

Heartsong Review

#12
SPRING
/ SUMMER '92

\$4.00

Resource Guide for New Age Music of the Spirit

WORLD FUSION MUSIC

INTERVIEW WITH
MATTHEW MONTFORT
Of Ancient Future



© 1992 by Phoenix & Arabeth

Reviews of over **150 Hard-to-Find Recordings, Books, Resources!**

LIGHT ON...

INTERVIEW WITH MATTHEW MONTFORT



Matthew is the founding member of Ancient Future, an internationally acclaimed world fusion ensemble. He has studied with master musicians of Africa, Bali and India, and plays guitar, charango, mandolin, sitar and gamelan. He authored the book on rhythmic training for musicians, Ancient Traditions- Future Possibilities, and has published several albums. One, Natural Rhythms, is reviewed in this issue.

Acacia for HR: *What was the original idea behind your group Ancient Future?*

Matthew: When Ancient Future started back in 1978, our goal was to blend musical styles from around the world, to make new music that utilized some of the best aspects from different areas, just to show that styles from different cultures could work together.

A: *Sort of a musical metaphor for envisioning the world as one.*

M: When we started, there was no term for this, so we coined the term "world fusion music" to describe our music.

A: *You were the actual originator of that term and the first people to combine music in that genre?*

M: It's been going on for thousands of years, but Ancient Future was the first ensemble to devote itself to that idea as its premise. There were definitely other ensembles that were working with fusion styles; Shakti, with John McLaughlin, Zakir Hussain, T. H. Vinayakram and L. Shankar, were fusing Indian music and Western music at about the same time that Ancient Future was formed. Shakti had a big influence on our group because we were very excited about their East-West fusion. We thought there was a chance for a movement here, and we thought it would help to have a term for the music that could be used in media. We envisioned this

music coming into its own in the 80's and 90's, and that is now happening.

A: *Probably you were a real catalyst. It would be interesting to hear about how some of your inspirations came about.*

M: My first exposure to the teachings of Indian music was through Ali Akbar Khan. He was like a saint in India because of his music. He and his father taught Ravi Shankar. He's known the world over, as the number one master of North Indian Music.

So I moved to San Rafael, CA, to study at the Ali Akbar College of Music. There was quite a scene at the school back then, and that's where I met the original members of Ancient Future. I wanted to learn as much Indian music as I could, to use in creating my own type of music. I was also excited to find that there was a Center for World Music in the Bay Area, which was the original school that brought Ali Akbar to the area. They also invited other musicians from South India, from Bali, from Java, etc. I was able to study with quite a number of extremely talented musicians who would come in from time to time. The Center for World Music was using the term "world music" at the time to describe traditional music from around the world. That was how we came up with the term "world fusion music". We inserted the word "fusion" to distinguish our music from traditional music. Since then, the term "world music" has become the catch-all category for both world fusion and traditional world music.

A: *What other musicians strongly influenced you?*

M: Zakir Hussain is one. He's the teacher of several members of the group over the years. He's the top master of the North Indian tabla. He played on our fifth release, *World Without Walls*, along with regular members Jim Hurley on violin, Doug McKeenan on keyboard, and Ian Dogole on percussion. Another strong influence was Made' Grindem. I went to Bali and studied gamelan with him five days a week for four months.

A: *I expect the experience of Bali itself was quite a contribution, too?*

M: It really was. In a way it was probably the most fun time of my life. We got to play some music with some

Balinese musicians. I went there with Mindy Klein, who was the original flautist of Ancient Future. Mindy and I got together with some Balinese musicians one night and went out to play in the rice paddies with the rice paddy frogs. When we first started they weren't making many calls, but when we started playing they joined in. We recorded that and took it back to the states and it inspired some of the rhythms we used on *Natural Rhythms*, which was our second release.

What we're doing right now is a lot of fun. Chinese harp master Hui Zhao came to an Ancient Future concert in Mt. Shasta and introduced herself to the band. She is China's top master of the gu zheng, which is the ancestor of the Japanese koto, so we started to play some music together.

My main instrument is the scallop fretted guitar which is a cross between a guitar and a South Indian vena, which is a fusion instrument in itself. It has the fret of a vena and the body of a guitar. The whole reason in having the guitar scalloped is to bend the notes as they do in South and North India. It turned out that the gu zheng and the scalloped fretboard guitar work extremely well together. So we developed quite a musical relationship, and she would come down to the Bay Area and open up our shows for us. Basically she ended up joining the band.

I really enjoy the interaction that happens when I get together with these musicians and the exchange happens. I'm learning an approach I can use with any type of music. That is, a way to learn it fast and find out what makes it tick. I try to get into the head space of the traditional musicians so that I can get into a similar place when we play.

