Music(ology) Needs A Context – Reinterpreting Goa Trance

by Yellow Peril/Sebastian Chan1998.

While much recent work in musicology has at least acknowledged som eof the complex extra-textual elements of contempoary music (see for instance, the writings of Susan McClary and Robert Walser), there is still a strong tendency, particularly in the study of certain musical genres, for musiocological analyses to reduce often vibrant musics to lifeless corpses fit for autopsy. This tendency produces analyses whcih are, at best, aprtial and often significantly skewed (and thereby misleading). As this short 'riff' will arguie, Cole and Hannan's study Goa Trance (Perfect Beat vol 3, no 3, July 1997) illustrates precisely these limitations with regard to its notional subject of analysis, the phenomenon of Goa trance music, its associated subcultural milieu, its habitues and its myths of origin.

Firstly, Cole And Hannan neglect the contexts in which the music they dissect is produced, circulated, consumed and given meaning to. Second, they fail to critically analyse their primary sources in a study that seems to take the words of local deejays, musicians, Internet sources (and the totally unrelated and subculturally inappropriate 'glossy' music magazine J-Mag), at face value[1]. Thirdly their musicological dissection of 'Goa trance', draws on only mass market compilations as source material which is extremely unrepresentative of the music culture as a whole. On the other-hand, their brief discussion of the effects of specific technologies such as particular sequencing software on the musical styles and sounds produced is a highlight of their paper. This crucial illuminating point offers much for researchers travelling through and mapping the terrains of high-technology musical styles, in particular drum'n'bass/jungle in which the prevailing ideology of musicians is one of 'limitless sonic exploration'.

Techno and its related genres continue to revolve around the relatively small circulation of 12" vinyl releases consumed, in the main by deejays, who then relay their sounds to an audience in a a variety of listening/dancing environments. In the Goa scene, as Cole and Hannam (1997:8) point out, vinyl is replaced as medium-of-choice by DAT (digital audio tape) for reasons of durability and portability. As DJs make particular tracks familiar a broader release is made with the re-issue of tracks being targeted at event-goers more than deejays. The delay between initial limited release and wider mass market release can be anywhere from three months to three years. Reading the subcultural UK press (such as DJ, Mixmag, Jockey Slut or Muzik), a researcher in Australia would be tempted to assume that these tracks are indeed 'new' and 'current' but in the vast majority of cases these reviewed tracks are themselves the re-issues[2].

Being located so far from the subcultural source, techno-related music rarely reaches local Australian deejays in anything but its mass market re-issued form and white labels and dubplates are highly sought after commodities amongst certain categories of deejay. Because music also circulates in global network of interlinked scenes (Straw, 1991) through which also circulate the cultural meanings that are given to the music by the subcultural listeners, the situation for the researcher is even more complex. Through their consumption and (re-)production of subcultural knowledge and the formation of distinct local subcultural discourses local Australian listeners already know the language with which to 'interpret' Goa trance, Detroit techno or Bristol trip hop. With this knowledge, too, comes the desire to (re-)create specific 'authentic' listening environments be they forests, sumptuous clubs or warehouses. These 'discourses of hearing' are the subject of my own research and need only be acknowledged briefly here. The 'local' interpretations of sounds are themselves subject to a multiplicity of local factors including the impact and presence of other niche musical styles, availability of local venues suitable to reproduce the 'authentic' listening environments of the parent culture, and the class, gender and racial mix of the potential 'diasporic' listeners. This latter point is particularly important when rave, in the UK a fairly racially-mixed working class subculture, becomes transported to the East Coast of Australia where it was adopted by largely middle-class, White youths.

Focussing specifically on Goa trance, Cole and Hannam (1997) claim that it evolved out of a long history of parties in the former Portuguese colony that have taken place since the 1960s. They argue that it is not

until the early 1990s that a specific 'style' begins to emerge. Whilst it is tempting to attribute this style to a particular place both for the researcher and also the subculture's own historians, it is important to see these emergences or points of intensity as occurring in a broader global cultural arena. Thus the stylistic shift in the music played at the parties in Goa needs to be read, for a start, in the context of the massively expanding German trance scene and the dominance of 'hardcore' breakbeat rave music in the UK. As German trance labels, in particular, MFS, Harthouse, Gaia, Fax and Trigger boomed in Europe their importation into the UK coincided with the emergence of the Spiral Tribe and the 'turned on' travellers. This coalition began to form into a splinter 'crusty rave' scene which is innexorably linked to the Goa trance scene especially in the way it has been received in Australia. Indeed as young hippies/squat punks became part of the rave scene through the 'techno-isation' of the travellers in England[3], the squatters in Berlin, and the North Coast ferals in Australia (all of which predate both 'rave' and Goa trance), mythic journeys recommenced along the old [backpacker] routes taking with them the music and ideas of rave and techno. This 'traveller spread' has been only as far as the more Westernised tourist destinations of the 'East', and the traffic in ideas, mediated by, ironically, a fusion of Eastern (Japanese) and Western electronic music technology[4]. Here It is also important to note the construction in the British subcultural press of Goa as a 'alternative' tourist destination to the 'traditional' British summer dance resorts of Ibiza, both key mythologies in the overarching histories of 'rave'.

Further one cannot remove the predominantly White construction of Goa trance as an 'alternative' music culture from the local British explosion of Bhangra and later what Talvin Singh has termed 'tablatronics' in the South Asian migrant communities[5]. And it is here that it becomes useful to draw in the backgrounds of the artists involved in the 'Goa scene'.

With few exceptions the musicians involved in producing psychedelic trance, Goa trance or supposed 'ritual beats', are overwhelmingly White, well-educated and middle-class – and whose 'radical music' is importantly linked to an involvement in a sort of 'radical politics'[6]. Psychedelic trance culture can, in many ways, only be separated from the White excesses of the psychedelic culture of the Sixties by its technologically-different music. Even regardless of the resultant musical output, local Goan musicians are rarely, if at all, involved in the production of Goa trance, and the local Goan population, is, as one prominent member of the UK Goa scene themselves states, involved only on the periphery of the parties as either the police trying to shut them down or accepting bribes, or as marginal 'exotica'. The music recorded and released as psychedelic trance itself is written from a distance, recorded in studios initially in Europe and the UK, and more recently Tokyo, Israel and Australia, drawing on the wider British social context in which India is remembered and mythologised in both 'crusty' and mainstream culture. This throws into doubt Cole and Hannam's claim that the Goa beach party scene was truly 'multicultural'.

The appropriation of sounds through the use of sampling, the appropriation of contrived spiritual imagery, in particular the 'Om' symbol and Hindu deities particularly Shiva, pale beside a the more direct forms of cultural imperialism;

> "the parties have been an invasion' says Mark Allen, 'but it is one that has been welcomed by the local people. Over the years I have got to know a lot of families. A lot of children have grown up selling ice-pops and water bottles at parties. They've been dancing with us from five years old and now it is a part of their culture' 'We respect the traditional way, so we couldn't make a party in a Holy Place', says Tsuyoshi Suzuki, DJ and man behind Prana, 'but it can work in Goa, which is much more Westernised than the rest of India'" [7]

By choosing to focus as source material on local Australian artists Cole and Hannam miss these crucial global contexts in which local artists tend to feel they exist outside of. The North Coast NSW parties that Cole and Hannam draw upon as source material for their analyses of DJ sets are themselves a local fusion of traveller mythologies and more urban, specifically Sydney and Melbourne scene fallout which has brought many non-psychedelic trance records into DJ sets since 1994 further highlighting the futility of academically 'cordoning off' niche styles for analysis. For audiences too, it is more the combination of venue, music and people that creates the meanings of the musical structures rather than the musical structure itself – a good example of this being the use of 'psychedelic trance' at the early Vibe Tribe parties in Sydney Park and notably on a beach in Little Congwong Bay in urban La Perouse.

To conclude it seems important to see Cole and Hannam's article as an example of how musicology and

overly enthusiastic ethnography produce skewed results. Rather than bring to the fore the issues of communality amongst dancers, or philosophies of liberation through dance, the musicological approach ignores these positives by ignoring the social contexts of consumption. Further it highlights the difficulties in writing about niche styles that are so obviously involved in much more complex global flows of culture and ideological topographies.

Yellow Peril

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FOOTNOTES

1. This last source is particularly interesting as it raises the questions of editorial autonomy in the music press – the superficial article on Goa trance that Cole and Hannam quote being triggered by the mass market chart success of Robert Miles' Children single.

2. This is complicated even further by the proliferation in the UK of 'dubplates' in the jungle/drum'n'bass scene. Dubplates are quickly pressed up and very impermanent recordings made by artists at very low cost exclusively for deejays. Dubplates have a lifespan of about fifteen 'plays' after which they begin to disintegrate and are used as artists as a means to test out new tracks and ideas in event environments. As many UK artists I have interviewed argue, the jungle/drum'n'bass scene relies on this highly disposable recording technology to be in a state of continual change. Because of this the majority of big name jungle/drum'n'bass deejays play an increasingly large r proportion of their tracks from dubplates expanding the time-lag between initial club/event play and even white label release. This has the effect of continually relegating mass market 'compilation' releases favoured by major UK labels to the subcultural dustbin but, more negatively, keeping global scenes/markets who rely on these compilations and major releases as their deejays' source material many months behind the 'latest trends' in the UK.

3. See especially Collin, M., 1997, Altered State – The Story Of Ecstasy Culture And Acid House, Serpent's Tail, London.

4. See Theberge, P, 1997, Any Sound You Can Imagine – Making Music, Consuming Technology, Wesleyan University Press, Hanover for an excellent examination of the inter-relation of musicians and technology and the resultant ideological standpoints. Theberge, by drawing on specialist musician magazines manages to dislocate music technology from its imagined 'ideology-free' status.

5. This phenomenon and the White reaction to it are well documented in Sharma, S., Hutnyk, J. & Sharma, A. (eds), 1996, Disorienting Rhythms – The Politics Of The New Asian Dance Music, Zed Books, London.

6. See Gartside, P., 1997, "Bypassing Politics? – The Contradictions of DIY Culture" in Soundings, Issue 6, Summer 1997.

7. Quoted in Champion, S., 1996, "Goa" in Return To The Source (ed Marcus, T.) Return To The Source Records UK, RTTS1, pg48. Return To The Source Records is a spin-off from the RTTS club that was London's prime Goa trance club faithfully recreating the environments of Goa which for subcultural purists had been 'ruined' by the over-exposure the music and subculture by the British press.