

JON PARELES | MUSIC REVIEW

## World Music for a Connected Planet

The 15th edition of Globalfest featured a dozen international groups building on traditions.

RAPPING PUNCTUATED by Indian-flavored melodies and tabla drumming. A Celtic murder ballad sung above a baleful electronic drone. Songs in Guadeloupean Creole backed by blues guitar and sousaphone. Iranian indie-rock. Brazilian neo-psychedelia. A mariachi version of Nirvana's "Come as You Are."

They were all onstage at Globalfest, the world-music showcase that had its 15th edition on Sunday night. There were 12 international groups playing overlapping sets at the Liberty Theater and, across a frigid 42nd Street, at B. B. King Blues Club & Grill and its annex, Lucille's.

A central theme of Globalfest has been that while borders are permeable, cultures can maintain an identity even as they change. Connections spread constantly, and musical ideas travel especially fast. Every musician, even the ones who care most about holding on to tradition, has to make constant judgments about balancing local (or tribal or regional or national) materials and imported ones, about what to retain and what to update.

It's the age-old processes of artistic evolution — remembering, refining, borrowing, hybridizing, testing, personalizing — accelerated to digital speed and transformed by digital access. There's a serious risk that commercially driven homogenization will assimilate traditions away. But as Globalfest demonstrates each year, there's also a pushback from musicians who harness new techniques in service to prized legacies.

That murder ballad, for instance, was sung in unmistakably traditional style — somber and lingering — by Jarlath Henderson, who is from Northern Ireland. But the band surrounding him included one musician deploying a nest of electronics while the others switched between folky and non-folky uses of bass, guitar, fiddle and keyboards; each song set Mr. Henderson's voice in a distinct, customized environment.

Delgres, a trio based in Paris that's led by its Guadeloupean guitarist and singer, Pascal Danae, bases its music on a historical moment: 1802, when Napoleon reimposed slavery in Guadeloupe and some islanders escaped to New Orleans. It's reason enough to back up Mr. Danae's slide guitar with

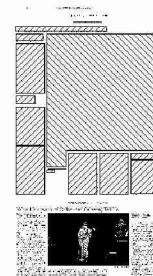
drums and a quintessential New Orleans instrument, sousaphone, in songs that envision a Guadeloupean blues with rawboned guitar riffs that could suddenly reveal the staccato intricacies of African and Afro-Caribbean guitar styles.

But the night's fiercest, most diverse grooves belonged to Jupiter & Okwess: the singer, songwriter and bandleader Jupiter Bokondji and his band, from Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with songs that joyfully carried conscientious messages like "Protect women." The briskly upbeat rhythm of Congolese soukous, well known worldwide, was only part of the set. Mr. Bokondji traveled extensively in Congo and learned many local, lesser-known styles that infuse his songs, giving them variety and bite. He's also clearly fond of what a wah-wah pedal can do.

La Dame Blanche, a singer, songwriter and flutist born in Cuba and based in Paris, vigorously drew on whatever she pleased, including quasi-classical flute melodies, dancehall, "Ave Maria," cumbia, trap-tinged R&B and plenty of hip-hop. She made them cohere by her fluency and force of will.

Grand Tapestry is an alliance of hip-hop-loving Indian classical musicians with a Los Angeles rapper, Eligh. The group's main composer is Alam Khan, who plays the 25-stringed sarod and also runs a laptop; he's the son of the renowned sarod player Ali Akbar Khan. Grand Tapestry's set veered among Indian classical duets by Mr. Khan and Salar Nader on tabla; rock-ish instrumentals with Mr. Nader on trap drums instead; and, most promisingly, the rapid-fire, positive-thinking raps from Eligh backed by the two musicians.

Mohsen Namjoo's songs are steeped in Persian classical music and poetry, merged freely with raucous Western rock. He was an acclaimed and sometimes controversial songwriter in Iran who has lived in exile in the West after being sentenced, while abroad, to five years in prison for setting Quran verses to music. Even across the language barrier — his songs are in Persian — his commitment was unmistakable, and his chameleonic voice could hold the nuanced clarity of Persian classical singing or turn into a rocker's howl, an old man's cackle or a theatrical sob.



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There were smart echoes of tropicalia, Brazil's iconoclastic (and dictatorship-defying) music of the late 1960s, in the set by Ava Rocha and her band: amiable melodies, poetic lyrics, hints of Brazilian rhythms and taut arrangements that sometimes let the guitars get noisy. Her performance suggested a playful, elusive ritual. She arrived onstage bearing a decanter of what looked like wine, and drank some of it; before she finished her finale, she balanced it on her head. In between, she sang with sultry nonchalance and traced slow-motion gestures both elaborate and inscrutable.

Flor de Toloache, the New York mariachi band that won the Latin Grammy for best ranchero/mariachi album in November, mingled mariachi tradition with tangents of its own, like Andrews Sisters harmonies, occasional lyrics in English and that Nirvana song.

Other performers hewed closer to tradition. The Iberi Choir, from (the country) Georgia, sang gorgeously harmonized songs, many of them a cappella, with convoluted passages of eerie dissonance; one song had lyrics dating back to the 12th century. Miramar — with lead singers from Puerto Rico and Tennessee and a Chilean-

American keyboardist and composer — devoted itself to urbanely lovelorn Puerto Rican-style boleros, some vintage and some written by group members.

Eva Salina lent her poised, lustrous voice to complexly morose songs from the Balkans in a duo with the Serbian-style accordionist Peter Stan, who backed her with oompah chords and puckish, skittering obbligatos. And Thornetta Davis, a Detroit blues singer, brought backup singers (from her church, she noted) and a horn section for a hearty, formidable set of optimistic blues — even when the optimism came from finally ditching a no-good man.

For a musician in the 21st century, those traditions are a matter of choice, not the result of isolation, nostalgia or birthright. Even in a connected world, they're strong enough to draw new practitioners with their music alone.

**A pushback from  
musicians who harness  
new techniques in  
service to prized legacies.**

**Globalfest**  
Manhattan

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NINA WESTERVELT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



At Globalfest, clockwise from top: Jupiter & Okwess, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, who delivered fierce grooves; Delgres, a trio from Paris; and Ava Rocha, whose band brought hints of Brazilian rhythms.

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