

Interview

Dan Storper - Founder Putumayo

Storper was deeply impacted by world music when he happened upon a live concert of Kotoja, an African band lead by Babá Ben Okulolo in the San Francisco Bay area 1991 and became involved with this compelling music, putting together Putumayo's first two world music collections in 1993. That same year, Storper was joined by his long-time friend Michael Kraus, who helped him launch the label.

WM Oasis - As someone born and living in America, far away from Europe and Africa, how close were you to the African music in the 80's when Fela, Salif Keita, Mory Kanté was touring everywhere in Europe ?

Dan Sorper - Frankly, I was pretty disconnected from the world music scene in the 1980's when I was running my retail international clothing and handicraft stores. I had loved world music songs by Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masakela, Sergio Mendes in the 60s but lost touch. I really got reconnected in 1991 when I heard an African band named Kotoja performing in Golden Gate Park. It was then that I started checking out what African music was available for sale in stores and began to meet world music fans and going to concerts to see African artists who were touring America like Thomas Mapfumo and Youssou N'Dour.

WM Oasis - As owner of worldmusic oasis record store, I have to say that the success of your records here in Sweden has to thank the special illustrated covers that captured the eyes of the customers before the music. Have you heard this remark before?

Dan Sorper - Yes, we have. I did feel that, as a designer, folk art collector and retailer, presentation was important and I felt that Nicola Heindl's illustrations would provide an appealing visual representation of the music. I agree that that made a big difference in gaining attention for our CDs.

WM Oasis - Your music has been launched a few years after that the term world music was coined; which facilitated your records to quickly find a place at the established market. Do you think that the term world music have helped your label to integrate quickly in the world music family?

Dan Sorper - I do although, as someone who also has presented folk, jazz, blues and more American genres, it has had a downside in people pigeon-holing us as purely a world music provider. So, even though our name is Putumayo World Music, we started telling people we offered international music.

WM Oasis - Your label is known as Putumayo **World Music**, helping with the term that was launched in 1987. This term has been subject of many discussions, what are the reasons according to you of all this debating?

Dan Sorper - I like the easy way “world music” rolls off the tongue but believe that there are many genres called world music that really don’t fit. It’s hard for me to call French pop which is displayed in “world music” sections of stores as “world music.” Similarly, when you go on websites like Amazon, you’ll see rock groups from Ireland like U2 showing up in the world music offerings simply because they’re from Ireland. I think it’s better and more accurate to break it down into Latin music (and musical genres like Salsa, Merengue, etc.), African music and its countries and/or genres.

WM Oasis - Many African artists refused to be included in in the box of world music, feeling that they are underestimated, marginalized and their music have nothing to do in that box created by English people. How do you understand their way to think?

Dan Sorper - On the whole, I think it’s probably benefited African artists but I do understand their perspective.

WM Oasis - With Latin American artists and producers have contributed to the success of world music in the United States?

Dan Sorper - Well, it’s really an odd situation in that there is a big Latin music market in the US which seems to target so many different audiences. For the dancing population, artists like Juan Luis Guerra, Oscar D’Leon and many others have been very important. If you consider Brazilian music as part of the Latin music world, then Jobim in the early days and Bebel Gilberto in recent days have been very important. But, the biggest impacts probably have come from Buena Vista Social Club on the traditional side to Ricky Martin, Gloria Estefan and Shakira on the pop side.

WM Oasis - The English people define world music as It’s just a label on a box. Nobody thought of defining it or pretending there was such a genre: it was just to be a box of convenience, like jazz, classical or rock. How can you define world music from your side?

Dan Sorper - A convenient, but oversimplified, way to merchandise CDs in record stores and online.

WM Oasis - Many people have given the credit of the world music expansion to Paul Simon, David Byrne, Ry Cooder and Peter Gabriel, while others think that the Beatles with Ravi Shankar, Rolling Stones with the Jajouka, Don Cherry, Miriam Makeba are the ones that should get the merit and the prestige for their contribution to have succeed to introduce the world music to the western audience. Are there other people we need to thank?

Dan Sorper - I think all the ones you name have been important. But, there have been many others as well from the festival and concert presenters throughout America who have promoted world music, the public/community radio stations and National Public Radio who have highlighted them as well as syndicated radio shows like Afropop Worldwide and the Putumayo World Music Hour, to important artists like Youssou N’Dour, Hugh Masakela, Habib Koite, Cesaria Evora, Bebel Gilberto, Pink Martini and the small but important group of world music record label owners and employees who have actively promoted it over the past few decades.