

The New York Times

September 30, 2006

MUSIC REVIEW | CULTUREMUSICAL CLUB OF ZANZIBAR

Riches Borne by the Musical Trade Winds

By JON PARELES

Culture Musical Club of Zanzibar sounded like two different bands in its two sets at Makor on Wednesday night, a rare chance for New Yorkers to hear the East African music called taarab. The first set was elegant pop, rooted mostly in Arabic music but with hints of India and the Caribbean. And the second was unmistakably African: frisky, nonstop, propulsive dance music.

Culture Musical Club isn't a revivalist project like the Buena Vista Social Club. The band is named after the club in Stone Town in Zanzibar, where it rehearses. Zanzibar, a spice island in the Indian Ocean off the coast of Tanzania, has long been on international trade routes, and its music looks west to mainland Africa, north to the Middle East and east to the Indian subcontinent.

For the first set, Culture Musical Club used a lineup something like an Egyptian pop orchestra: oud, qanun (zither), accordion, three violins, dumbek (hand drum), rika (tambourine) and bass accompanying three lead singers: two women (Rukia Ramadhani and Amina) and a man, Makame Faki, all singing love songs.

The women sang in long, gentle lines, with the gliding ornaments of Indian music, answered by the fluttery phrases of oud and qanun. Mr. Faki was more forceful, with his voice sometimes taking on the sharp, soaring tone of African traditional singers; he got the audience clapping along. And as the early set picked up momentum, there was also a lilt in the music, with hints of bolero and cha-cha, or perhaps their African antecedents. The music was finely detailed and urbane, and no harbinger of what followed.

The group returned for the second set with maracas, an African bass called a sanduku and a pair of hand drums, called kidumbaks, that resemble both Middle Eastern dumbeks and South Indian and Pakistani drums. The music they played, usually heard at wedding parties, is also called kidumbak. The songs ride on the drums and maracas and on modal, circling violin melodies, like hoedown fiddles gone back to Africa.

Flanking the band were two female dancers gifted at rump rotation, who also swiveled their way through the audience. The lead singers stepped forward to sing short lines that the rest of the band sang back to them, with some members ululating up above as the violinists dug in and the music gathered speed. It was incantatory party music, and before the set was done, the stage was filled with audience members dancing along.

Chicago Tribune

Ambassadors from Zanzibar: Culture Musical Club pays call with mosaic of traditions.
Date: September 20, 2006

By: Howard Reich

Sep. 20--Of all the exotic bands to land in Chicago during the ongoing World Music Festival, one stands apart from the rest. But it's not just geographical distance that distinguished the appearance of the Culture Musical Club of Zanzibar, nor the sweet fact that the ensemble was making its North American debut here. More important, this remarkable organization obliterated stylistic barriers that traditionally separate cultures. Or, to put it in other terms, the Culture Musical Club embraced seemingly opposed musical traditions in utterly seamless ways. The band--which played a mesmerizing performance Monday evening in Millennium Park (after a noontime show at Daley Plaza)--gives voice to the "taarab music" of its homeland. Taarab has been translated to mean "to be moved" or "agitated," a reference, perhaps, to the undulating dance rhythms and trance-like incantations at its core. In Zanzibar, few taarab ensembles match the popularity of the Culture Musical Club, which makes it an ideal ambassador for an artistic tradition little known in the United States. Listen closely, and it's not difficult to detect the roots of this music. If the violins and accordions represent the musical influences of the West, the African percussion and Middle Eastern oud articulate the sounds of another hemisphere. Add to the mix elements of Indian, Cuban and even Japanese musical culture, and you have one of the least likely--and most alluring--large ensembles to play this year's festival. The music that the band performed in the Pritzker Pavilion proved seductive, with multiple strands of melody unfolding in sequence. As vocal soloists and female choir articulated melodic lines, the larger instrumental ensemble answered and amplified them. Yet the unusual chord progressions and unorthodox stop-start phrasings defied notions of melody and harmony that long have defined European-based music. While the cross-cultural nature of this band helps explain its popularity around the world, so does its level of musicianship, which was expressed in the intricacies of its vocal work and the unanimity of its strings. The Culture Musical Club of Zanzibar performs at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday in Hamilton Park, 513 W. 72nd St.; free; 312-742-1938. hreich@tribune.com

Copyright (c) 2006, Chicago Tribune