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Global music community makes waves in Western pop

BY CATHY RAGLAND
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We hear often about the influence of Western popular music on music of other cultures, but less often about how non-Western music is changing popular music.

The effects of an increasingly connected global music community are being felt far beyond the selective appropriation of African or Brazilian pop by high-profile artists such as Paul Simon and David Byrne. In the music of San Francisco-based Trance Mission, the cross-cultural exchange reveals a more complex and organic fusion.

As part of a 10-date West Coast tour, Trance Mission stops off in Seattle for a performance tomorrow at the Backstage.

Collectively, the four-member group is well-versed in various genres of Western popular and classical music. But alongside clarinets, guitars and electronically sampled sound sources, Trance Mission employs a wide range of percussion and wind instruments from Indonesia, West Africa, Southeast Asia and India.

Most prominent in the mix is the didjeridu, an Australian trumpetlike instrument made from a hollowed-out branch, and the khaen, a polyphonic pipe organ made of bamboo and found in Thailand and Laos.

Carefully and graciously, the group's multiethnic hodgepodge is molded into a thickly textured, groove-infected sound structured around the basic elements of Western harmony, rhythm and melody.

"What we originally wanted to do was start a dance band that was a little different," says clarinetist/composer Beth Custer. "We started improvising together every Sunday in a local cafe called Radio Valencia in San

Concert preview

Trance Mission, 9 p.m. tomorrow, Backstage, 2208 N.W. Market St.; \$5; 628-0888.

Francisco and the music started melding together into songs."

A primarily instrumental outfit, though vocals are worked into the sound in the form of effects, Trance Mission's music is danceable in a free-form, self-expressive way. But the most provocative element of the group's sound is a solid, compositional base.

The focus is Custer's gorgeous and hypnotic melody lines played on alto and bass clarinet, which are spirited along by the gurgling, one-note drone of the didjeridu.

Played by Stephen Kent, the 40,000-year-old sacred instrument of Australian Aborigines is the rhythmic foundation of the group's sound. Its steady drone is riddled with subtle hiccups and yelps, which create a multitude of high-pitched overtones that allow myriad instruments to connect to its root.

"After I studied the instrument in Australia with some Aborigine players, I began working on ways to play the instrument with a contemporary sensibility," Kent says. "I don't limit myself to a trumpet sound, I try to get as much width out of the single-note sound of the instrument as possible."

"All the musicians in this group have traveled and studied with masters of many of the instruments they play," Custer says. "And though everyone is sensitive to the traditions of the instruments, we try to make the music our own."

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