

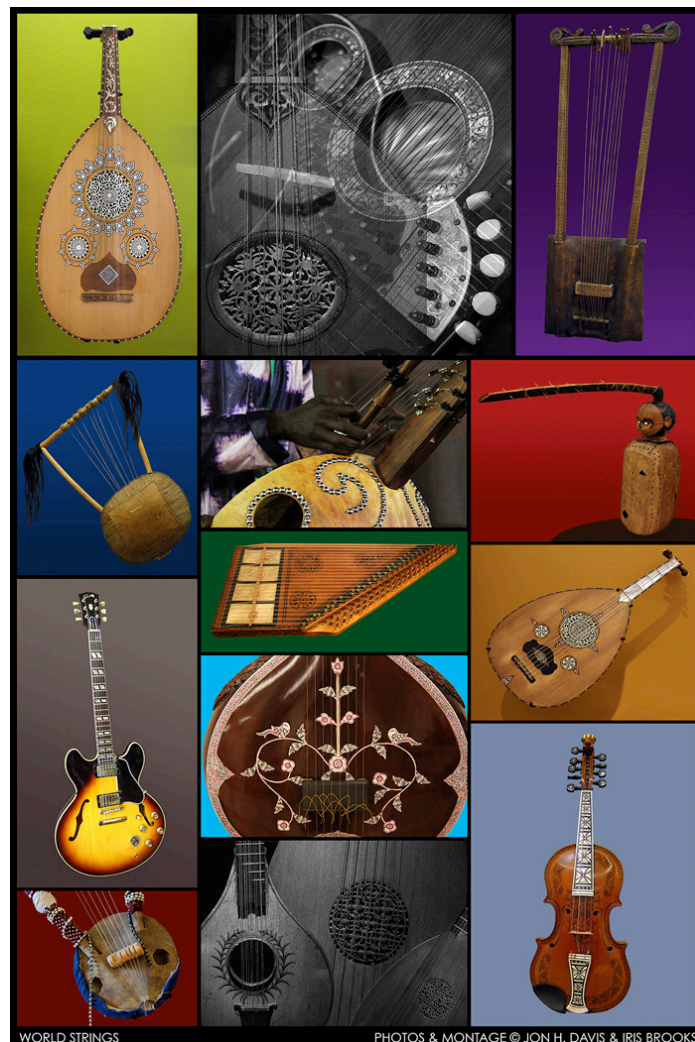
Music Without Borders: Transformative World Music

Iris Brooks

*"Music has no borders, no race or color, no limits of country, no ethnicity.
Music makes the people come together . . ."*

Pope Benedict XVI,
World Leader

Sounds do not have borders or walls built to separate them. Wherever you are and regardless of your political, religious, and social beliefs or practices, music can highlight an issue (political injustice, water rights, environmental stewardship, abuse to women). It also serves to warm the heart, soothe the soul, and provide a crack of light in what may appear to be a growing darkness. In the days leading up to and following the 2016 Presidential election in America with fake news at an all-time high, many people asked me what they could do to feel better and restore their hope for the future of the world. I too, did some deep soul-searching, returning to my first love, music. Beyond listening to the actual strains of a musical work, there is a visceral, sensorial experience, helping to make us feel whole. Some consider music as a force balancing good and evil, a healing art to bring people out of despair and lift the soul, or as a map created by songlines to honor the natural world.



WORLD STRINGS

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WORLD STRINGS

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Whether or not you believe music functions to unite body and mind, the individual with society, or society and nature, most people feel the power and magic of music, which enlivens us. Ross Daly is a thoughtful and virtuosic musician who was born in England and has lived in Crete for decades, a land where the lyra players are said to resurrect people's hearts with their fingers. Currently touring in New England, Daly doesn't make such claims, but plays and records a variety of string instruments from different corners of the world, with little regard to borders of countries and with the ability to transcend boundaries of self. "Modal music—music that's based around tones or modes rather than Western scales—covers a region that stretches from the northwest of Africa to west China. All of those areas have things in common, and they're all constantly changing and evolving," he says. Genre-jumping Greek-American songstress Simrit, who has recently released the appealing album, *Songs of Resilience*, is inspired by devotional poetry, Greek Orthodox chants, West African rhythms, and yoga. She believes music can have a profound change on our consciousness. Simrit asserts, "For the world to shift into a potentially peaceful place, we must start with ourselves first."

