



Vive La Music!

The stars of Vive La World! make their case for Franco-American friendship

Hélène Gherman, one of the founders of the Vive La World! tour, had her doubts. Would American audiences embrace a festival whose raison d'être is to showcase the new music emanating from France in the United States and Canada, and which is sponsored and promoted with the help of the French government?

It wasn't exactly an easy call to make. Even in the best of times, that broad (and somewhat of a hodgepodge) genre labeled "world music" seems to be little more than a college-radio footnote, or an airwave delicacy for those fed up with the mainstream offerings churned out by the U.S. recording industry. Things had gotten better in recent years, though. For example thanks to British rocker Sting's "Desert Rose," Americans discovered the chants of Algerian singer Cheb Mami, who was originally brought to these shores for the debut edition of Vive La World!

But then came the war against Iraq and, leading right up to it, a frantic anti-American sentiment in Europe that was especially pungent in France and Germany. Over here, "zee French" stereotypes became late-night TV fodder; French fries and other gastronomic items were renamed "freedom"; and the French wine and tourism industries reportedly took a beating. In comparison, the Germans, who only had to contend with a TV miniseries on Adolf Hitler, got off the hook.

So it was no surprise then when Gherman, who organized the first Vive La World! concert at Central Park in New York City with colleague Bill Bragin in 1997, hesitated on another go-round. But in the end, the French music producer chose to live by that most American of entertainment aphorisms: "The show must go on."

"Because of the war, I had doubts about this year's edition," Gherman recounts from her Paris office. "I contacted all our partners, and saw no reason to cancel the tour. On the contrary, we needed the exposure in the United States, and it would've been a pity to back out. It was a way ... to talk things over. Music is always a good ambassador for a lot of things."

And so a caravan of Francophone musicians will be making their way across North America once again. Vive La World!, which kicks off in Quebec City, Canada, on July 9, will hit Montreal; Detroit; Miami; Vancouver; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; and New York City, where it will come to a close on July 20.

The Miami stop is an example of the collaboration that its organizers and participants wish Presidents George Bush and Jacques Chirac would engage in. Co-sponsored by the Rhythm Foundation, the show receives support not only from various South Florida entities such as the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs, but from the French Consulate in Miami.

"The idea of this tour is so beautiful and so relevant to Miami," says Laura Quinlan, director of the Rhythm Foundation since 1993. For Quinlan, who helped bring the festival here last year, if ever there was a moment when an event such as Vive La World! was important, this is it. "We are in a time when so much of the world is closing borders, fearing immigration but, at this point, at least in France and in Miami, you can't fear it, because it's already happened. Immigration is part of our reality," she reflects. "This festival is just a way to celebrate the really positive aspects of diverse cultures."



When asked if she worries American audiences might stay away from Vive La World! because of the French government's stance on the Iraq war, Gherman offers, "Our government's position is one supported by a lot of people here, and by a lot of people in your country." She adds, "People will listen to good music, enjoy a good concert, and appreciate good art, outside of political considerations.

"There's this outdated image of France, of the beret and the baguette," says Gherman good-humoredly. "But we are just like you guys. Today's [French] music is not by accordion. It is a mix of music from all over the world, with a Parisian touch." In other words, this is not your father's Edith Piaf or Charles Aznavour (or heck, not even Johnny Hallyday).

In France, world music is not as strictly categorized as it is in the U.S. Because it often includes jazz, techno, dance, electronica, and pop, the music can fit into different radio formats. For example this year's Vive La World!'s headliner, Belgian-born, London-based, Middle Eastern diva Natacha Atlas, walks a very fine line between what could be considered world music and pop.

Although she's not from France, Atlas is a huge star on the world-music circuit (she had a top ten hit on French radio with her Arabic-flavored version of Françoise Hardy's "Mon Amie La Rose"); thus, she is a real coup for the promoters. Atlas first came to prominence as lead singer (and belly dancer!) of the London-based multicultural collective Transglobal Underground in the early Nineties. With its mix of electronica, hip-hop, funk, and dub with Indian, African, and Middle Eastern sounds, the group became a role model for today's world-music artists. Lately she has been devoting more time to her own projects while collaborating with other artists like the Indigo Girls, Jean-Michel Jarre, and Jonathan Demme (for the soundtrack to *The Truth About Charlie*).

Scheduled to join Atlas are DuOud, a duo of Parisian musicians: Tunisian-born jazz player and sound engineer Jean-Pierre Smadja and Algerian-born Mehdi Haddab, the latter formerly with global-meets-electronic trio Ekova. Together they play the oud (North African lute) and combine their African heritage with jazz grooves, trip-hop, and electronic sounds.

Then there's So Kalmery, a songwriter/bandleader from the former Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo, who settled in Paris in 1992. Kalmery's poetic music, brimming with African history and culture, nourishes itself with blues, soukous, gospel, rumba, reggae, and South African jive, among other musical styles.

Rounding out the repertoire is Electro Bamako, the cyber-cultural collaboration of French electronica producer Marc Minelli and traditional Malian singer Mamani Keita, who began her career as a back-up vocalist for world-music pioneer and identically surnamed Salif Keita.

Theirs are the sounds of today's France, the France that nationalist right-wing politicians such as Jean-Marie Le Pen abhor: a multicultural, polyglot, pan-everything social experiment of Gallic audacity from which a new music has emerged to find increasing success.