

Interview with:

Roger Armstrong

Co-founder and managing director of Ace Records Ltd

WM oasis -Your long music story began 1975 with Ted Carroll in Belfast. You were a big fan of Rock n'roll, 60,s style R& B and garage band rock, 10 years later 1985; you started Globestyle with Ben Mandelson. How did you find yourself in this new"world music" world?

Roger Armstrong - Ted was from Dublin, I was from Belfast and we met in London in the early 70s and went on to start Chiswick Records in 1975. Originally we recorded local groups but also licensed recordings from other companies which we then released on our own label. I know Ben from 1977 when I produced a single with his band Amazorblades. He went on to play in Orchestra Jazira which was an Anglo-Ghanaian band. Around this time he suggested that we apply the idea of licensing to records that were not UK or American. So we licensed in a Super Rail Band album and a compilation of Cadence music – later known as Zouk. We continued doing this until the mid 80s and up to then our most successful record was Yemenite Songs by Ofra Haza. In 1985 we made our first recordings in Madagascar. The first of these recordings came out in 1986 and in 1987 there were the meetings at the Empress of Russia that established the marketing campaign that was World Music.

WM oasis -Two years later after you launched Globestyle, you invited the key figures in the British world music industry for a meeting. How have you get the idea to be the first one, together with Ben to call for a meeting in the Empress of Russia?

Roger Armstrong - Originally Doug Veitch who had the Bundu Boys records out approached me about doing what is known as an advertorial in Music Week – the UK trade magazine. These consist of persuading suppliers to advertise in a special magazine supplement which will then have editorial content about the subject. My feeling was that this would last one week and be forgotten about and they were expensive to do. However Ben and I felt that we should get all of the people working together in this area to see if we could cooperate in some way. As I had a background in retail my concern was that there was no particular space in record stores for this kind of music and we found that often African records were in the reggae section or soul section and our Ofra Haza record would be in 'Indy'. So this became the theme of the Empress of Russia meetings and we built a marketing campaign around this 'rack in a record shop' that we called World Music.

WM oasis -Among the list of the music experts you have invited to the meeting, Peter Gabriel one of the central figures in world music is missing. Why?

Amanda Jones and Thomas Brooman from Womad were both there and I am sure that Peter Gabriel was kept informed by them.

WM oasis - How was the atmosphere during the meeting and were you satisfied with the name that has been chosen?

Roger Armstrong - The meetings were very productive and though there were differences of opinion we all managed a very good level of agreement with all major decisions being taken democratically. Essentially it was a meeting of adults who all recognised that they had an interest in working together to produce an end result beneficial to all of us. I was and am perfectly happy with the term.

WM oasis - World music is still confusing for many people, refused and hated by others and has made many record companies, records stores and producers happy. Do you think the name world music is still valid and compatible today after 35 years?.

Roger Armstrong - I do not have any problem with World Music and never have. I think that what happens is that as artists become more famous and cross over into the Western music world, they then object to being 'categorised' as World Music. The question is would they have succeeded had they not had such a vehicle to promote themselves through and indeed a rack in a record shop to sell their records in? I think that there is a younger generation that has grown up with the term and they accept it totally and maybe even bend it to suit their own taste, which is fine and I think a very modern idea for a term like World Music. I think that maybe some of the older people who were in at the beginning of all this resent the fact that it has been commercialised, but I feel that the artists who have made money out of it are probably not so concerned, maybe they like being commercialised. To your list of happy people I think you can add 'artists'.

WM oasis - Are the Dubliners, Carlos Santana, Fairport Convention, Gotan project, a part of world music or are outside the category?

Roger Armstrong - Ian Anderson of fRoots had a very good description of World Music – 'local music but not from here'. So on that basis Fairport Convention might be WM in Tanzania or Jakarta, but The Dubliners would not be WM in Ireland.

WM oasis - You are together with Ben Mandelson co-founder of Globestyle 1985. You have been recording, on location, different artists in Mocambique, Kenya, Zanzibar. Have your productions improved the situation for the musicians in those countries like in Mali and Senegal?

Roger Armstrong - As far as I am concerned I am running a business and my job is to make records, issue them and hopefully make money for my company and of course pay royalties to the artists. I really have no geopolitical intentions in what I do. To me the most successful records have been the ones where we have maybe not sold that many but the small amount of money earned by the artists makes a big difference in their country where it is often a low value economy.

WM oasis - Most of the English labels have concentrated their productions on East, West, and South Africa, not many have been interested in North Africa, countries with rai, gnawa, berbere and classic music. Why? Is it not interesting?

Roger Armstrong - There is an element of accessibility in all this as the labels are introducing music from different parts of the world to a European and American sensibility. But I also disagree with you and I think that there have been a lot of North African records issued and if anything it is East Africa that is not so well represented. With Globe Style Ben always tried to find / make recordings of music that was not so familiar, so we did issue some music from Kenya, Tanzania, Zanzibar and Mozambique. The tinkling koras of West Africa and the dance beats of Township music are maybe easier for the Western ear (and feet) to relate to than the lush strings and romantic sound of a Taarab Orchestra.

WM oasis - Globalization, Internet, Fusion etc. All these changes have affected positively and negatively the music and the culture from the world. Do you think the world music will survive this development?

Roger Armstrong - I think that music has the ability to change and mutate and so will survive almost anything. As the world becomes more interconnected people get the chance more and more to experience each other's culture. Before the invention of the record player, music would have moved quite slowly around the world, maybe brought across long distances by sailors and more slowly by travelling players. With the invention of the record player people could hear music from other parts of the world more easily as records could be transported from one place to another. Our modern world is not that different, the process just happens a lot faster.

Back in the 60s when labels like Nonesuch, Chant Du Monde etc were releasing what was proto World Music, it was mainly field recordings from ethnomusicologists and so by definition was less obviously influenced by wider cultures. At the time these labels would have had no interest in releasing, say, a Franco or Dr Nico record - that was pop for the local population. But the revival that became World Music in the 80s was more interested in pop and embraced music with outside influences and a modern sound. Well documented is the influence of Cuban music on West Africa, Ali Farka Touré was directly informed by the John Lee Hooker records that he heard and blended the blues with his own local styles and American Jazz had a profound influence on South African music.

WM oasis - Oum Kaltoum is one of the greatest world music singers in the Arab world. What does she represent for you, this legendary singer who still sell as much as Buena Vista, or better?

Roger Armstrong - The difference between Oum Kaltoum and Buena Vista is that she sold millions of records in the Arab world and became reasonably popular in the West but I doubt that very many of her records were sold there. Whereas Buena Vista's millions of records were sold in the West and so in some ways they are not comparable. Apart from some Pop music that is entirely geared to being commercial, most music starts off as a minority taste and then if it is lucky it 'crosses over' as they say into the wider commercial field. Buena Vista is a prime example of a cross over record and has a sound that will not alienate the wider Western audience, but Oum Kaltoum is a more specific taste and I doubt that her music would ever have received a wider acceptance in the West – not to the extent that Buena Vista did.

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