A: *Also, you are actually dealing with a lot more than just music when you get in touch with these various energies that way, right? Like a language, it's a reflection of the whole culture. Matthew, do you think some people have objections to this music, viewing it as not being pure or traditional enough?*

M: I haven't run into masters of traditional music with a lot of objections, though some don't want to be personally involved in fusion music. Music is a very subjective experience and people

often intellectualize their emotional responses to music, and it takes on a hierarchy in terms of their personal response. On top of that, maybe a person tends to be a purist. Then a rigid set of categories develops. A lot of westerners studying non-western music become entrenched in purism and close their minds. Even in Western music, someone studying classical music might say, "There hasn't been any good music written since 1815". People come to the music with preconceptions.

A: *You mean that some part of their mind manages to build up a defense against it instead of just remaining open and freshly experiencing it?*

M: Right. Live music has an extra infectious dimension that usually overcomes that tendency.

A: *Let's hear about your album, **Natural Rhythms**.*

M: When we got to Bali, we were very struck by the way people inter-relate with nature. We saw a lot of paintings of

frogs performing on musical instruments. I was inspired by the way the culture has that awareness of nature. When you listen to the rice paddy frogs croak, there are rhythms that are very similar to the rhythms of Balinese music, kind of interlocking.

"When you listen to the rice paddy frogs croak, there are rhythms that are very similar to the rhythms of Balinese music, kind of interlocking."

There's a concept called Kotekan which means "interlocking parts". The rhythms are divided so that part of the rhythm is on the beat and part is off, and together it makes one melody. That is sort of symbolic of how their whole society has an interlocking, cooperative quality. I use the Kotekan Balinese influence a lot in my music. On **Natural Rhythms** there is a suite of three pieces all using Kotekan: *Frogorian Trance*, *Frogorian Dance* and *Frog Orient Chance*. On

Dream Dancer I wrote a piece called *Gama Rock*, in which the idea was to combine gama rhythms with rock and roll. On our latest release, **World Without Walls**, there's *Nyo Nyo Gde*, which features an extremely complex use of kotekan. If you put on headphones, you can hear each side of the mix of the different parts, separately and the melodies they create together.

A: *Having been involved with some Northwest tribal music, I have a strong sense that these ancient musics have a powerful ability to help reconnect people with our roots in a way we desperately need right now.*

M: I think that what happened in the Western world was an imbalance toward the technological approach. That has a lot of value to it, but it's important that some of these other ways of being don't get lost. Preservation isn't the only thing that needs to happen. I also believe in integration.

A: *Matthew, what's your vision of what's coming with world fusion music*



Matthew Montfort
(guitar, sitar, etc.)

Jim Hurley
(violin)

Doug McKeehan
(keyboards)

Ian Dogole
(percussion)

and what you're going to do in that continuing flow?

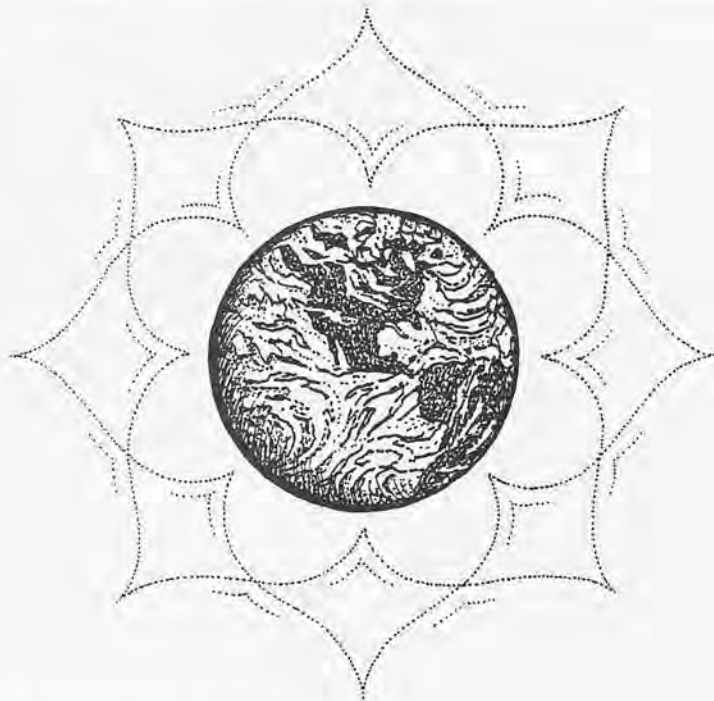
M: One thing that needs to happen, is we need to develop musicians with the skills to do music that is based on the rhythms of the world; the melodic qualities of Indian music, the harmonic aspects built up over the years in European music, and the life-filled aspects of traditional folk musics. It is very difficult right now to find musicians who really have the skills to combine these things. Either it's going to be someone like me who has studied a lot of different types of music or it's somebody like Zakir Hussain who came out of one tradition who is extremely advanced, and then has big ears so he's always learning more.

