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Globalfest Moves Online, Showcasing World Music Without Boundaries

With 16 bands over four nights, the festival expanded its reach at a time when live music with audiences is in short supply.

By Jon Pareles

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Minyo Crusaders set an old Japanese song, from a tradition called minyo, to a Nigerian Afrobeat groove. DakhaBrakha, from Ukraine, roved from Eastern European drones and yipping vocals to something like girl-group rock. Aditya Prakash, from Los Angeles, sang a joyful Hindu devotional over upbeat jazz from his ensemble, sharing its melody with a trombone. Rachele Andrioli, from southern Italy, sang a fierce tarantella accompanying herself with a tambourine and electronic loops of a jaw harp and her voice. Hit La Rosa, from Peru, topped the clip-clop beat of cumbia with surreal lyrics, surf-reverbed guitar solos and psychedelic swoops and echoes.

They were all part of the 18th annual Globalfest, the world-music showcase that moved online this year as a partnership with NPR Music's Tiny Desk Concerts series, which will preserve the performances online. Previous Globalfests were one-night live showcases in New York City for a dozen bands on club stages. But for this pandemic year, musicians recorded themselves performing live at home: living rooms, studios, a record-company office, a backyard barbecue. Angélique Kidjo, the singer from Benin who appeared at the first Globalfest, played virtual host in eye-popping outfits; musicians made sure to have at least one globe on camera. The sets were short, just two or three songs each. But Globalfest's potential audience has been hugely multiplied.

Dedicated Men of Zion, a multigenerational family band, sang gospel standards. GlobalFEST

While necessity forced Globalfest online, networking has long been built into its music. Many musicians who cherish local and traditional styles have decided that the way to ensure their survival is through adaptation and hybridization, retaining the essence while modernizing the delivery system. For musicians, fusion is also fun: a chance to learn new skills, a way to discover creative connections. There are commonalities in the ways voices can croon or bite or break, in mechanisms like repetition or call-and-response, in wanting people to dance. Modernization doesn't have to mean homogenization.

There were traditionalists at Globalfest. Dedicated Men of Zion, a multigenerational band of family members, sang hard-driving gospel standards like “Can’t Turn Me Around,” rasping and soaring into falsetto, from a backyard in North Carolina with a smoking barbecue grill. Edwin Perez led a 10-piece band — mostly Cuban musicians — updating a New York style that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s: salsa dura, propulsive and danceable with jabbing horns, insistent percussion and socially conscious lyrics. (One song was “No Puedo Respirar” — “I Can’t Breathe.”) Vox Sambou, a Haitian singer with a Canadian band, infused funk with the frenetic rhythms of voudou rhythms, praising the culture of the African diaspora as his music embodied it.

But tradition often came with a twist. Nora Brown adeptly played and sang Appalachian banjo songs from Kentucky, passed down through personal contact with elder generations, even though she’s a 15-year-old from Brooklyn, where she performed in a tunnel under Crown Heights with a train rumbling overhead. Rokia Traoré, from Mali, has an extensive catalog of her own songs, but her set reached back to a tradition of epic song: centuries-old historical praise of generals who built the West African Mande empire — “Tiramakan” and “Fakoly.” She sang over mesmerizing vamps, plucked and plinked on ngoni (lute) and balafon (xylophone), progressing from delicacy to vehemence, from gently melodic phrases to rapid-fire declamation, putting her virtuosity in service to the lore she conveyed.

Sofia Rei conjured a wildly eclectic mix from her New York living room. GlobalFEST

Musicians securely grounded in their own cultures also felt free to experiment with others. Martha Redbone — born in Kentucky with Cherokee, Choctaw and African-American ancestors — punctuated bluesy, compassionate soul songs with Native American rattles and percussive syllables. Elisapie sang in her Native American language, Inuktitut, as she led her Canadian rock band in volatile songs that built from folky picking to full-scale stomps. Emel, a Tunisian singer influenced by the protest music of Joan Baez, sang two songs from a living room in Paris. They were introspective, brooding, keening crescendos: “Holm” (“A Dream”), which envisioned a “bitter reality that destroys everything we build,” and, in English, “Everywhere We Looked Was Burning.”

Labess, a Canadian band led by an Algerian singer, had musicians performing remotely from France and Colombia; its set roved from Arabic-flavored songs to, for its finale, “La Vida Es Un Carnaval,” a kind of flamenco-samba-chanson amalgam with French lyrics and a button-accordion solo. Natu Camara, a singer from Guinea now based in New York, gave her West African pop a tinge of American funk as she offered determinedly uplifting messages.

And Sofia Rei, an Argentine singer now based in New York, conjured a wildly eclectic, near hallucinatory international mix from her living room with her band: Andean, Asian, jazz, funk, electronics. True to Globalfest’s boundary-scrambling mission, she sang about living under “Un Mismo Cielo”: “The Same Sky.”

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