

Out of Africa

ALMOST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER THE RELEASE OF PAUL SIMON'S GRACELAND, AN ALBUM BOTH SUCCESSFUL AND CONTROVERSIAL, TOM HAWKING CONSIDERS THE INFLUENCE OF WORLD MUSIC ON THE POP CHARTS.

PAUL SIMON WAS down on his luck in 1985. His marriage had fallen apart, his career was going nowhere and Art Garfunkel wasn't speaking to him, mainly because Simon had expunged Garfunkel's vocals from their last record and released it as a solo album. That album, *Hearts and Bones*, sold badly, leaving Simon with a tarnished reputation and an irate collaborator.

Imagine his delight, then, when he first heard the joyous sounds of South African *mbaqanga* music, a lively style that originated in the townships around Johannesburg. Simon discovered the genre via a cassette given to him by a friend. A light bulb went off above his balding pate, and within a year he'd decamped to Johannesburg to record with local musicians.

The result, *Graceland* (1986), wasn't the first album to marry Western and non-Western musical styles, but it was the first to trouble the charts, eventually reaching number one. It dragged Simon's career out of the gutter, and, along with Peter Gabriel's work in roughly the same period, introduced the MTV generation to world music.

As well as being successful, *Graceland* was controversial. There was a legal battle with Tex-Mex band Los Lobos, who played on one of the songs but didn't receive a songwriting credit. Also, there was the fact that Simon had recorded in South Africa while the country was still under a United Nations cultural embargo due to its government's apartheid policy.

And then there were the whisperings that the whole thing was exploitative: that Simon had swiped the sounds of Africa and passed them off as his own. When he performed at Howard University in Washington DC, he was met with protests and accusations of cultural larceny.

Whatever your thoughts on *Graceland*, and world music in general, it's the last accusation that continues to resonate today; the concept of Western musicians taking on styles from beyond their cultural sphere remains contentious.

Recently, there's been a similar furore over US band Vampire Weekend, whose second album, *Contra*, debuted at number one on the *Billboard* chart in January. Vampire Weekend make no bones about the fact that they love African music – frontman Ezra Koenig has dubbed the band's sound "upper West Side Soweto" – and both their albums have been exuberantly cross-cultural; full of African and Jamaican sounds.

Some criticisms of Vampire Weekend are a latter-day echo of the whisperings about *Graceland* – the *New York Times*, for instance, accused them of "cultural tourism". The common thread is that four white kids from Ivy League universities shouldn't be playing African music. They just *shouldn't*.

But why not? No one complains when African musicians take on Western influences. No one accuses musicians like Senegalese desert blues maestro Baaba Maal or Indian slide-guitarist Debashish Bhattacharya – both of whom bring Western influences to indigenous music – of cultural tourism.

The idea that poor black artists can only look on as rapacious whites plunder their musical heritage is patronising for all concerned. This view ignores the fact that genuine cultural interchange has to be, well, an interchange, and that it has been going on for centuries.

Mbaqanga music evolved as a South African take on jazz, melding big-band instrumentation with traditional rhythms and vocals. Jazz, of course, evolved in the US, but its roots are in the West African sounds that came to the New World on slave ships.

The exploitation argument also ignores the fact that such interaction can be massively beneficial. In India, for example, fusion music – the combination of Indian classical music with Western instrumentation and production techniques – has exploded in recent years, helping to keep Indian classical music fresh. Likewise, *Graceland* revitalised *mbaqanga* music, which had been flagging in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s.

Clearly, the balance has often been unequal. But then, as anyone who has worked in the music industry can tell you, such exploitation isn't inherently tied to race or culture. It's about power, and the balance of power these days isn't nearly as uneven as it used to be. Non-Western musicians can exist on a commercial footing with their Western counterparts. Look at Pakistani Sufi-music legend Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who in his last years received global appreciation. Or, for a more prosaic example, look at Pussycat Dolls covering AR Rahman's theme for *Slumdog Millionaire*, 'Jai Ho'. Who would have thought a Hindi film song would hit number one in Australia?

Graceland and Vampire Weekend's output help to facilitate a two-way exchange. A Western kid discovering Fela Kuti by listening to *Contra* has to be a good thing. If such discoveries happen enough, then maybe the whole us-and-them concept of world music will go the same way as apartheid. Simon and his contemporaries helped to broaden the West's musical horizons. We should celebrate the fact that a new generation of musicians is, once more, looking to the world for inspiration.

Tom Hawking is a freelance writer, and former editor of Inpress magazine in Melbourne and RAVE magazine in India. Vampire Weekend are touring Australia throughout May; for dates visit frontiertouring.com.au. Contra is out now.



TOP: PAUL SIMON PERFORMS 'UNDER AFRICAN SKIES' AT BAM ON 9 APRIL 2008 IN NEW YORK CITY. PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY SUSSMAN/GETTY IMAGES
BELOW: US BAND VAMPIRE WEEKEND. ILLUSTRATION BY YUKIYOSHI KAMIMURA