

# GRAMMY

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## WHEN WORLDS CONVERGE



SIX ARTISTS WEIGH THE IMPACT OF MIXING GENRES IN THE '90s

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# WORLDS

## Mixing Genres in the '90s

# CONVERGE

BY BILL FORMAN

The idea of mixing musical genres brings with it images of cultures in contention: folk traditionalists booing an electric Dylan at Newport, jazz purists bemoaning the arrival of fusion, r&b legends lost in the crossover.

Critics frame such transitions in terms of dilution, corruption and misappropriation; proponents speak of breaking down barriers and exploring new terrain.

Today, with the rise of world music, hip hop, black rock, genre-bending and cross-cultural sampling, these questions are taking on new meaning. Perhaps now more than ever, contemporary musicians are questioning what constitutes the essence of their own stylistic approach, and its place within increasingly complex artistic, commercial and cultural contexts.

"I think the difference between watered-down, appropriated ethnic music and bril-

liant new syntheses just has to do with honesty," offers Don Was, the musician-turned-producer who recently recorded LPs with Yemenite singer Ofra Haza and Rai artist Cheb Khaled. "You know, they should behead people who do it by numbers like a recipe: four parts Ethiopian, two parts hip hop and one part Hank Williams... although I personally would like to hear that."

The catch, of course, is that the distinction between musical growth and calculated crossover is not always self-evident, especially in an industry where multinational conglomerates are constantly searching for the perfect mix to connect with an eroding

American attention span. "I remember when, here in New York, gamelan music was the rage among the smart set," says Living Colour guitarist Vernon Reid. "And a few years after that, West African juju music was very big, and then go-go music from DC was very hot. And the danger is that the music becomes just an exotic fashion, a boutique thing, and centuries of development are reduced to an article in the Times magazine section."

So what *are* the long-term prospects for cultural and artistic diversity in an industry that rewards musical assimilation? And what, if anything, has musical authenticity come to mean in an age of world music and cross-cultural experimentation?

In the following pages, a cross-section of today's recording artists address these and other questions raised by the blending of musical genres in the '90s. Their insights and anecdotes provide a revealing glimpse into issues confronting contemporary musicians in a postmodern world.

When I smell an attempt to close the openness of jazz," says Herbie Hancock, "what I also smell is someone burning down part of the essence of what makes jazz a living thing." The musical purity question is not a new one for the renowned jazz keyboardist, composer and innovator. Having performed for years with Miles Davis, it was only logical that Hancock's own group, Headhunters, would cross the boundaries between jazz, rock and funk — a transgression that helped pave the way for the '70s jazz fusion movement.

Like Davis, whose latter-year interpretations of Cyndi Lauper and Scritti Politti hits caused dismay in some jazz circles, Hancock has been criticized for being too open to outside influences. Yet this same openness has motivated him to investigate a wide range of musical genres, including an ongoing collaboration with African kora master Foday Musa Suso that anticipated today's world music trend a decade ago.

"Jazz," continues Hancock, "is a very eclectic kind of music, and it has always

borrowed from other forms of music. That's what makes jazz the beautiful thing that it is. I seriously doubt if a foundation in any other kind of music would put one in a position to be as flexible in your output as having a foundation in jazz."

Still, Hancock says he understands the resentment many jazz musicians feel in America today. "When you dedicate your life to an artform — and certainly jazz is an artform — you know the work that's been involved. You know the beauty that exists in the music, how full it really is in its ability to express a gamut of emotions and creative ideas. You know full well its ability to move people. And to see it thrown by the wayside and not being nurtured in the very country where it was born, it's really shameful. An artist is a human being, and some artists have become very bitter as a result of that."

