

Strike A Cultural Chord

For those interested in furthering their understanding of a place and its people, there is often no better way of doing so than through music. With few exceptions, music can be heard nearly everywhere on the planet. Following are a few suggestions for how to use music, whether by attending live performances, learning about local musical traditions or just by sharing your favorite music with those you meet, as a bridge to making new cultural connections.

by David Juman

1 Know Before You Go

One of the best ways to connect to a new culture through music is to do a bit of advance research and planning. If you are able to learn a little something, before you travel, about the musical performers, traditions, styles, instruments and even upcoming events in the place you're traveling to, you will be able to "hit the ground running" when you arrive. The "world" or international section of your local music store is often an excellent starting place, depending on your destination. You may wish to pick up a CD or two from here or from your local library, which by the way can also be a good source for learning about or listening to international music.

In addition, as with most subjects nowadays, the Internet provides an abundance of resources for those who wish to discover music from different cultures and parts of the world. I have listed just a few of these sites along with this article. For a more targeted Internet search, try typing your destination along with the word "music" or another musical term into your favorite search engine. For example:

Ecuador "musical styles"

"folk singers" Hungary

Paris jazz "music calendar" 2006

2 Have Music, Will Travel

If you have a portable music player (or will be staying where you know there will be one), don't forget to bring along some of your favorite tunes. In large part, music is not bound by any particular language, and therefore it's a terrific way to break the ice and connect with someone whom you otherwise might not even have met. Locals, particularly those in developing nations, are often very curious about foreigners visiting their countries, and it's quite likely that if you're willing to share your music with them, they in turn will open up in their own way towards you.

If you happen to be a musician yourself, consider bringing along your instrument on your travels, time and space permitting. Of course, it's more practical to tuck a harmonica into your backpack than it is to wrestle a cello into a taxi, but I've found that sharing one's music in such a personal way often brings out a warmth and curiosity in people unlike any other. When my work assignment in India was extended from short to longer term, I decided to lug along my saxophone when I returned to India following a short visit to the US. Apart from occasionally torturing my upstairs neighbors while trying to master the elusive, high F sharp (!), the warm reaction I received from others for whom I played made the long trip back with the horn well worth it.

⑤ Keep Your Ears Open

Once you get where you're going, make sure you know what's going on there, musically speaking. If they're available, pick up a newspaper or city guide to see if any concerts or other musical performances will coincide with your stay. If you're in a smaller town or village, ask around and find out whether there are any upcoming local music events. It doesn't need to be an organized, well-publicized event; often, smaller informal gatherings provide the best opportunity to explore other cultures and traditions and experience music the way it was meant to be heard.

If you are a musician and your schedule permits, you may wish to take a lesson, or even enroll in a class or other form of musical training during your travels. Immersing oneself in individual or group instruction can be an outstanding way to meet new people and gain some exposure to the culture at a deeper level than what is often available to the ordinary tourist. And don't forget to pick up some recorded music during your travels; in urban areas, the selection of music available locally will often far surpass what's available back home.

During my time in India, I've had the good fortune to participate in a broad range of musical moments, and with these I have acquired a deeper understanding of the culture and people here. In the tech-touted city of Bangalore, my wife and I danced in the rain along with hundreds of Indians and foreigners alike, practically oblivious to being

soaked while the Rolling Stones performed a mere twenty feet away from us. In Hyderabad, I watched as Kadri Gopalnath (<http://www.kadrigopalnath.com/>) magically transformed his alto sax (a favorite instrument of mine, and one typically associated with Western jazz music) into a delicate and inexplicably liquid tool of Indian Carnatic music. And in the deep south of Kerala, I sat in a moonlit paddy field from about 11pm till dawn, transfixed and ultimately exhausted by a traditional Kathakali musical dance drama (<http://www.cyberkerala.com/kathakali/>).

Wherever the place and whatever the style, the variety, richness and universality of music provides a ready-made avenue through which to deepen one's understanding and enjoyment of a culture. For music lovers, there is no better way to explore new places, meet new people and make cultural connections than to keep your ears open and turn up the volume. ✧

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World Music Resources Online

- The Rough Guide to World Music - <http://www.roughguides.com/music/world.html>
- RootsWorld - <http://www.rootsworld.com/rw/>
- World Music Central - <http://www.worldmusiccentral.org/>
- University of Washington Libraries (World Music pages) - <http://www.lib.washington.edu/Music/world.html>
- World Music on About.com - <http://worldmusic.about.com/>