Others credit music with making the world vibrate and uniting civilizations. While I am not defending this claim, I am intrigued by it and I do encourage everyone to create his or her own playlist for empowerment, to rekindle spirit, and listen to one's inner voice. Here are some of my current suggestions, ranging from deep listening sonic meditations to work by the Nile Project with musicians from many countries joining together in a collective with the conviction that listening is key and music leads to cultural awareness. This sampling of albums will get you started on music without borders

THE NILE PROJECT

"Listening is the basis for understanding."

Egyptian vocalist Saleeb Fawzy,
Musician - The Nile Project

Systems thinking, network theory, and participatory leadership are not phrases that instantly bring to mind music. But these organizational ideas are an important part of the concept of The Nile Project, a group with 35 members, which spans eleven Nile countries. This collaborative, cross-cultural musical group—featuring poignant vocals in six languages—performs for key decision makers and diplomats at organizations such as the United Nations, European Commission, and African Union, focusing attention on environmental concerns with an emphasis on water issues crossing borders along the Nile River.

The band brings together a variety of instruments, styles, and modes, as well as the sacred and profane in collaborative performances and albums, such as the newly released *Jinja*. This recording had unlikely beginnings. Rather than going to a recording studio, the group decided to create their album while they were on tour, but not from live concert recordings. Instead they converted their hotel rooms into temporary, guerrilla recording studios with mattresses, box springs, extra bedding, and pillows acting as forms of soundproofing.

What does the word "Jinja" mean? It translates as "really" in Korean, a religious architectural term in Japanese, and Jewish *ninja* in the urban dictionary. Jinja also refers to place: a Korean fast food restaurant, a style of chicken in Singapore, and most relevant for this disc, a city on Lake Victoria in southeastern Uganda, where the Nile Project musicians gathered from countries including Burundi, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, and Sudan, as well as Uganda.

Perhaps the broad spectrum of meanings for "Jinja" is appropriate for a rhythmically-driven, world music album which crosses borders on every cut, leaving listeners energized with instruments as diverse as *adungu* (a plucked bow-harp from Uganda, known as a traditional royal and ceremonial instrument), *djembe* (West African goblet-shaped drum said to contain the spirit of the tree it was made from), *riqq* (a small Egyptian tambourine with brass jingles played with fingers throughout the Middle East in both Arabic classical and folk music), *oud* (a lute found throughout the Arab world with a sophisticated repertoire, considered by some to be the "king of instruments"), *krar* (an Ethiopian and Eritrean five or six-stringed lyre with a bowl-shaped resonator), and saxophone. These instruments may be thought of in musical families (plucked zithers and hand drums in different shapes) shared by collaborators over the last three years, rather than following a strict adherence to the boundaries of their specific countries.

The border crossing of instruments is also reflected in environmental issues, which span many countries. There is not enough water for everyone who lives along the Nile and the hope is to make the river more sustainable. Transforming water conflicts within Africa, this musical group wants to bring awareness to this issue and start a dialogue between different countries as a result of their performances. "We don't start with conversation; we start with African music."

In a film on their website we hear: "We have a lot in common. Musical curiosity leads to musical understanding. In the same way musical understanding leads to cultural understanding. Our project is about bringing us all together to share an opinion and a dialogue." When on tour, the band includes workshops (Musical Collaboration and Water Cooperation), panels (River Stories), and class visits (Water Conflict Transformation) to accompany the concerts. The mission of the Nile Project is to "inspire, inform, and connect Nile citizens to help them collaborate on cultivating the sustainability of the river." And beyond this important message of the Nile Project, the music on this exciting new recording, Jinja and its accompanying tour, is well worth a listen

MARCEL KHALIFE FAMILY

"When we plumbed the depths of our Arab heritage searching for a luminous gem to light up our present and restore what has been forgotten or lost from our lives today— which is love—we brought back a pearl of everlasting, incandescence, indeed a torch whose flame never dies out, so long as two souls breathe in love."