Hancock says he tours Europe and Japan every year, but includes America in his tour plans only once every five years or so. "I feel that people are the victims of the media in America," says the artist, who blames ratings systems and playlists for what he sees as a narrowing of popular tastes. "It's like if everybody sent a questionnaire around saying what food does everybody like, it would probably end up being ice cream. So if every food manufacturer started making ice cream, what would happen? We'd all get sick. Fortunately, it doesn't work that way with food. Unfortunately, it *does* work that way with music in America. Everybody is trying to all do the same thing. And what they don't realize is that people will support a wider variety of music if you give it to them. If you *don't* give it to them, the only thing we're going to do is make America narrower and stupider."

While decrying the limited exposure jazz receives in America today, Hancock resists the temptation to elevate it above other more popular genres like dance and rap. "Putting one form of black music up on a pedestal and then trashing another one, something's wrong with that picture," says Hancock. "It's like a denial of the validity of black music to me. They both got the same roots. I mean, I don't mind when somebody says I don't like this artist's music or this record, but to knock a whole genre of music

makes no sense to me."

Disco had its time and place, maintains Hancock, and so did jazz fusion. Though Hancock's recordings helped inspire the latter genre, he says he never really liked the term fusion, nor the bandwagon mentality it turned into. "The expression of what was called fusion got narrower," he maintains. "Sometimes a new direction starts and it has a certain breadth to it. And then, if it has any success, everybody jumps on the bandwagon and starts doing it the same way. And it starts getting real narrow. I hate that — what potentially could have expanded, instead contracts."

Still eager to expand and maintain his own musical vocabulary, Hancock continues performing piano-based jazz even as he listens to the latest rap and acid jazz records in anticipation of his next pop project. (Hancock's last venture up the American charts was the turntable and synth-driven 1983 techno-pop hit, "Rockit.")

"There are all kinds of different subgenres that have their own lifespan, and some of their lifespans are short," says Hancock. "Some stand the test of time, but I don't believe that something *has* to stand the test of time to be considered of value. Some things have value but only for a short time. Look at

the quark in physics, it only lasts some micro-seconds, but it's very valuable, you know? Everything is not designed to last forever. It would certainly be boring if everything did."

*I've got a reason to believe we all won't be received in Graceland.*

— FROM "ELVIS IS DEAD" BY LIVING COLOUR

It's no secret that one of the most popular genres to emerge from black music has historically ignored its own roots. What's less frequently discussed is the fact that, to this day, rock remains an astonishingly segregated genre. As a founder of the Black Rock Coalition and guitarist for Living Colour, Vernon Reid has taken a leading role in reclaiming rock for black musicians and calling attention to a history that was largely ignored in the eagerness to claim Elvis as the king of rock and roll.

Born to West Indian parents in England, Reid and his family relocated to New York City, where he studied jazz and became part of the city's alternative music scene, recording with the likes of Ronald Shannon Jackson, John Zorn and Public Enemy. Yet, despite his eclecticism, the leader of the Black Rock Coalition's most famous band is



"When I smell an attempt to close the openness of jazz, what I also smell is someone burning down part of the essence of what makes jazz a living thing."  
— Herbie Hancock

understandably wary of cultural appropriation.

"Taking things out of the context that they were originally meant to be in can be cool and funky, but it can also be strange," says Reid. "Like there are certain African beats that are extremely sacred, and there are certain drums you really are not supposed to play in a certain way. Of course,



here in the West, we have absolutely no respect for native tradition on any level. Disrespect of other cultures is built into the Judeo-Christian ethic. The 'beneficiaries' of the West — and I do mean that in quotes, big ones — are supposed to be ignorant savages, but at the same time their artwork can be stolen and exploited. It's like, 'They're just savages so we can take all this really cool stuff.'"

Yet Reid is the first to admit that these cultural transactions are not always one-sided. "If it hadn't been for a lot of the English bands saying how wonderful black musicians like Chuck Berry, Muddy Waters and T-Bone Walker were, who knows what would have happened to a lot of those blues musicians? Believe me, I wonder. Because American pop artists were not copping to it for the most part, not in the same way. The

English literally worshiped Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and the r&b people."