"Preservation isn't the only thing that needs to happen. I also believe in integration."

In order to develop more musicians that can do this, I wrote a book on rhythm training called **Ancient Traditions, Future Possibilities:** Rhythmic Training Through the Traditions of Africa, Bali and India. I wrote it to try to recruit people for my group in 1985. That book has probably done more toward altering what other musicians think than any of our albums. When a musician gets their hands on that book and goes through it, it changes the way they relate to their music. A number of good musicians have done that.

What's happening now is that a lot of masters in traditional music are starting to experiment in world fusion music. When we first started back in 1978, that wasn't happening very much. Musicians from one culture are playing with musicians from others. I just went to a Gavin convention and there were a lot of light jazz/New Adult Contemporary commercial stations such as the WAVE in LA. They had a seminar about what world music could be played on their shows. They were trying to cull from world music a sense of what advertisers would go for. This created a lot of controversy, because a lot of the world music programmers from public radio were there too.

To open the conference, they brought in a "nuevo flamenco" guitarist



who gets some airplay on commercial radio, and he played with a total master of the African kora, which is like a harp. They hadn't rehearsed much and even so they were able to find a common ground to play together, but could have done a lot more with more rehearsal time. I'm really looking forward to the next stage where people have a chance to rehearse and go deeper with it, to know each other's traditions better. It's going to take years and years, but that's fine.

A: *So as interesting and energizing as world fusion is now, I am hearing from you an extremely exciting future.*

M: Yes. This music is still in its infancy, so there are a lot of wonderful possibilities for exploration. Of course, along the way some of the music won't live up to its potential. And there's also the danger of what happens in the music business whenever anything becomes successful. Actually, I think this is going to take so long to develop it's not going to get to the point of burning out quickly.

A: *Do you think that's partly because this type of music just might not appeal to the pop audience?*

M: Commercial radio is being very conservative about what they are willing

to play in the way of world music. They're at the stage where their listeners are not even going to know it's world music, yet and they're going to listen and like at least some of it. The first time people hear world music, it's strange and foreign. The second time, there's a little familiarity, the third time, it's more comfortable and by the fourth time, it's getting to sound good provided it's good to begin with. The music that's on commercial radio is what the programmers think is easiest to assimilate by non-musicians.

"The music that's on commercial radio is what the programmers think is easiest to assimilate by non-musicians."

When listeners assimilate some of the most accessible, they'll be ready for the next step. We're more on the middle ground between the popular and traditional. We do music that is accessible to audiences but still retain lots of the traditional elements.

A: *That's a great note to end on Matthew. Thanks for this great interview, not to mention your vision and energy in helping birth and spread this wonderful music.*

INSTRUMENTAL- FUSION and World Music
High energy music using acoustic and electronic instruments

ANCIENT FUTURE

Natural Rhythms

REPRINT * / DA CR / U**

Ancient Future, playing with Japanese, Balinese and East Indian musicians and instruments, creates state of the art contemporary "global fusion" music. Melding nature, cultures and inspiration creates a rich fabric of sounds. *Magic Rain* and *Valley of the Moon* are dialogues between zither and Pacific tree frogs, recorded at a pond with no overdubs. *Frogorian Trance* and *Frog Orient Chance* were recorded live in the rice paddies of the village at Campuan, Bali. *Hummingbird* was inspired by a nearby hummingbird, and *Waves* is a tribute to the sea. *Fading Dream*, *Somaloka*, and *Eleventh*

Heaven are dedicated to the dancer in us all. This music is good for driving, dancing, rituals. It is rich, melodious sound, quite complex, with abundant jazz rhythms. Half the work is compositional, half improvisational. Highly recommended.

TECH NOTES: Instruments are: scalloped guitar, bansuri flute, tabla, koto, 12 string guitar, Balinese gamelan instruments (gangsa, tinklik and kukul), kajar (bamboo percussion instrument), beer cans, esraj, sarod, zither, marimba, flute, violin, cymbal and classical guitar. 1981, 45 mins. CASS, LP.

Reviewed by Joan Levine, '89.

MA CODE: 4094, Active Sept & Oct 92

TO ORDER: \$12 for CASS or LP, postpaid to
 Ancient Future, Box 264, Kentfield, CA
 94904.