Marcel Khalife,
Oud Master

Straddling stylistic genres and international boundaries within one family, Lebanese oud (Arabic lute) master Marcel Khalife and his sons, Juilliard-trained Rami playing piano and multi-instrumentalist Bachar (Conservatory of Paris graduate) on percussion, present their compositions and experiences reflecting diverse geographic and sonic pathways on their new album, *Andalusia of Love* (Nagam Records). It incorporates the lyrical works of Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish with additional performance by Jilbert Yamine on *kanoun* (a traditional Middle Eastern trapezoid-shaped, plucked zither with 81 strings). Marcel Khalife speaks of their instruments as, "the mediators of our personal languages."

Andalusia of Love was inspired by the acceptance of three faiths in times past in southern Spain and the ache of the human condition. The album was paired with a concert tour, which was supported by the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee. This large, grassroots organization is interested in protecting civil rights and civil liberties of all people while promoting mutual understanding and preserving Arab cultural heritage. Nabil Mohamad, vice president of the ADC explains: "The tour falls within ADC's mission to highlight the beauty of Arab culture, which will dispel stereotypes while allowing listeners to learn more about Arab heritage and *turaath* (culture)."

Marcel Khalife—who has taught at the Beirut National Conservatory of Music, toured throughout the world, and been named UNESCO Artist for Peace—is a prolific musician who is interested in breaking stereotypes in his contemporary compositions and soundtracks both in the Arab world and around the globe. This humanitarian, who has been dubbed the "Bob Dylan of the Arab World," believes, "nothing justifies our art other than to speak for those who cannot speak." It is an important reminder of the power of music to communicate for the disenfranchised.

TRIO MEDIAEVAL, SINIKKA LANGELAND, AND STARFLOWERS

"Every microcosm, every inhabited region, has a centre, a place that is sacred above all."

Mircea Eliade,
Religious Historian and Philosopher

Trio Mediaeval is a European-based band made up of Scandinavian women singing pieces originating in different centuries and countries ranging from Icelandic chants of the Middle Ages to Norwegian folks songs and contemporary works blending history and geography. Their distinctive sound evokes images of a stark landscape with a sacred feel on the ECM record label and in their extensive tours throughout Europe and North America over the last two decades.

While these are classically trained vocalists, usually performing a cappella, their work transcends genre boundaries, especially with new projects such as their recent recordings on ECM. The soon-to-be-released album, *Rimur*, explores the relationship of Iceland and Norway through traditional, mediaeval, and improvisational music and in *The Magical Forest* they join forces with the quintet, Starflowers. This album involves collaboration with others from Finland, Sweden, and Norway, including Arve Henriksen, an impressive improviser/trumpet player from Norway and Sinikka Langeland, a traditional folk singer and performer on the Finnish zither (*kantele*), known for her boundary defying work along with jazz musicians.

This new project melds folk hymn melodies, angelic offerings, traditional strings, sax, trumpet, percussion, and bass in an inventive song cycle by Langeland based on myths and legends of the world tree while celebrating the spirit of place. She is from Finnskogen, which is a region she was drawn back to in order to hear the sound of the forest. She writes about the area: "Finnskogen can be regarded as the western part of a cultural belt that runs eastward through Finland, Russia and Siberia all the way to Japan." Songs and hunting rituals are common to this shamanistic pathway inspiring Langeland.

Believing in the power of myth and music is important to her. Langeland feels, "myths are important. But they hold no power if nobody believes in them." And she reminds us, "It is fascinating that now you can put on a CD and change your own state of mind."

THE JERRY CANS

"One of our passions is to really inform others about what it's like here and what our language and culture means. Being segregated from the rest of Canada—we live a very different lifestyle and not a lot of people know what it really is like up here."

Nancy Mike,
Musician - The Jerry Cans

A northern Canadian band based in Nunavut, mixes roots, rock, reggae, Celtic influences, traditional Inuit throat singing and more while singing in their language, *Inuktitut*. Sometimes they highlight social issues, such as domestic abuse in their newest video, *Arnalukuuq* (released January 2017). It focuses on love and support of women who have been verbally and physically abused and was inspired by their frustration with the previous governmental decisions to ignore cases involving missing and murdered indigenous women. This video was created to empower women and it shows the flame from whale and seal oil on the traditional stone lamp, often maintained by the women in the community. This image is accompanied by lyrics repeating words such as beautiful/good (*piujuq*) and strong (*sanngijuu*).

