

Talking Leaves
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Talking Leaves

A monthly bioregional journal of deep ecology and spiritual activism...



Drumming and Musical Traditions of the World

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 crosscultural exchange.

This was the dream I had when I formed 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. Afri-

can 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 three 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 Kotékan, an interlocking rhythm where two players make one rhythm or melody by playing on each other's offbeats, permeates all. These rhythms of the gamelan 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, *Natural Rhythms*, 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 that it would be exciting to mix rock music with Balinese Kotékan. 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*. By the time of the latest Ancient Future record, *World Without Walls*, composing in interlocking rhythms had become second nature. "Nyo Nyo Gde" from

the new record showcases a mixture of Balinese Kotékan, Chinese melodic treatment, and Indian rhythmic cadences.

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* 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. 🌸

DRUMMING

by Patrick Pinson

I am one sixteenth, Mingo Indian. My other fifteen sixteenths loves drumming too because it provides me with a healing white culture has not. I have always been fascinated by my Native American heritage and the spirituality of Native peoples. My oldest blood brother's interest has been in tracing our family heritage through his involvement in the sons of the American revolution and he has helped me trace our family tree back to John Deskins, a Mingo Indian from West Virginia. Deskins was my great great grandfather and changed his name from Doe Skin to Deskins because of the shame so prevalent then of being an Indian.

I had been looking for both a men's group and a way to study and learn of my native American heritage

and this came about in 1986, when I began a two year course of study in Native American spirituality at the Wy'East Healing Center in Sandy, Oregon. I went through the four "rounds" with 12 other men. Among the things we learned were medicine teachings, the sweat lodge ceremony, talking circles, and drum making. The Wy'East experience changed my life, and for the first time, I learned how to be intimate with other men. I learned the importance of ritual and ceremony in my life, and it was there that I learned the power of the drum.

My first drum was constructed of goat skin, a section of a wooden chain container and deer straps. I was so proud of that drum and it occupies a place on my altar today. I was instructed on how to make the drum by a fellow brother in the rounds who was an Osage Indian from Oklahoma. I anxiously waited for the skin to dry and to hear the "voice" of my first drum.

I am in recovery from drug and alcohol dependence, and just about every other addiction and compul-

sion there is. I have an obsessive/compulsive personality, so when I learned to make a drum, I didn't stop at one. I made 50 drums. For me, working with the skin of the deer and elk was and is therapy. I am always full of wonder about how the drum will turn out and what kind of "voice" it will have.

I began to share my drums with other groups who wanted to include drumming as part of their format, and the demand eventually led me to start my company Cedar Mountain Drums. I feel blessed to be in a business that started from my joy.

For me, the drum is a most sacred tool. I live with several drums, and they all have their own medicine power and voice. By touching the skin of the deer, elk, or buffalo stretched tight around a cedar hoop a very healing vibration happens. I have experienced this every time I sit in a drumming circle. I constantly hear men and women share that same experience.

I have danced to the rhythm of the beat of my brothers and felt the

power of my mother earth rise through the souls of my feet to my heart. The drum beat connects on a heart level. Native Americans say the drum is the voice of the earth mother.

I am always looking for opportunities to drum with others. Here in Portland, 20 to 80 men gather twice a month to drum and share at the eastside and westside "Wisdom Circles." Each drumming circle is different and reflects the mood of each of the men. We start out slowly, and gradually build in intensity. Many of the men dance. We dance our pain. We dance our joy. The drumming has its own life time. No one tells us when to stop—we drum usually from 30 to 45 minutes. The vibrations of the drumming set the stage for sharing from the heart.

In an earlier article I shared my experience of taking 35 drums to a prison program in Salem and doing a two hour drumming and sharing circle. Since that time we have taken our drums into the Portland Detox Center, into elementary classrooms,



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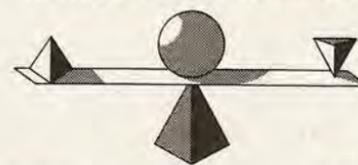
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ing on distinct atomic, molecular, subcellular, and cellular levels. To say nothing of the on/off rhythm of neurons firing in the brain, the butterfly rhythms of the heart, the mysterious rhythm that brings the swallows back to Capistrano. We are embedded in a universe of rhythms, which means we are embedded in a universe of time.