As the first widely recognized black rock band in decades, Reid says Living Colour has taken its share of critical heat. "We've gotten all kind of potshots," says Reid, noting with a laugh that all of the pans are totally wrong. "There was an English paper that said we were the Martin Luther King to Public Enemy's Malcolm X. I mean, taking musical groups and putting them in the context of social activists — literally people who have given up their lives to try to move the human being forward — it's a little gamey at best. And then a lot of people mistook 'Solace of You' on our last record as us trying to do Paul Simon's thing. And I'm thinking, I don't

"The danger is that the music becomes just an exotic fashion, and centuries of development are reduced to an article in the Times magazine section."

— Vernon Reid

know, I thought that African music was around before Paul."

All of which is not to denigrate Simon's *Graceland* album, notes Reid. "There's a lot of divided opinion because of the cultural boycott, but I have to say, the music and songs were really good. I see Paul Simon doing this great album, and I wonder why haven't any African-American artists done something on that level? Of course, Harry Belafonte worked with Miriam Makeba and Herbie does work with Foday Musa Suso, but I just wonder about that." Reid also cites Wayne Shorter's collaborations with Milton Nascimento as an exemplary crossing of jazz, pop and Brazilian music.

Even so, Reid has reservations about the world music concept. "I remember hearing Fela at a concert say, 'I am not a part of no fucking world beat! I play African music. Why can't I play African music? Now everyone is world beat.'" For Reid, it all comes down to a question of motivation. "If you love a certain kind of music, and you want to incorporate it because this thing moves you, then I think as long as you're fulfilling what

you feel, that integrity is going to be there. But if you're thinking, 'Well, I'm gonna do this product because this product is selling,' that exploitative quality will come through whether a record is successful or not."

All of which calls for some periodic soul-searching on the part of the artist. "I think you absolutely have to stay in touch with what brought you to music in the first place," says Reid. "Why is music something to love? I think there are a lot of people that are in the business that *don't* love music particularly, but it's what they do, you know? I've met musicians who have had hit records who are bitter because of whatever they had to do to get to where they are. I think you have to remember why you love music."

With her supple vocals, African rhythms and soulful brass arrangements, Aster Aweke has been tagged by critics as the Aretha Franklin of Ethiopia, a title she finds amusing. The 31-year-old singer-songwriter did in fact grow up listening to American singers like Billie Holiday and Aretha Franklin, styles that would prove just as influential as the Indian film music she absorbed in Ethiopian movie theaters as a child. By the time she began singing in Ethiopian nightclubs, Aweke was already on her way to creating a unique multicultural synthesis.

"Most nightclub bands played different styles of music, but I guess I was the one who was mixing it the most," she recalls. "I used to try to imitate Aretha Franklin and Donna Summers, and then I'd do Amharic songs and my own songs." While initially criticized for singing like an American — "I wasn't trying to be a Western singer," she once said, "I was trying to be myself" — Aweke built a large following in her homeland, where she released 11 cassettes.

Aweke came to America in the mid-80s, ostensibly for college, though her studies ended up taking a backseat to her music. While singing in an Ethiopian restaurant in Washington, D.C., Aweke was tracked down by Britain's Triple Earth records, who'd previously had successful world music records with Indian singer Najima. The

singer soon found herself recording with both Ethiopian and British musicians, a cultural summit she initially approached with hesitation.

"I thought it would be very difficult, that we would not understand each other," recalls Aweke of the recording sessions that landed her a major label deal with Columbia Records. "I thought I wouldn't like what they do, because they don't know the roots of the music. I was afraid that they would change it, that they would lose the flavor. But it wasn't like that. In fact, I was surprised that it was very easy, and that's when I told myself that all music is a universal language, and everybody can do it."

