

November 2006

The Beat Goes On

A cool wind from the East finally cut through the oppressive heat, which blanketed the hillsides around the southern end of Lake Malawi. We had walked less than a kilometre but I was drenched in sweat and beginning to worry that my filmstock would soon be a pathetic mush, simultaneously fried and melted beyond any further use. We were trying to find the local wells on which many villages relied for their water supply. I was just beginning to feel truly miserable when the sound of rhythmic chanting wafted up the valley. 200 metres ahead a line of women with large buckets and gourds on their heads emerged from a sheltered gully. The sound rose and fell with a lilt and ease we have come to recognise in African music and for years later, it brought back the memory and relief of that day more than any of the photographs I took.

Had I been a photographer in 1971, my dream assignment would have been to document the great percussionist, Ginger Baker from the band Cream and Blind Faith, travelling and drumming his way through and with the communities of the Sahara desert.



The sound of music, a chorus of human voices or indeed chaotic traffic on an Indian street or a protest march winding its way down a Mexican avenue; they all evoke memories and images or the enhancement of images in a way which is unique to the travel experience. Certain instruments and sounds have become synonymous with regions, countries and cultures of the world – panpipes with Peru, a steel band with the Caribbean. And who can forget the frenetic guitar strumming of the Gypsy Kings, the thundering echo of the Japanese Kodo Drummers or the 5am Adhan, calling Muslims to prayer.



The legendary Radio DJ, John Peel famously and rebelliously conjured up images of underground culture and music in Britain. As world music began to filter into Europe, these vignettes were taken to another level by Andy Kershaw who introduced us to many bands, vocalists and musicians from across the world (especially Africa) who might never have been heard outside their own countries. Even if I had not been to many of the countries featured, I became fascinated by the traditional sounds of their music and the images they threw up of where they came from, their religion, family and friends. It was a real catalyst in deciding where to travel next in search of images.

A self-assigned project once took me to the American south in search of stock images. This began with documenting the paddle steamers on the Mississippi River, landscapes of the Great Smokey Mountains and the pilgrimage to Graceland and Dollywood. Paying homage to Elvis Presley and Dolly Parton could easily have led me astray but it wasn't until I visited the Oconaluftee Mountain Life Festival in North Carolina that I was truly indoctrinated into the deep-rooted spirit of Southern culture and hospitality.

Every porch, kitchen and pharmacy seemed to be reverberating with the sound of guitars, fiddles and washboards. Without exception, music was my passport into the lives of these people. Just being from the UK was enough to link me (tenuously, I thought) with their Celtic roots and I was passed on from one household to another with a slap on the back and a belly full of corn grits and strong coffee! During a photography workshop I was once asked what I would be doing if I wasn't making my living as a photographer - given the choice. A musician, without doubt.

The image of a travelling musician is romantic and idealistic and it doesn't surprise me to still see travellers with a battered guitar slung around their shoulder or a harmonica slipped into a top pocket where other travellers would have their new 6 million pixel digital "point & shoot". Woody Guthrie would be proud!

For hundreds of years, music, song, dance and storytelling have formed the backbone of many cultures. Often and in more recent times, these are the only elements which remain of traditions linking them to their past while the rest give way to "development" or the growing demands of tourism. I have always been very suspicious of what is ironically called the 'Cultural show', where local people dress up in national or tribal costume to perform some ritual, dance or folktale. Most of these shows are barely authentic and are unlikely to provide one with a true sense of the culture.

The popularity of world music has increased enormously in the past 10 – 15 years and many more travellers are now seeking out the roots of this music in far flung places rather than being satisfied with a wet tent in a field at WOMAD or Glastonbury. Happening on one of numerous small festivals steeped in local tradition, music and dance is still one of the most enjoyable and photographically fruitful experiences.



My stepfather had spent much of his air force years in India just before partition in 1947. Fifty years later, I was lucky enough to travel with him on his return and we spent a couple of weeks travelling through the back waters of Kerala staying with local families. One night we were invited to a village puja (worship of local Hindu deities). It turned out to be much more than a simple prayer ceremony. Painted elephants sauntered through the small temple courtyard, hundreds of oil lamps were lit and a band of musicians and dancers burst onto the scene, each one seemingly in competition with the other – the dancers contorting ever more wildly and the musicians growing louder and more free form as the evening wore on. After a while I gave up taking photos and just listened and watched in awe. When I returned home, I bought a couple of tapes of this style of music, but none of it could compare to that night in the Backwaters.

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