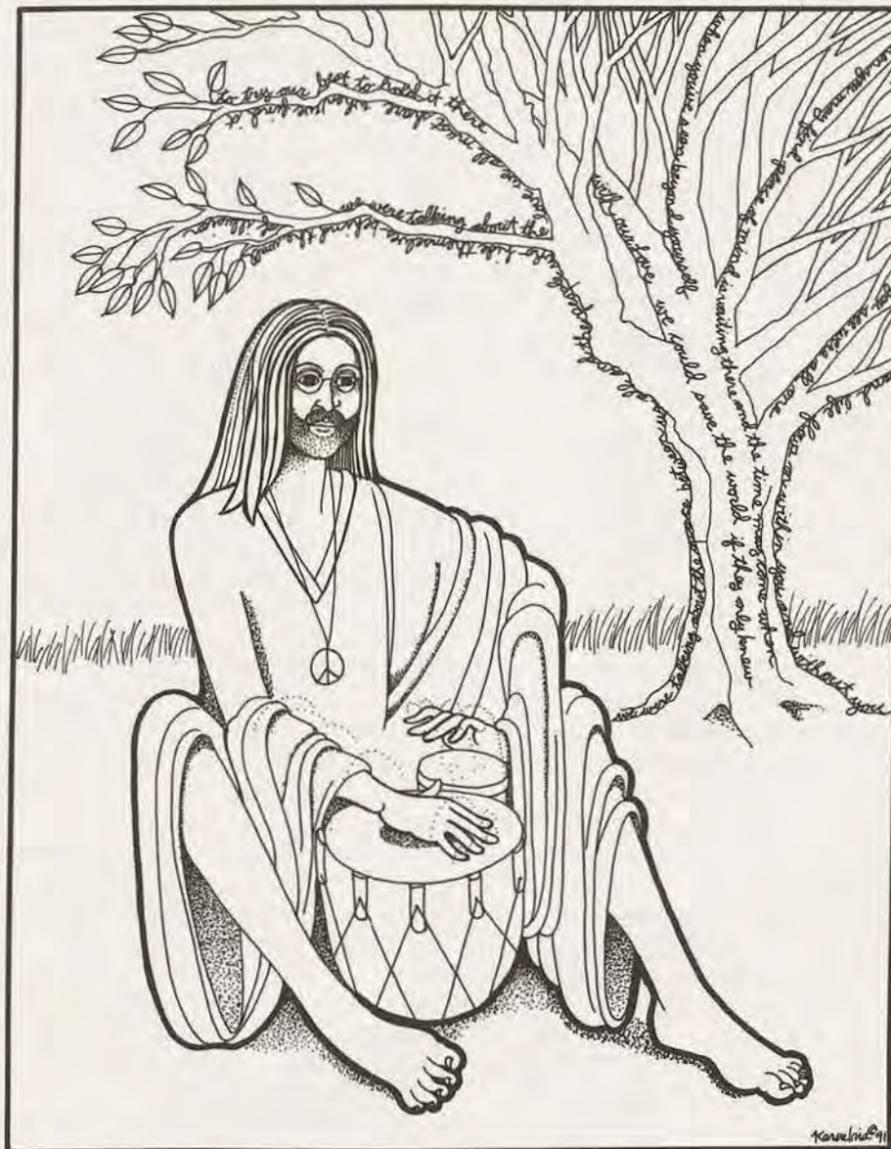
We live on a planet that completes its cycle around the sun every three hundred and sixty-five days, with a moon that cycles around us every twenty-eight days, and we rotate around our own axis every twenty-four hours. Most of us have little appreciation, however, for just how deeply we are dancing to these rhythms. There is a direct connection between these cosmic cycles and our bodily ones, most profoundly with respect to the circadian dance of day and night. This cycle of light and darkness is fundamental to all biological functioning on this planet. All organic life divides its circadian time into periods of activity and rest. Dogs and humans, for example, are active during the day and quiet at night. Cats and owls are just the opposite. But the activity/rest continuum is only the most obvious example. Body temperature, blood pressure, respiration, pulse, blood sugar, hemoglobin levels, amino acid levels, appetite—all are influenced by the planet's daily revolution.

