor remains an illusion, for these characteristics will necessarily be reinterpreted in various ways as they become transformed via mass reproduction. As they leave their cultural and social space, indigenous traditions are extended into icons, mostly of class and intellectual status. Freshness and "roughness" in a T'boli chant for instance, are valuable not in the way that they are valuable for a T'boli village and not because of their significance as practices per se, but as symbols of symbols, relics of a remote past which the West and Westernized Filipinos lack and want. The ephemeral is placed in a cassette; improvisation character is reinterpreted as ornamentation; tone color becomes exotica.

Central to the problem too, is the gap between the culture that produces most indigenous music; and the culture that buys and collects it and uses it to promote racial pride and the national image. In their journey from the periphery to the center, the "native" styles and forms are re-imaged and re-imagined, in the service of the nation which, following Benedict Anderson, may in the final analysis be, imagined.

This gap is smoothed over when Guillermo declares that "our indigenous traditions belong to

the matrix of our national culture, at once Asian and distinctly Filipino, from which the revolutionary people's culture must continually draw to bring out the specific national character of our struggle (Guillermo 1988: 172)."

While I agree that we must position and define ourselves as Filipinos, "so that we can claim a socio-historical ground" from which we can decenter, dismantle the imperialist's narratives and strategies, the assertion of nationhood elides and eludes several problematiques. In this stage of what Jameson describes as "The Period of Late Capitalism," the nation-state's authority is continually being eroded as the center of power, but remains pivotal as a guarantor of space for the smooth flow of commodity and capital. The nation-state also remains important to trans-national empires "in so far as it is a model which offers an organizational framework in which the present imbalance of power and control can be maintained (Hoffie 1993: 12)."

Thus, in the process of self-naming and self-identification, we also conveniently occlude our insertion into the network of international and multinational control which regulates potentially disruptive and subversive impulses by naming, identifying them through the category of race and imagined nationhood. Even as we insert ourselves as a "difference" within the framework, rhetoric and thematics of multiculturalism, the metropolitan center is quick to arrogate for itself the ideals, impulses and struggles of this subversion by taming, channeling, reconstructing and transforming them into consensual products in the marketplace.

This becomes painfully apparent in our efforts to stamp our mark in the World Popular Music map. As the Filipino lilt in World Beat Music demonstrates, dissonance, cacophony and disharmony are refashioned, reconstructed and redirected along the lines of harmony and unity in the midst of diversity.

It is high time for us, and all the other Others to reclaim this dissonance.

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