

The New Criterion

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The end of world music

by Timothy Jacobson

End times? Might be: the Recording Academy Awards Department of the Grammy Awards has declared the end of “world music.”

My son, who attended a college famed for its music program, first brought this term to my attention a quarter-century ago. Reciting to me the semester’s course choices, he listed a class in “world music” but stumbled when I asked him what this constituted. My son was and is a thoughtful fellow who seldom stumbles over anything. That day, however, he replied weakly with something along the lines of “Y’know—all that global stuff so they can say it’s not all Bach anymore.” I replied with some sneer about “drums and such,” which one was beginning to hear in churches back then, and we left it at that. Gratifyingly, he persisted with Bach. In blurting out that word “global,” however, he was apparently twenty-five years ahead of the game.

The Academy’s decision to quit the “world” and go “global” transpired over the summer. With all “non-essential” (for once, perhaps, an accurate designation) laborers at home, the denizens of the music world seem to have had plenty of time on their hands. “Artists, ethnomusicologists and linguists from around the world,” we can infer from the news release, have sniffed an opportunity somehow missed before now. “Best World Music Album” has been a Grammy category since 1992, and the meaning always seemed clear enough: non-Western material. *The Guardian* reports that the term “world music” first came to the industry in 1987 in the UK to help market non-Western artists, though its dimmer origins reach back, no surprise, to American academia in the 1960s. Thirty years ago, the deconstruction of Western culture still had some ways to go, and the phrase, as with so many others that have wafted from the rarefied corridors of academe in recent years, slipped into polite usage with little fuss. Today, when fuss is everything, it falls before its somehow more-progressive better: “global music.” The meaning is now spelled out, but in keeping with the critical theory playbook it is spelled out not in terms of what global music actually is, and thus what it defends, but for what it signifies against, to which all in opposition must now submit. It is against colonialism.

Now, I admit to an old-fashioned notion of the meaning of colonialism, but the last time I checked, the last Western colonizers (the Portuguese) exited that business in the 1970s. One dizzies trying to

follow this line of thinking, if we can call it thinking, but it is amusing to watch the cat chasing its own tail.

From the top, it's a "mindset" change, you see. The Academy must update its label "to reflect a more appropriate categorization that seeks to engage and celebrate the current scope of music from around the world." Why use one cliché if half a dozen will do? Therefore, we need to move "toward a more relevant, modern and inclusive term." And so the decision "was made" (in the eternal passive of bureaucratic prose) to go global. Next, the bogeyman: "the change symbolizes a departure from the connotations of colonialism, folk, and 'non-American' that the former term embodied while adapting to current listening trends and cultural evolution among the diverse communities it may represent." Quick to pick up on the story, *The Guardian*, *Billboard*, and *Variety* all homed in on that colonialism bit. "Global Music will continue to provide a home for influential music from all parts of the globe yet bringing with it a fresh perspective fueled by the authenticity, diversity and direct inclusion into our process." Not to mention how much safer the governors of the Academy must feel as they head into Grammy season.

"Global" is an adjective I first discovered in widening use in the business world in the 1980s and 1990s. The substantive, "globalization," was then quickly becoming the new orthodoxy among right-thinking Harvard Business School-type managers in big Western companies that formerly had maintained mere "international" outposts and operations. In the old way of doing business, headquarters was always "at home," but lucrative trade was done "abroad" (now another erased term), usually supervised by expats. Then, as fashions changed, more and more "locals" started to run things, but of course still reported back to headquarters. This former arrangement now seems quaint, and its analogue in the world of music management and marketing (i.e., any hint at "privileging" of the Western canon) is now declared anathema. Transgress at your own peril.

It is worth noting that the first great age of globalization—late-Victorian times up to the First World War, the age of telegraphy, steamships, and relatively free trade—was also the age when the major institutions of high culture, including musical ones, and virtually all of them Western, were invented and financed. Sound recording was still in its infancy, but that infant industry was vigorous and fast-growing and soon would become a strapping adult. These same highly intentional institutions and businesses prospered and multiplied in the twenty-year American Imperium following the Second World War, which, it turned out, was the last period of unapologetic Western cultural self-confidence. The first Grammy ceremony was held in 1959, the very zenith of the era. Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and the Kingston Trio all were winners.

I am no music critic and have no dog in these word fights. World music? Perfectly happy to see it go. Global music? Seems a pointless dodge. Should we, going back to business for a moment, convert, say, "world" trade statistics into "global" ones? Would it make any difference?

I will offer this challenge however to the Academy, if it could but extricate itself from this morass of its own making. Find ways to apply your great prestige and influence to the urgent work of this moment: to get the show rolling again, to open the concert hall doors, to call up the performers, to

hire the producers and engineers, to reassure the audiences. Simply, ladies and gentlemen, to make music.

Timothy Jacobson (1948–2024) wrote from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia.