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A United Nations of Music

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By LARRY ROHTER



David Manning for The New York Times

Aditi Bhagwat, an Indian foot percussionist, rehearsing with other OneBeat fellows, Kyungso Park, left, and Chance McCoy at Atlantic Center for the Arts. [More Photos »](#)

NEW SMYRNA BEACH, Fla. — In one studio a Polish saxophonist was jamming with an Indonesian gamelan master. In another, two singer-songwriters — one from Kenya, the other from Denmark — were finishing a song they had written together. Next door a Lebanese oud player and a Korean playing a traditional zitherlike instrument called a gayageum rehearsed a duet for a coming live performance.

In one room after another world music in its truest sense was being created last month at the Atlantic Center for the Arts here, just north of Cape Canaveral. As part of a new federally sponsored program called OneBeat, 32 musicians from 21 countries on 5 continents, almost equally divided between men and women, were brought together to write, produce and record original music and take it on the road for American audiences.

“The canvas here is huge,” said Aditi Bhagwat, a singer, percussionist and dancer from Mumbai. “I’ve seen instruments I’ve never seen; heard rhythms, scales and harmonies I’ve never heard; and tried things that, if I did them in India, some might think I was foolish. But here everyone is open to new things, to change and experimentation, which can only encourage you to grow as an artist.”

On Thursday the OneBeat tour will arrive in Brooklyn, the last stop on a tour that began in Orlando, Fla., and included stops in Charleston, S.C.; Asheville, N.C.; Roanoke and Floyd, Va.; Washington; and Philadelphia. The musicians are scheduled to visit the Brooklyn Community Arts and Media High School, check out local recording studios and perform at Roulette in Boerum Hill on Friday, and at the Autumn Bowl, near the waterfront in Greenpoint, on Saturday, before returning to their home countries.

Some of the ensembles that formed here are based on traditional musical affinities, like an Arab-Indian group and a jazz-pop fusion trio whose members come from Kenya, Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of Congo. But others are purely random: shortly after arriving here on Sept. 10, the 32 fellows pulled numbers from a hat, and were assigned to bands accordingly.

“We’re in a Garden of Eden, with no forbidden fruits, but it’s also very intense, because we have to mingle,” said Nina Ogot, a guitarist and singer-songwriter from Kenya who has ended up writing and performing with Sidse Holte of Denmark in a side project. “That forces different cultural traditions together, so you have to find common ground and make music, no excuses allowed.”

Many of the foreign fellows had not visited the United States before; some are out of their own countries for the first time; and a few had never flown on an airplane. Nourished by notions of America derived from movies, many of them were startled to end up in a small-town setting, hard by the Intracoastal Waterway and hot and humid, that did not at all conform to their expectations of what the United States would be like.

“Having never been in America before, this seems like Columbus to me,” said Piotr Kurek, a Polish producer and sound engineer who has gravitated toward the Asian contingent. “It’s very wild here, like a jungle.”

OneBeat also has five American fellows, seemingly chosen to give a sense of the breadth of United States musical traditions and styles. Chance McCoy is an Appalachian fiddler and dulcimer player living in Virginia, while Amir ElSaffar is a jazz-oriented trumpet and santur player from Chicago, and Domenica Fossati is a flutist and singer from New York who has performed in genres ranging from classical to pop.

Through the luck of the initial draw Mr. McCoy and Mr. ElSaffar found themselves in a band with Ms. