

Interview

Mary Farquharson

Journalist, Co-founder world circuit & Discos Corazon

Anne Hunt and Mary Farquharson were running a touring organisation called Arts Worldwide which brought musicians to the U.K. who were popular locally but little known to a wider public. This work led her with Anne Hunt and Joe Boyd to create the label world circuit 1986. Mary is living in Mexico where she started with her husband Eduardo Llerenas, the record label Discos dedicated to finding and recording the best traditional music from Mexico, the Caribbean and Africa. Mary was one of the few other music industry leaders to coin the term world music in order to give this music a name for marketing purposes in 1987.

WM oasis: How have you meet Ann Hunt and how did you get the idea to start the World circuit art as a record label, when you were both completely inexperienced in running a record label?

M.F - I had been working as a journalist in Venezuela. When I returned to London I saw a small ad in The Guardian to work as an arts promoter with Arts Worldwide. I really liked Anne and her project so I decided to join. After two years, Anne was tired of having to seek public funding for the touring circuit of non-western artists that she had set up, so she decided that we'd start a record label in order to finance the project independently. I thought she was completely crazy since the concerts were wonderful but none very well attended at that time so I didn't see how the record label would survive. We didn't have specific experience but she is very smart and I think that the essence of the label was her knowledge and love of the music, which was always her main motivation.

WM oasis: Nick Gold have joined the label, developed it and bought it. Do you regret that you and Ann sold the label that has become one of the best sellers in the world?

M.F - I can only speak for myself. I don't regret it at all. Nick developed the project, as you mentioned, and he deserves to get the credit for what he did.

WM Oasis - Thanks to your and Ann's long work for the world circuit, the result later was the Buena Vista social records. How does it feel to not be a part of this planetary success and the money that you probably would have use to organisations like the Asamblea de Barrios?

M.F - Again, my experience is different. Through the Mexican label that I set up with Eduardo Llerenas in 1992, Discos Corason, I have kept in contact with Buena Vista and other World Circuit projects. We have distributed the catalogue in Mexico since 1997 and one of the Buena Vista artists, Eliades Ochoa, was a Corason artist who Nick first heard on our label.

WM Oasis - 1987, you were in the group at the Empress of Russia, how was the meeting? The majority of the group voted for the name world music. Did you agree to the choice of the name world music?

M.F - Yes, I was present. Ben Mandelson was very sharp but the rest of us didn't fully relate to the danger of being eradicated following the success of Graceland's and the resulting interest of the majors in styles of music that had until then been ignored. Certainly no one expected the dramatic growth of interest in what we used to call 'non-western music' following Ben's initiative. Although we didn't choose a good name, the idea of bringing together radio producers, festival and concert organisers and small labels under a semi-umbrella was very good.

WM oasis: Nick Gold has said in an interview about the chosen name world music
What do
think about that? Do you think the name world music is representative for all the music in the world?

M.F - I think the term is very flawed. Perhaps if we'd anticipated the growth of a 'genre' as a result of that meeting, we might have chosen a different name but the idea was specifically to find a way of bringing together the work of a disparate group of people who, for different reasons, each had a deep interest in one or more styles of non-western music. It was coined to solve a problem at a specific time (the success of Graceland's) in a specific place (London); I honestly don't think anyone expected that it would have such an important impact on musical tastes all over the world.

WM oasis: Have you any contact with Ann Hunt & the group of the Empress of Russia and who were the important persons behind the start and the success of the meeting?

M.F - I am in close touch with Lucy Duran and Nick Gold; I also see and speak with Ben and Ian Anderson. I have been in touch with Anne but I think that she moved further away from this music than the rest of us.

WM oasis: Is there a difference in your view of world music definition from the time you were in London and now when you are living in Mexico?

M.F - I suppose I am even more aware of the contradictions and paradoxes of this term. I do regret that we didn't think of some other name because the contradictions of this name are given too much importance. People don't obsess about the term 'jazz' or 'blues' and seem to accept much more easily the evolution of these musical genres.

Are Mexican musicians concerned by the concept, do they feel that they belong to the English concept World music or Musica Del Mundo?

M.F - Yes, there is a lot of interest here in world music and the usual confusion about what it means. Traditional bands, especially the more sophisticated ones, want to be included under this umbrella, as do fusion bands. Lila Downs and Los de Abajo became successful international acts when WOMEX etc., decided they were world music bands. Today world music in Mexico is strong, especially in the fusion of Mexican music with gypsy styles, African and other Latin American styles. There are world music festivals and radio shows. The music included in these tends to be what other people might call 'roots music.'

WM oasis : Globalization, Internet, fusion etc. All these changes have affected positively and negatively the music and the culture from the world. How is the situation in Mexico?

M.F - Positive and negative. Mexico City is a very musical and a very sophisticated city. There is a big Balkan scene here, electronic music is huge, the dance halls are not so popular now but cumbia is back on the upswing. All the big international bands play here, Spotify has taken off big time, i-tunes was doing well but has tapered off now. The most traditional bands are very big on cell-phone culture, digital radio is growing. Mexico tends to adapt to what hits without losing the essence of the local culture which is very resistant!

Mexico: 2014-07- 28