Within the body itself the main rhythm is laid down by the cardiovascular system, the heart and the lungs, the heart beating between sixty to eighty times per minute, the lungs filling and emptying at about a quarter that speed. But again these are only the most obvious bodily rhythms. From the vibration of single cells to the slow peristalsis of our intestines, our internal machinery is all moving in a complex dance whose synchronization is carefully monitored by the central nervous system, which then reports on the state of our internal rhythms to the midbrain. Unless we have been exercising hard or are menstruating or are sick, we are rarely conscious of our internal rhythms and almost never conscious of the way our bodies reflect the larger rhythms of the planet, solar system, universe.

Science knows one big thing about rhythm, something it calls the Law of Entrainment. The Law of Entrainment, which seems to be fundamental to the universe, was first discovered in 1665 by the Dutch scientist Christian Huygens. Huygens noticed that if two clocks were placed next to each other within a very short time they would lock up and tick in perfect synchrony. *Entrainment*. If two rhythms are nearly the same, and their sources are in close proximity, they will always entrain. Why? The best theory is that nature is efficient and it takes less energy to pulse together than in opposition.

One way to think about the connection between those universal and planetary rhythms and the personal rhythms of our own bodies is that we are entrained with these larger patterns, we are pulsing in synch with them because nature is efficient and we are a part of nature.

From the book *Drumming At The Edge of Magic* by Mickey Hart with Jay Stevens. © 1990 by Mickey Hart. With the permission of Harper Collins



World Peace Through World Music

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An Interview With Tabla Player: Emam

by Carolyn Moran

"World peace through world music" is the dedication of Iranian born tabla player Emam. Emam is an artist from the San Francisco area who plays tabla in the tradition of Indian classical music. He also has produced several recordings of Indian devotional and classical music and plays with the group Ancient Future. He recently played at a concert in Eugene and enthusiastically agreed to speak about his music, philosophy and spirituality.

CM: What has influenced your music both spiritually and historically?

EMAM: My first teacher happens to be my own uncle. We had not met before because he left Iran when I was born. Twenty years later, I came to the U.S. and met my uncle within a year. He was totally unusual; he stood out. He was thin, small, vegetarian and not into anything that I was into. He listened to very interesting music. He was doing all of these yoga postures, positions that to me looked impossible. He was very advanced in everything that he was doing. It shook my concept of what life was about just by meeting him. He invited me to stay with him on my next vacation from school.

Until I came to America I had never played any instruments. My father discouraged me from studying any instruments, but I listened to all kinds of music. I had a shortwave radio and I would tune into many dif-

ferent radio stations. In high school I got into the rock and roll era with Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, all the good ones. When I came to America my taste started changing and I got into more jazzy fusion music.

When I met my uncle, another transition happened. I became a total vegetarian. I cut out a lot of activities in my life also. My interest in music began to change toward the devotional. I went with my uncle to India in 1978 for the first time. I was going to meet Babaji and at the time I didn't know who he was nor what he was about. In fact, the story of how I ended up there is pretty interesting.

He invited me to house sit because he was going away for the summer. He was in Oakland. He was living a very conscious life, composting, re-routing his water, all the right stuff. It was a perfect household. It was like a mini center. We would do meditation every day. He told me I could come and live there rent free. I said, "Fine. Where are you going?" He said, "India." I had always wanted to go to India and he told me I could come if I wanted to. I was a student and I didn't have any money. I had visa problems. When I hung up I thought, "Who says I can't go?" I thought about it for a week and I called him back and told him I was going.

Amazing things started happening. I found out that a scholarship that I was getting from an Iraqi company was increased and was retroactive for eight months. So I received a big check which covered a lot of the expense. I asked my uncle where we were going and he said to read *Autobiography of a Yogi*. He said I would find out about him in there—I thought he was talking about Yogananda's guru Yukteswar, I didn't read far enough to get to the Babaji part. When I met them in London I asked if we were going to see

Yukteswar and he said, "You didn't read the whole book." He assured me that I would find out soon enough.

I had no idea who Babaji was, no preconceived anything about him. We ended up at the ashram and I was there for two months which is unusual because most people stay for a few weeks. That was my first trip to India and the purpose was to meet my spiritual teacher, Babaji. I went back to India later for an extended stay. I had some of the most incredible times there. I went a total of ten times. Babaji left his body in 1984.

He gave us a lot of energy before he left his body. He prepared us for his departure. The biggest lesson I received when he died was to have his energy and presence come directly into my body. It was one of the most powerful experiences that I had ever had. I felt the same presence in all of the people at the ashram. The message was clear. At this point there was no separate entity.

CM: When did you begin playing the tabla?

EMAM: In 1976 I bought a pair of tablas which I thought I could teach myself to play. I couldn't; it didn't sound like it was supposed to. I went back to the school in Nebraska and there were three musicians from Sri Lanka. One was a dancer, one a flute player, and the third one was a tabla player trained in the North Indian Delhi style. I studied with him for three months. This was before Babaji. I mostly played Dholak when I was at the ashram for the first time. The Dholak is a two-headed drum used for chanting and folk music in the northern region of India. I taught myself to play to accompany the Kirtan or devotional singing in India. Tablas are hard to hear over the singing.

I studied with Alla Rakha Ustad and started getting serious about tabla for the first time. I went back to India in '78-'79 and studied with another person. In 1981 I studied with Alla Rakha again and that was a very powerful series of classes. In '82 I went back to India and studied with Ustad Inam Ali Khan for ten sessions. He is the head of the lineage of Punjab tabla called Gharana, but they live in Bombay. The Delhi Gharana is the more simple composition; the Punjab is more rhythmically complicated and harder to play if you are not advanced rhythmically. In the Delhi composition the down beats are emphasized more and in the Punjab they are not. These are the two rhythms within the same complexity. They still share all the complexities within the tabla traditions. Between the two, one is a little simpler than the other. The phrases are a little easier. I was able to pick up a lot of the compositions from the Delhi Gharana faster. I was given ten lessons back to back and was told to write them down and practice them when I got back to America. That became the basis of my practice.

CM: How did you meet Zakir Hussain?

EMAM: In 1983 I ended up subletting their apartment in Marin County. He wasn't around; I talked to his wife and arranged to stay at their apartment. In the middle of my stay there, Zakir showed up one weekend. When he has concerts to do, he stays in a room and then he

continued

leaves. I was amazed at what happened to my energy when I met him.

Have you ever been with anyone who you know and can feel are so accomplished at their art that they just vibrate with energy, shakti? There is a certain quality in the total masters.

CM: For example, Segovia?

EMAM: Yes. When you are in their presence you lose yourself. I was not behaving properly. He was so intense. I got used to it after awhile. Now we are very good friends. I had to go through a process of getting used to his energy. He was that powerful. With Alla Rakar it was the same thing, but I never spent much time with him. Here was a young man my age, whom I experienced with the same respect that I experienced with his father who was so much older. Alla Rakar is one of the greatest tabla players ever. He played all over with Ravi Shankar. The combination of the energy and the age made a great impression on me.

He invited me to go to India and spend time with him during the concert season. When I went to India in 1983, I traveled with them a little bit. I became his friend before I became his student. The energy and the respect never changed. Aside from Babaji he was the first person I met who was so established in his art, not just as a tabla player but as a musician. He is a complete musician. Zakir is rhythm. Percussion in rhythm. Any rhythm cycle on top of any speed on top of any rhythm cycle on top of any speed...he can do anything to anything and make them sound absolutely unbelievable. He can double anything you may think is fast enough and play it faster.

CM: His playing is very spiritual.

It actually puts you on another wavelength.

EMAM: It is hard to talk about. He started playing at the age of nine and as a teenager he started traveling around and performing. He came to America with Ravi Shankar when he was 18. Even if you consider it from that point, 1970, he traveled all over and played with so many different people. He knows exactly who he's done what with. He has continual memory. He can play songs better than the master he heard it from.

CM: Then he is like Babaji.

EMAM: He is the manifestation of Babaji in the form of rhythm.

CM: I could really tell that. I had never heard him until you gave me the cassette and I was truly amazed.

EMAM: That's why it is called *Magical Moments of Rhythm*.

CM: So are you producing him?

EMAM: Oh no, that happened only because we were good friends and he wanted to help me. It was wonderful and I will appreciate it for the rest of my life. He just started his own label.

CM: So he became your teacher?

EMAM: Yes, a good friend and a good teacher. The best teacher. I met my uncle to help me with Gyana Yoga which is the yoga of knowledge. I met Babaji to help me with Bhakti Yoga which is the yoga of devotion. I met Zakir to help me with Nada Yoga, yoga of music.