Of course, lyrics tend to be less universal, and Aweke has seen more than a few baffled expressions since she started playing for non-Ethiopian audiences. "When I get onstage, I see people's eyes go here and there, searching for the meaning," she says. "The first time, it was very hard, and it's not like I'm going to stop and tell them, 'When I sing this, it means that, you know? On the next album, I'd love to mix English and Amharic vocals.'"

In the meantime, Aweke has no complaints about the changes brought about by acceptance in the world music community. "In the restaurant where I used to sing, they'd have dinner and, when the music

"In the restaurant where I used to sing, when the music started, the Americans would all leave and then all the Ethiopians would come in. Now I get to play for everybody."

— Aster Aweke



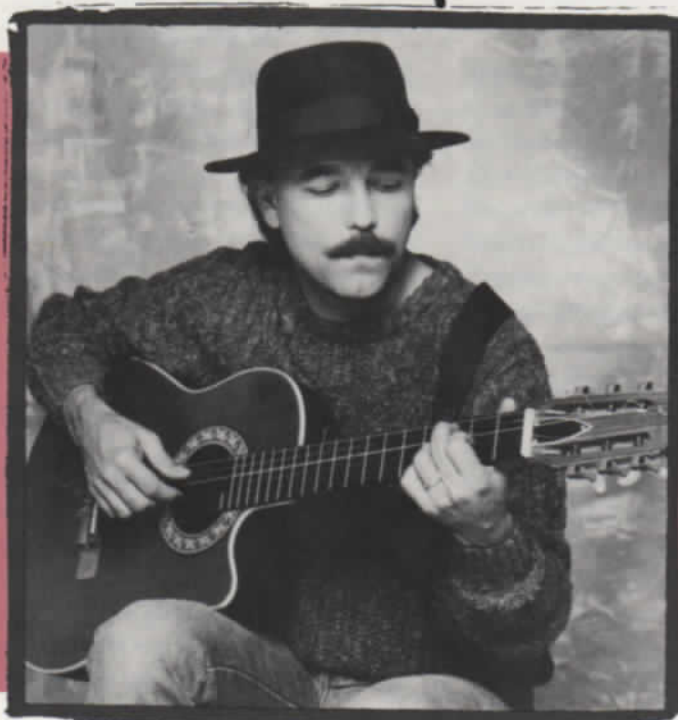
started, all the Americans and people from India or wherever would all leave the place, and then all the Ethiopians would come in — it was funny. But now I get to play for everybody."

In the 1985 film *Crossover Dreams*, Ruben Blades played a young salsa singer who is seduced and ultimately abandoned by the crossover machine. In real life, the Panama-born singer has managed to expand the boundaries of his music without losing his integrity or his

core audience. Fronting his group Seis del Solar, Blades replaced traditional horns with synthesizers and introduced politicized lyrics to a genre traditionally given to love songs.

Blades equates salsa with the Egyptian pyramid, its classic beauty unaffected by the many architectural designs it inspired. "The pyramid was before its imitators; salsa, rap, jazz and blues were what they were once and forever," he explains. "Like anything, these music forms will evolve in time; but the source will always be there for us to go to, when desired... You'll buy the old Charlie Parker and not dream of accepting a synthesized substitute of his sax sound, no matter how talented the performer-copycat may be. In the context of true cultural production, made for people who want to hear the real thing because they're culturally curious and socially thirsty for knowledge, authenticity will always be vital. The question is: will the sounds be available commercially. If it's a small group of supporters, you can bet they will not."

The problem with the current world music phenomenon, in Blade's view, is that it emanates from economic conditions rather than true cultural and social interaction. "Everything today revolves around the politics of money. If there weren't any economic considerations attached to its production, there would be no world music market today. That it has developed some following in the U.S.



"White radio will support white acts, black radio will do the same for black acts, and foreigners will have to fend for themselves."