Determined to sing in their own language and reaffirm cultural pride, they turn their eyes and ears to preserving the culture of the Arctic region they live in. Not dissuaded by their many rejections from established record companies, The Jerry Cans started their own label, Aakuluk Music (pronounced, "a-coo-look"), which is a term of endearment.

"Some people have stereotypical ideas of Inuit culture or what it's like up here. And it can get frustrating and it can really get tiring to always have to educate non-stop when we are traveling. But I am very much passionate about my culture and who I am and where I come from, so I have that passion to just teach all the time, no matter what the circumstances are," says Nancy Mike of The Jerry Cans.

Listeners learn a bit about their culture on their soon-to-be-released album *Inuusiq*, meaning Life. When one of the musicians had a baby, it was named after her recently deceased father, since it is the tradition in this Arctic region to name the baby after the one who has passed, with the sense of living a new life through another person.

STEVE GORN

"Light and dark, safety and uncertainty, known and unknown; this is the journey through the precious human realm. Through this music I wish to embrace it all. Contemplation, joy, sadness and solitude—it's all there—a true feast offering."

-Steve Gorn,
Musician

Between Two Worlds is the latest release from Steve Gorn, an American musician and Grammy-winner, who has embraced world music with true depth as heard in his previous albums such as the evocative *Luminous Ragas*, where his expressive Indian *bansuri* (bamboo flute of North India) is transcendent and subtle. In this new, heartfelt and spacious disc, *Between Two Worlds* (Bamboo Rasa), Gorn plays his lyrical *bansuri* as well as a plaintive clarinet, sometimes capturing the style of the more nasal, emotive Armenian *duduk* (an ancient, double-reeded, wooden, wind instrument). The pieces on this album have an inner, meditative quality as Gorn explores new territory on a soulful, sonic journey.

Music is a contemplative practice for Gorn. But he also speaks in architectural terms, referring to some notes as stable pillars and others functioning as a scaffold on which he improvises, expanding the colors, range, and shapes while exploring the dimensionality of each phrase and completing its arc. "Music is really a transformative modality; it can sweep us away, shift our moods. It can settle us, excite us, awaken us, or be mind altering. It is a portal—crossing boundaries into ecstasy, intoxication, and possession. Music joins the visible and invisible world," says Gorn.

He is a longtime practitioner of the healing arts and believes in the power of music to stop time. His goal is "to bring people to that sacred space where heart and mind meet." In addition to his new recording, *Between Two Worlds*, Gorn has performed on soundtracks, for theater and dance productions, and with world music ensembles aimed towards spiritual callings including One World, a satisfying concert for peace and reconciliation with pensive cellist Eugene Friesen and the imaginative, masterful percussionist Glen Velez. Gorn's sound has been called "liquid grace" by Paul Winter and whether performing in a cave in India, a boat on the Hudson River, or in a lament over Jerusalem, he creates music which goes beyond the boundaries of musical notes. Regardless of his instrument or stylistic genre, Gorn's transcendent music is both about and from the heart.