CM: How does the tabla fit into your yoga of music?

EMAM: It is my practice. Yoga is focusing on a particular thing. Babaji connected me to Karma Yoga or the yoga of work—work that we do in the world and dedicate to God and not being attached to the fruits of the labor. For me music is both of those, the practice of music, the performance of music and the business of music. The practice of it comes from the desire to play and make it better and to be able to use it in producing a performance or a recording. Practice of tabla is a classical practice, like any other classical instrument; it is exactly the same. Through repeating phrases, through repeating strokes, and you have to learn the strokes specifically as they are. You cannot pick up the tabla and teach it to yourself. You need a teacher. It might be possible with a videotape but you would have to be a genius. (laughter)

You need to see exactly how to hit it. It is all finger work plus wrist work. The combination, using pivotal wrist movements and finger movements, straight finger movements on the right hand and curved finger movements on the left hand. On the right hand there is very little up and down movement, just wrist pivoting and finger movement. When you get into very fast phrases it comes down to minimal movement. The fingers move very fast. You have to learn those rolls on the fingers which is very unusual for a drummer because drummers work with the hands.

CM: You play other percussion instruments, don't you?

EMAM: I do. I'm not trained on conga, for example, to play like a conga player but I can make it sound like it has a good rhythm because I'm trained in rhythm. I have some of the strokes but not all of them. On Dumbek I use finger movement or just hand movement and the combination some times. I've recently started playing Jembah which is a ce-

ramic African drum. With a microphone I can go between playing finger work and hand work and make it sound nice. Without a mike it would sound like all hand work because you couldn't hear the finger work. The problem with playing drums with finger work is that you can't play it unless you have microphone amplification because it is quiet music.

CM: I noticed that there are different sizes of tabla.

EMAM: Yes. There are different sizes and different pressures on the heads tuning them to different pitches. Each one is tuned to one pitch. My highest one is a D then I have a C, B, A, and G. I go between these notes. One of those is normally used for the left hand when performing the tabla in Indian classical music. When more are used it is approached as an instrument and a whole raga is performed. The tabla players would have different hand drums from high to low pitches and tune it in a scale and play a whole composition on it. They would have a drummer accompanying them to keep the time. That is the way it is done traditionally in India. The way I did it was using that concept but on a smaller scale by having five different tunings with one that I always use as a major and I would change depending on the song that is being played.

CM: You have gotten involved playing with *Ancient Future*. What is world fusion music?

EMAM: There is a woman by the name of Mindia who started *Ancient Future* with Matthew Montfort. We played music together in the early '80s and eventually got married at the ashram in India. When I got back from India I started bringing them together again. I started creating recording projects having to do with devotional music from India. We created an ensemble that was Mindia's music and we got Mat to come and play with us. This was the continuation of the world fusion music that they had started together. World fusion is combining instrumentation from different parts of the world, having someone who has studied the music of that instrument traditionally and practiced it and can deliver that music in the proper manner of the tradition of that instrument. Everyone in *Ancient Future* is coming from a classical tradition.

The only exception to that is the Jembah which I play with my own technique. This is close to what the Jembah players use and it works. I know the rhythm because I am a tabla player. I wasn't taught the African tradition and I'm not trying to use the instrument as a traditional instrument; I'm using it as a rhythm instrument.

CM: What is your vision in creating world fusion music?

EMAM: It is to create peace. The

whole idea of world fusion music, the magic of it is that it brings people of different cultures together. In order to play world fusion music, either you have to have someone from a different culture playing with you or you have to go to a different culture or to a master from that culture and study the culture. That is why I appreciate working with indigenous people's music rather than people who have studied from that. When I teach tabla, my goal is to get my student ready to study with Zakir, always.

The magic becomes the possibility of all these different people from different cultures tuning into each other through music. Beginning to learn about each other's music and exchanging musical possibilities with each other. Each one keeping the integrity of their own music, each teaching to the other's part of their music. Indian classical rhythms are some of the most intricate, most beautiful of the planet and to combine that with the orchestration ideas of Bali and Africa—the music would be incredible!

World peace through world music. To find a way to teach everybody enough about everybody else that there would be no way to have animosity. That is my job, my work.



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