

POP GOES THE WORLD

New collections unearth the addictive sounds that keep fans in South America, the Middle East, and Asia tapping their toes

By **Saul Austerlitz**
 GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Psychedelic cumbias from Peru. The folk music of Myanmar. Sugary Thai pop and soul. Raw, lightning-fast Syrian rock. Colombian sounds from the 1960s and '70s.

A recent spate of astonishing world-music compilations, many from countries often associated more with political unrest than rocking out, have expanded the musical globe, filling in what were once blank spots on the map. With eyes and ears opened by groundbreaking prior releases, inquiring minds want to know: What *does* Burmese pop sound like? And what happened in Brazil after the Tropicalia movement had its late-'60s run?

Music made outside the borders of the United States and the United Kingdom has long been a presence in American record stores, primarily African and Brazilian music. But in recent years, the level of interest in exotic world music has increased sharply. The music industry's split into dozens of small niches has helped to create a market of highly informed, adventurous music fans who — like the film buffs who spent the 1990s embracing movies from Taiwan, Iran, and China — seek fresh sounds, whatever their provenance.

Plus, the influence of well-regarded world releases such as the "Ethiopiquest" series of Ethiopian rock and jazz and the **WORLD MUSIC, Page N8**

rerelease of influential Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti's albums have helped to generate a hunger for more of the same.

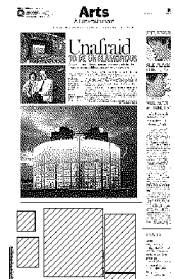
"There's been a deluge in the past few years of really super-interesting, almost totally unheard of world-music compilations — stuff from Southeast Asia, tons and tons of African stuff," says Michael Klausman, who works at Other Music, an influential music store in New York City. "It probably started a few years ago, with the huge resurgence and popularity of Fela Kuti, and ever since then, people realize he's just the tip of the iceberg and that there's a ton more along those lines."

Having heard Fela's "Original Sufferhead" or Luaka Bop's collection of Brazilian music, "Beleza Tropical," eager music fans now ask, "Is there more like this?"

The answer, invariably, is yes. Olivier Conan, owner of Barbes, a popular nightspot in Brooklyn's Park Slope, discovered the psychedelic, dance-friendly chicha sound of Peru while visiting the country in pursuit of unique sounds.

Chicha had been popular in the 1960s, but the demise of Infopesa, the record label that had released the bulk of chicha, made it a challenge to track down original masters and acquire rights for the new album "The Roots of Chicha: Psychedelic Cumbias From Peru."

"I got different kinds of reactions," Conan says of his Peruvian excursion. "The first [musician] I contacted was the guy from Los Hijos del Sol, Angel Rosado, and he was very excited that someone in America was calling him to put his music out. He really saw that he was getting discovered. He was so excited, he was playing me songs over the phone: 'What about this one? Do you like this one?' In general, a lot of those people really craved a sense of recognition that they didn't always get."



For some, the easy availability of music from formerly obscure outposts has only added to the hipster one-upmanship inherent to world music: "I'll see your Gilberto Gil and raise you one Ja'afar Hassan," if you will. It also reflects a democratization of music — a leveling of barriers and a razing of boundaries that allows interested American fans to find out what people are actually listening to in Damascus, or Baghdad, or Lima. And, says Yale Evelev, president of the Luaka Bop label, "The whole ability to get deeper into a culture has become easier with the Internet."

And there's plenty to choose from, including such recent compilations as "The Roots of Chicha," "Brazil 70: After Tropicalia," "¡Gó-zalo! Bugalu Tropical," "Thai Pop Spectacular," "Colombia! The Golden Age of Discos Fuentes," "Molam: Thai Country Groove From Isan, Vol. 2," "Cult Cargo: Grand Bahama Goombay," and "Sí, Para Usted: The Funky Beats of Revolutionary Cuba."

African music — including the crystalline pop of "Authenticité: The Syliphone Years," "Bokoor Beats," and "Belle Epoque 1: Soun-diata" — is still a staple of compilations this year, but its ubiquity has been supplanted by other, less-familiar destinations.

Some, such as "Thai Pop Spectacular," skew toward the campy end of the spectrum, while others, including "Sí, Para Usted," lean toward the scholarly side, offering detailed liner notes and a brief explication of the music's roots in Fidel Castro's revolution and the Cuban government's monetary support for music schools and musicians. "Brazil 70" expects a degree of familiarity with Tropicalia, while others demand no such special knowledge.

Ironically, much of the music being celebrated abroad was abused at home for its overt commerciality. Peruvian chicha had never been compiled before because serious Peruvian music fans

disdained it as pap, and for every "Brazil 70" composed of highbrow, intellectual musicians like Caetano Veloso and Tom Zé, there is a "Thai Pop Spectacular" full of deliciously frothy pop singers.

It is bubblegum pop, ultimately, that translates best; it's good-time music — the sort of sounds you'd expect to hear at a bar or club — that has the most appeal because it tends to stay the same the world over.

The most surprising discovery amid the overflow of releases is the pop music of Thailand. "Thai Pop Spectacular" documents a magical world of Thai musicians carefully taking notes in the margins of their dog-eared copies of "Superfly" and surf-rock compilations. The result is a rush akin to the best of what world exotica can provide: a double-edged revelation that music this unfamiliar could exist, along with a sensation that maybe it isn't so unfamiliar at all. Toes tap to the same beat, in Bangkok or Boston.

Seattle label Sublime Frequencies has made a specialty out of truly exotic music. This year alone, the label has put out "Thai Pop Spectacular" and "Molam: Thai Country Groove From Isan, Vol. 2," and a collection of Burmese pop and folk called "Music of Nat Pwe, Vol. 3." Other recent releases include "Choubi Choubi," a surprising assemblage of ear-splitting Iraqi rock, and "Highway to Has-sake: Folk and Pop Sounds of Syria," which brought the blistering keyboard work of Omar Souleyman to the attention of American fans.

With the surge of world-music compilations, the need for expert talent scouts who can sort the diamonds from the dross grows ever greater. Now that all the world's music is available, who will tell us what is truly worthwhile?

"Music has become very cheap in a way because everybody has an iPod with 7,000 songs, which are not organized," says Conan. "I think anybody who does the work

of putting together a playlist with some sort of identity and cohesiveness will get noticed."

Other Music's Klausman agrees.

"People are just trying to dig deeper and deeper into different genres of music," he says. "People want to hear something that seems really authentic, that has a certain quality of rawness. With a lot of world music, it's a chance to constantly discover innovations that you never knew took place."



Clockwise from above: “The Roots of Chicha” features Peruvian bands like Los Destellos; “Highway to Hassake” showcases the keyboard work of Omar Souleyman; frothy songs fill “Thai Pop Spectacular.”

