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Cross-cultural Music: the Work of Grand Union

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I'm conscious that it's an invidious position, being an artist and turning up to talk-gatherings, because you stand for what you do as an artist, either as a musician, or a painter or a writer, and no amount of talking about what you do can actually explain or tell anybody what it is you're about. You've chosen some artistic form of expression and that is what you stand for and that's what your life's work is. In my case, I can talk quite articulately about music but basically I'm a musician, a creative musician, and it's what I put on stage that's important.

It's difficult because there's a whole range of things that we do, although they are unified by two or three central factors which I'll touch on. I'm going to show a video to give you some idea of what Grand Union is about, and what I'm about as a creative musician. We're talking about eighteen or nineteen years of fairly continuous work. The company itself is basically cross-cultural. At its core, it's not multicultural, it's not world music, or any of those things. We are what we are, *sui generis*. We define our own terms to a great extent. The musicians are from all over the world. They mostly live in London, though not exclusively: there are musicians in

Manchester and Bradford and Leeds and Newcastle who we regularly work with, and increasingly musicians from abroad on a fairly regular basis. They're all professional. They come from a wide variety of different musical cultures. They fall into roughly three groups, but this oversimplifies. There are jazz musicians, both black and white, in equal number. And there are women throughout the company, in about one third to two-thirds proportion. They're not dominant in the second group particularly either, which is more or less equally split between men and women, which is the singers, who tend to come, again, from a wide range of different musical cultures. You'll see in this particular film a lot of the Grand Union regulars: a Chinese opera singer, a Bangladeshi folk and Indian-classical singer, a Turkish folk singer, as well as Brenda who is a Caribbean jazz and gospel singer, a Chilean male singer, and a folk-rock singer from the north-east, so there's a huge variety. And then finally, the third group are the musicians who play largely non-western instruments: sitar-players, people who play Andean folk instruments, drummers from Africa, steel-pan players, and so on. What characterises these musicians is that they are fascinated by the business of music and musicians. And this is where I distance myself, sometimes over-defensively, from musicology or ethnic music. What interests me is not so much the music of different cultures, but its creative possibilities as expressed through the musicians themselves. And what's fantastic for me, in London but in all the great cities in the country and, as it happens, in an increasing number of rural areas, is the number of very fine musicians there are, who come from all over Asia, South America, the Caribbean, Africa.

So there are fantastic players and representatives of different musical cultures, but why they are in Grand Union is that they want to share, stylistically they want to share, they want to learn, to work with other musicians. One of the founder members

of Grand Union who came from Chile in the early eighties said, “I may never go home. I’m in London. I have this background in Chilean folk music. I play all these instruments. My job is not to go round and preserve in a rather sentimental way the culture of my own country, but to make a contribution to the culture of Britain today, and to find some way of expressing my identity and expressing the British identity through my music.” And that’s a very subtle but important aspect of Grand Union’s music.

It’s the musicians who count. They can all improvise. They learn in different kinds of improvisation. And I learn probably more than they do, from my association with them, about different kinds of music, and am inspired by different melodic forms, harmonies, rhythms, and so on. They’re all multi-instrumentalists, so everybody sings or plays percussion as well. So you have this tremendous variety of things happening. The other thing they want to share is to make some contribution, or make some dialogue, with other people who are not professional musicians. So we do a lot of workshop projects, we do a lot of participatory work. We work with cultural groups who have their own identity, whether they’re a Bangladeshi folk ensemble, for example, or people attending samba or African percussion classes, and so on. So you have these discrete groups, working with young people, right down to the age of four or five. So the work falls into a number of strands, but these core musicians, about thirty of them regularly working on Grand Union projects, are common to all of them. This fuels the art, and it fuels what we are trying to do.