



Creating A World Without Walls Through Music

By Matthew Montfort

Imagine music combining the irresistible rhythms of a jungle of African, Balinese, Indian, Middle Eastern and South American percussion with the beautiful melodic qualities of Indian raga and the rich harmonies of Europe. Imagine a musical world without borders where new music is created through cross cultural exchange.

This was the dream I had when I formed the world fusion music group Ancient Future in 1978. For me, this time period was a turning point in the evolution of music. One needed to go no further than the local record store to find music from Africa, Asia, Europe, Indonesia, the Middle East and South America. At the same time, rock music had become very popular in third world countries.

This inspired me to create new music for an emerging world culture. At the time Ancient Future was formed, there was no category for this music. We coined the term world fusion music for music that combines ideas from two or more musical traditions.

There is an abundance of musical knowledge available to the musician with a global perspective. European classical music has developed harmony, polyphony and orchestration to an advanced state. Indian music has developed melody and rhythm to a high degree of refinement. African music has developed multiple layers of rhythm into an advanced form. Balinese music has developed a refined form of orchestral percussion with interlocking rhythmic phrases. These traditions formed the basis for my world rhythm training book, *"Ancient Traditions - Future Possibilities: Rhythmic Training Through the Traditions of Africa, Bali and India"* (Mill Valley, Panoramic Press 1985). Each of these traditions

has something very unique and wonderful to offer contemporary musicians. Through studying world music a universal set of musical skills can be developed that will allow the musician to perform a broad range of styles, as well as inspiring new forms of music.

My desire to learn traditional music before I integrated its knowledge into my own work led me to many interesting adventures, including a trip to Bali to study gamelan music. The music of Bali seems to spring magically from both the culture and the natural forces of the island. Everything from society to music to nature interlocks. The cooperative village social structure is mirrored in the structure of the gamelan compositions. The concept of *kotekan*, an interlocking rhythm where two players make one rhythm or melody by playing on each other's offbeats, permeates all. These rhythms of the gemelan mimic the interlocking calls of the rice paddy frogs (or vice versa). Indeed, I found that certain rhythms would inspire the frogs towards song. Ancient

Future's second record (which Philo/Rounder reissued on CD in 1994 to commemorate 15 years of Ancient Future history). *Natural Rhythms* (Philo 9006), includes a suite based on live jam sessions with the rice paddy frogs and Balinese musicians. As we sat under the stars playing our instruments, the frogs would join in when certain rhythms were played.

As effortless and magical as playing music with rice paddy frogs was, fully integrating what I had learned about world rhythms into my music turned out to be a difficult, but fulfilling pursuit. I found that when I consciously combined one musical idea from one culture with another idea from a different tradition, I would see many new musical ideas come forth. Although the experiments sometimes produced some music that sounded forced, more often the results were very exciting.

For example, I was struck by the great fondness that young Balinese showed for rock and roll. I had the idea



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that it would be exciting to mix rock music with Balinese *kotekan*. After some experimentation, I found that I had best results by studying the traditional rhythms to improve my musicianship and then letting the knowledge steep in my subconscious mind. Then when I least expected it, wonderful new fusions of musical ideas would come to me almost magically in the inspirational moments of composition. My gamelan/rock fusion ideas came to fruition with a piece called "Gamarock," which showcases an electric violin soaring over rock versions of gamelan rhythms. The piece then plunges into a traditional gamelan section with a Balinese style drum solo and ends with an Indian/rock scalloped fretboard guitar solo over bamboo gamelan sounds. The piece was included on the fourth Ancient Future record, *Dreamchaser* (Narada/Sona Gaia 154)

Another way world fusion music gets created is through collaboration between artists from different cultures. At the end of an Ancient Future performance, I was introduced to Zhao Hui, one of China's foremost masters of the *gu zheng* (Chinese zither), and a musical get together was quickly arranged. I was absolutely captivated by her playing. The sound of her *gu zheng* blended beautifully with my scalloped fretboard guitar, and a real musical chemistry was immediately apparent. With her husband acting as an interpreter, I asked her many questions about Chinese music. After explaining how to

read Chinese music notation, she taught me "Dusk Song of the Fisherman," an ancient Ching Dynasty theme depicting the fisherman returning at dusk, singing a happy song. I had never performed a fixed composition with so much elasticity of tempo. She was able to communicate the tempo changes with her body language, much as a conductor would cue an orchestra, only she does this while she is playing, making her music seem like a graceful dance.

This experience was the genesis for the sixth Ancient Future record. *Asian Fusion* (Narada Equinox 630023). I became very inspired about the kind of music that we could make by fusing ancient Asian and contemporary Western elements, and set about writing compositions for her. Through working with Ancient Future she was exposed to a whole different approach to rhythm and improvisation that was both exciting and extremely challenging to her. In my composition "The Empress" (off the *Asian Fusion* CD), I wrote into her part a complex Balinese *kotekan*, an Indian rhythmic cadence known as a *tihai*, and intricate melodies with Latin rhythms. She had never even danced to Latin rhythms and she was being asked to perform some of the most difficult of these rhythms. But needless to say, she pulled it off beautifully, because she was willing to work long, hard hours to get it right. A truly great musician loves a challenge. That is the beauty of cross-cultural exchange -- people learning from each other and growing in the

process.

Of course, musicians have been exchanging knowledge across national boundaries as long as there has been contact between cultures. For instance, Flamenco music was the result of cross-cultural exchange between the Spanish and Moorish cultures. One of the most successful cross-cultural exchanges in modern times was the music of Shakti, led by jazz-rock guitarist John McLaughlin with South Indian violinist L. Shankar, South Indian percussionist T.H. Vinayakram, and North Indian tabla master Zakir Hussain. Shakti combined classical Indian music and Western music at a level that had not been reached before.

We recorded a tribute to violinist L. Shankar called "Lakshmi Rocks Me" for the *World Without Walls* (Narada/Sona Gaia 62763) release, and felt fortunate to be able to work with Zakir Hussain on the record. Many of the great masters of traditional music appreciate seeing their knowledge become a part of the emerging popular world culture, and Zakir's input was extremely exciting and inspiring. Zakir's tabla and kanjira helped "Lakshmi Rocks Me" to rock out both in Western and Eastern terms.

As this planet becomes more aware of itself as a whole, a growing number of musicians are now experimenting with new combinations of world music styles. Today, the expanding popularity of world music merits its own sales chart in *Billboard*. The world fusion music movement is blossoming.



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Matthew Montfort has led the world fusion music group Ancient Future since 1978, producing six highly acclaimed CD's. The latest Ancient Future release, *Asian Fusion*, was the *Tower Pulse!* pick for the #4 Best Contemporary Instrumental Release of 1993.

An award-winning guitarist (Louis Armstrong Jazz Award, Colorado Outstanding Young Guitarist Award 1976), Matthew holds a B.A. in World Music and Composition and an M.A. in Arts and Media Technology Traditions.