— Ruben Blades

is a consequence of the boring, repetitive, sterile and formulaic character of U.S. pop, rock and other commercial forms of entertainment. Since the market considers this a moment for a truth based on foreign sounds and productions, it allows its presentation and rips off the 'authenticity' in the process."

Blades expects the world music marketing phenomenon to go the way of breakdancing unless the public imagination is captured on a grand scale. "If a group of Taiwanese singers has, by a fluke of flukes, a hit record in the U.S. and creates a national expectation which sustains itself over several months, the national industry would create U.S. versions of this phenomenon and in a year or two it would be sucked out of any life it had. The record business is in it for the money, not for the social rewards or cultural contributions of the different genres. It needs constant renovation, locally, things it can market and control; it will not accept foreign competition from Third World countries, with politics and points of view that can create friction and be impossible to reconcile with the industry's goals and views.

"The heroes are made, in U.S. markets, to be devoured and disposed of," concludes Blades. "There is no allegiance, no debt, no fidelity like the one displayed by jazz supporters or salsa devotees. There will be quotas filled, to support the myth of a multifaceted cultural interaction at play here in the U.S. But white radio will support white acts, black radio will do the same for black acts, and foreigners will have to fend for themselves."

*America hurriedly made Pat Boone a general in the army they wanted us to join/ But most of us held fast to Elvis and the commandants around him/ Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Bo Diddley, Gene Vincent*

FROM "BABY BOOM CHE" BY JOHN TRUDELL

In his music as well as his thinking, John Trudell sees a clear link between culture and politics. And, for the Indian rights activist, poet and performer, that link



"I think most categories are little jail cells. Everyone's got to fit into one or the other, and then the inmates quarrel over whose cell it is."

— John Trudell

is ultimately a source of hope. "The reality is, if the music and art has the courage to go where the people take it, then eventually the people will take it past those imposed walls. You need the constant ebb and flow, and somehow, somehow, an opening is created by the energy of the people participating."

Musical categories, in Trudell's view, are basically impediments to progress. "I think most categories are little jail cells," he says. "Everyone's got to fit into one or the other, and then inside the categories, the inmates quarrel over whose cell it is. People have got to understand how prison works, you know, prisons of the mind, of the spirit."

A Santee Sioux who served as National Chairman of the American Indian Movement back in the '70s, Trudell incorporates spoken-word poetry, socially-conscious lyrics and Native American rhythms and chants

on his new, Jackson Browne-produced album, *AKA Graffiti Man*. Although he originally began reading his poems over indigent drumming, he was inspired to "rock the words" after meeting up with Kiowa guitarist Jesse Ed Davis.

"My intention always was to go to contemporary music and, as part of that, to mix the traditional aspect with the electric aspect — not so that one imitates the other, but so that they musically hold their own equally," he explains. "And I consider that to just be an evolutionary process. I don't feel that there's any loss of authenticity; it's just a continuation. When we look at music today, it all evolved out of something, from some place."

Trudell believes musicians should be more relaxed about experimenting with different styles and idioms. "As artists and as human beings, I don't think that we should be so paranoid," he says. "Because when I work with the traditional music, I know that taking it and exploring new forms in contemporary ways doesn't

dilute the strength of the music's traditional aspects. I go back in my community and the people that sing the traditional songs — it's not going to alter them. They will continue. So when I look at the new musical forms that are coming, they're just additions, and we need to be really happy to get them. Because we live in a historical time when dark age controlling mechanisms are being imposed upon us, and I think we need to be welcoming anything that's new.

"If we're going to spend all our time amongst ourselves saying who's right and wrong, then to me we become irresponsible in dealing with those who would oppress us and deny us our right to participate in life in a healthy way. We have our own different opinions, and we should have those differences. It's how those differ-

ences fit together that makes the balance, and we need to understand that aspect of reality.”

