

Rick Glanvill offers a *tourd'horizon* of pop music for the 90s

Eurofusion



The Zairean art of noise from Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens

If the 80s are to be broadly remembered for the collapse of Stalinism, the thawing of the cold war, green politics and 10 years of uninterrupted rule by the Iron Lady, popular music is having none of it. The 80s was the dance decade; 10 years dominated by club culture whose preoccupations with *Looking For The Perfect Beat* and believing *The Only Way Is Up* permeated the thinking of a generation.

Hip hop and rap music, sounds that came screaming (as punk had before them) from the mouths of disenfranchised youth, set a radical new agenda for pop music in the early part of the decade, based on the cheapness of new music technology for bedroom experiment.

By the close of the decade, that agenda had been processed and assimilated by record and radio companies almost to a note. Hip hop and its more linear, disco sibling, house music, can be heard everywhere in British life, from the babbling mass of unlicensed or 'pirate' radio stations to that barometer of mainstream trends, the advertisement jingle; the

one challenging orthodoxy, the other reinforcing it.

The hegemony Britain has enjoyed in world pop music, a legacy from the days when the globe learned English from the lyrics of aggressively-marketed sounds, is crumbling. The re-emergence of craggy 60s', 70s' and early-80s' rock casualties in recent years indicates a void in the current scene here, after times of formidable creativity which gave rise to world market leaders, which can't be filled by *wunderkinds* like the Stone Roses or Blue Aeroplanes alone. In the words of Talking Heads' leader David Byrne, 'rock 'n' roll's gotten a little tired'.

In Britain, rock's recent creative insolvency has led to a variety of fusions, with white rock bands (in the age-old tradition of Presley and beyond) moving with the prevailing wind of change. Thus Manchester's Happy Mondays perform a sort of blue-eyed house music, and bands like Pop Will Eat Itself and World Domination Enterprises create a sound clash (echoed by US blacks like Run DMC and Public Enemy) which grafts the anger and

technical innovations of hip hop on to the body of rock's gravitational launch. At a time when Britain's youth is more racially-integrated than ever before, this exchange can only accelerate.

Yet there is another, untapped source that rock musicians and their 'natural' audience have turned to the Third World and 'world music'. David Byrne and Paul Simon are two white US rock musicians who have filled their creative void by harnessing the talent of African and Latin American musicians previously untested in the international music scene.

Byrne supported his solo release, *Rei Momo*, which was based entirely around the salsa rhythms of New York's Hispanic community, with a worldwide tour using the same musicians. Simon controversially breached the cultural boycott against South Africa by using township stars on his *Graceland* recording and tour. Both artists are now currently infatuated with the music of Brazil, and were depicted in one cartoon as a Livingstone and Stanley, cultural explorers hacking through the

jungle in colonial attire.

Such 'appropriation' as *Graceland* and *Rei Momo* will increase: UK pop band the Blow Monkeys use Algerian superstar Cheb Khaled on their next release; South Africa's Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens sang on chart outfit The Art Of Noise's recent recordings; and Zairean singers such as Papa Wemba and Ray Lema are inundated with work.

Another important dimension has been the increased focus on 'world musicians' in their own right, not just at festivals like Womad (World Of Music, Arts And Dance) but through the regular appearance of visiting acts at rock clubs around Britain, with the occasional sellout crowd. As audiences come to know their *mbalax* (as played by Youssou N'Dour from Senegal) from their *lambada* (a new dance craze from Brazil), so musicians in the 90s will play to less parochial, more appreciative punters.

But there's another important factor at work here and it is a structural one. 1992 is not just the year of European monetary union and the relaxing of trade restrictions

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between EC members (and the year of the 'rapture' when God claims his own, according to some crusty theologians), but also the year big bang hits the record companies. New Year '93 could be rung-in to the death knell of British pop's dominance of Europe.

For years, the mainland European states have nursed feelings that their home-grown pop is inferior to the imported English form (Norway's A-Ha had to move to London and sing straight English pop to achieve their unique success). But times are changing. As the face of Europe alters, new rapprochements are made between nations, and Britain's Canute-like obstinacy is ever-more ridiculed, confide-

nee grows not just political-ly, but culturally.

The satellites of parent companies like Polygram, CBS and EMI in Europe, previously one-way channels for the importation of Michael Jackson, George Michael and other big worldwide sellers, are beginning to bite back.

Annual record company 'jollies', such as Europe's 'Midem' and New York's 'New Music Seminar' are places where US and UK delegates now *listen*, where previously they preached. The major companies are reshaping to accommodate new European demands, shedding older staff and their nostalgia for a golden age when the Beatles played *She Loves You* in the Liverpool Cavern club. Ironic, really, that the fab four had to move to Hamburg to be appreciated.

In the last three years, European music has come to mean more than the boom-bang-a crudities of the Euro-vision Song Contest. Euro-pop, at first an artless, ridiculed form of hi-tech disco from the gay clubs of France, Spain and Italy, has regularly peppered the UK charts.

Holiday singalongs got serious as the 'Balearic beat' championed in the clubs of the sun-drenched Mediterranean islands found appreciation on London's dance-floors.

French gypsies, The Gipsy Kings, romanced UK yuppies and won their hearts with a combination of progressive flamenco and clap-along melodies. The Gipsy Kings, like African and Latin musicians, have a popularity on the continent unmatched here, partly because of the greater proportion of Africans there, but largely because people lack the rank chauvinism of the Brits.

As in other spheres of business, 1992 points a finger at the UK music scene's linguacentricity. Britain's creeping educational response has to some extent been preempted by style leaders in clubland's youth. House music's 'sampling' (digital 'stealing' of sounds from previous releases) of everything from Yemenite vocals to African drums has opened public ears to 'foreign' vibes. In France, for example, rural hamlets hold *lambada* dance contests at the end of their harvest festivals one year af-

ter the new Brazilian craze emerged.

Moreover, some music has a pan-European empathy that transcends language barriers. Les Negresses Vertes are a blueprint for a United State of European Music, blending Gallic folk akin to Britain's popular Pogues, flamenco rock and north African styles. They are the tip of an iceberg of pan-European fusionists, based around southern France and northern Spain, whose music represents a powerful challenge to British rock bands here as well. Already, Negresses Vertes have sold out UK dates. When bands like Pata Negra and Los Porrinas visit (post-92, *naturellement*) the tide may be turning permanently.

The potential of Eastern European music, with travel restrictions lifted on musicians, is awesome. Already, the choral tradition of Bulgaria has been recognised in the UK (Trio Bulgarka recorded with British singer Kate Bush recently).

Of course, none of this is to deny the continued influence of urban US black music, still producing champions for the next decade in the likes of

Adeva, David Peaston, De La Soul and Bobby Brown. Funk will no doubt dominate trends on the dancefloor for as long as there are eight notes in a scale.

Interestingly, for the first time, black British acts are creating a lasting splash in the black music pool. Soul II Soul (whose leader Jazze B was voted best role model by the US National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples - the first Brit to be so) are an example of the unique blend of reggae still an essential element of the music scene here and contemporary US sounds that could only happen in Britain.

Black British music has never drawn so effectively on its roots before, and is likely to innovate further. Listen, for example, to the futuristic hip hop house/jazz melange of artists like Steve Williamson and Galliano.

The face of British pop is changing irrevocably, just as surely as the wall was breached: by the choice of the people. It is moving fast to fill the void, but looks as much abroad as within now for inspiration. We live - and dance-in interesting times.



The Gipsy Kings: Romancing the yuppie