PAULINE OLIVEROS AND THE DEEP LISTENING PROJECT

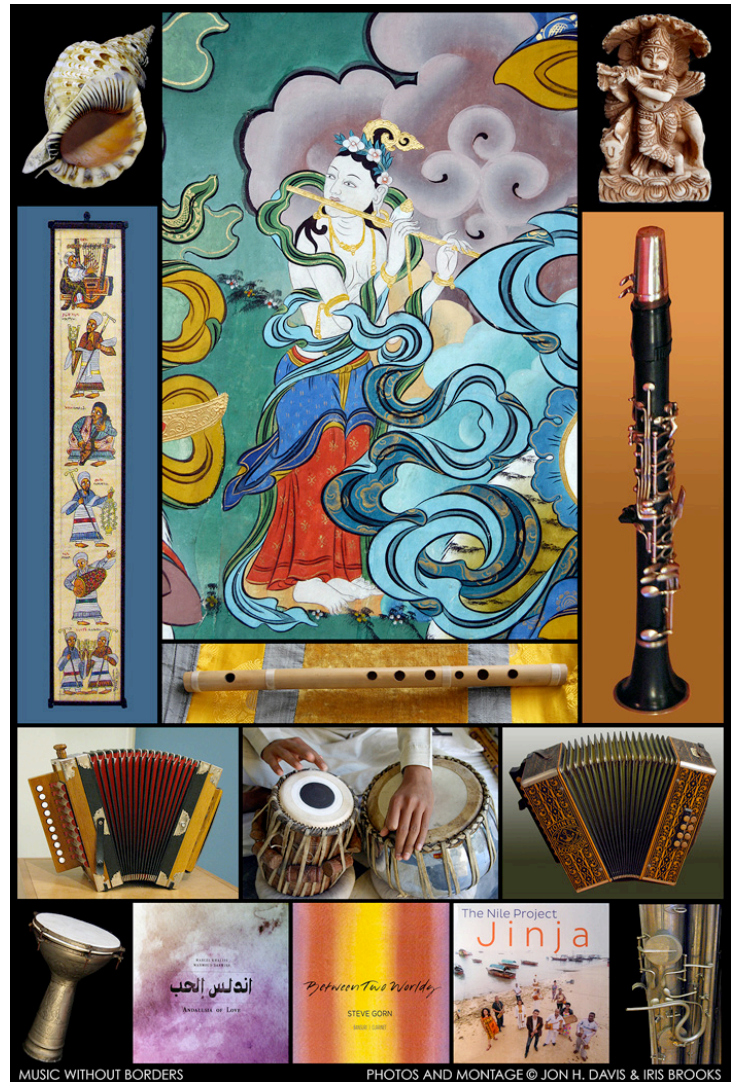
"Listen to everything all the time and remind yourself when you are not listening."

Pauline Oliveros,
Composer/Founder Deep Listening Institute

The late, musical pioneer and composer Pauline Oliveros inspired musicians, scientists, and philosophers from many lands with her concept of "Deep Listening." For Oliveros, listening was more than music in a bubble. Her Deep Listening philosophy encompassed "listening in every possible way to everything possible to hear, no matter what you are doing." She described Deep Listening as her practice, much as a spiritual leader might meditate. Her listening focused on music as well as sounds of daily life, thoughts, and nature. Sometimes her suggestions were unexpected, as in her suggestion to "walk so silently that the bottoms of your feet become ears."

Whether performing on accordion, conch shell, tuba, or electronics, Oliveros opened up world of sounds, defying and dissolving conventional musical boundaries. Her Sonic Meditations came with instructions for communal music making with awareness of environmental sounds as part of a musical performance. "Listening is not the same as hearing and hearing is not the same as listening," she said, reminding me of a Japanese Zen koan.

Her influential workshops focusing on simple exercises to promote deep listening (hearing stories from a partner you didn't know and recounting their tales to a larger group rather than your own story, shifted the focus from self to really listening to another) inspired generations to follow in her footsteps. She has left behind an extensive body of offerings: albums, scores, and books available online. "Deep listening is experiencing heightened awareness or expanded awareness of sound and of silence, of quiet, and of sounding - making sounds," said Oliveros. And most importantly, she believed, "If you're really listening, then some of the barriers can dissolve or change."



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RESOURCES

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Simrit - [Link](#)

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Deep Listening Institute - [Link](#)

***Iris Brooks** is a cultural explorer who has played music on and written about all of the continents. Her musical adventures include folk drumming with untouchables on the roof of a mud hut in Benares, India, a pennywhistle serenade for penguins in Antarctica, a formal concert at Carnegie Hall in the Different Perspectives series, and a 'sound safari' with the birds of Zimbabwe while paddling down the Zambezi River. Learn more about Brooks and photographer/videographer Jon H. Davis at the NORTHERN LIGHTS STUDIO [website](#) and view their film, Borneo & Beyond: The Rainforest World Music Festival on Vimeo [here](#).*

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