Growing up to a local soundtrack of Motown, free jazz, Bob Seger, and Iggy & the Stooges, Detroit-raised Don Was learned his eclecticism early on. “I can remember a night when some of the MC5 were holed up in John Sinclair’s place, high on something, and jamming with John Coltrane,” recalls Was, who went on to amass production credits that are no less varied, from Bonnie Raitt and Bob Dylan to Cheb Khaled and Ofra Haza.

The homogenization of distinct musical cultures is a danger, says Was, but at the same time he resists the notion that Miles Davis, for instance, should have chosen to “voluntarily become a living museum piece” rather than continue to try new things. “I believe that what’s important in any kind of music is that you make a genuine emotional statement, that you tell the truth. And in doing so, I believe everybody should be encouraged not only to tap into what they may be known for, what comes naturally to them, but also to expand and grow.”

As both a producer and musician, Was has found himself in the position of bridging cultural gaps. His band Was (Not Was) has essentially the same racial makeup as the old Stax system, with black singers and white backing musicians. “When we’re at our best, I feel that we take those things and create something new out of them,” he says of the band’s roots in soul, rock and avant-garde jazz. “And when we’re at our worst, I feel you can see the seams in there, and that’s when I cringe.”

Finding the right balance has also been a primary goal in Was’s world music production projects. “Take an artist like Ofra Haza, who I just recently finished an album with. How she’s perceived by the American audience is very important right now. She’s *not* the Israeli Janet Jackson. So I tried to make a record that, while having a link to modern music, had a much clearer link to her ethnicity as well.”

In working with Rai singer Cheb Khaled, Was says the venture was initially complicated by language barriers. “He didn’t speak any English and I didn’t speak Arabic or French. But we had interpreters there who

were able to go out for extended shopping sprees on Melrose about two days into the record, because we were able to communicate completely through gestures. And it was fine, I didn’t feel any gap. I felt excited because I knew that we were doing something that hadn’t been done before and there’s really something to be said for that.”

Some of the greatest breakthroughs, Was believes, are arrived at by accident. “It’s hard to tell you what’s a misunderstanding and what is a deep understanding. You know, I think some of the great music of our time has been a fluke. For example, I read once that when Bob Dylan went to Nashville to make *John Wesley Harding*, he took a Gordon Lightfoot record and said, ‘I want it to sound like this.’ And of course they got it completely wrong, but in the process started this thing called country-rock. And I believe

“They should behead people who do it by numbers like a recipe: four parts Ethiopian, two parts hip hop and one part Hank Williams.”  
— Don Was

Motown was a misunderstanding of New York r&b records; Berry Gordy tried to imitate what was going on in New York and he hired some local guys who weren’t r&b musicians, and they came up with this really strange misinterpretation of Atlantic r&b records. But man, I mean, that doesn’t mean it’s not legitimate.

“So how much happens by mistake and how much happens by design — I don’t know. I played on some of those [Khaled and Haza] sessions and I just closed my eyes and played. I wasn’t really thinking about the implications, I was just playing music. And if

everybody else does that, when there’s heart and truth to it, you’re gonna come up with something. And sometimes it’s gonna be really good.”

In the final analysis, the one assertion that all these musicians would likely endorse is deceptively simple: that artists need to rely on their own instincts in order to create the music that best reflects themselves and the world around them. Of course, in this postmodern world of media saturation and cultural acceleration, that could lead just about anywhere.

“There’s new cultures being created all the time,” says Vernon Reid, who believes it’s time to move beyond the barriers and take on our hybrid culture with all its unexpected twists and turns. “I was once in Southeast Asia,” he recalls, “and I was on this small riverboat in Thailand. We were going by these huts, which were really very basic —



kind of poor, peasant-type people. It was very early in the morning, kind of an overcast day, and we went past this one hut that was right on the river on stilts. And the eeriest thing about it was that there was only one light on. It was the glow of a television from within this hut.

“And I thought to myself, my God, there’s no isolation from it, you know? So people are exposed to the information, and they process it the way they will.”

# DATES TO REMEMBER

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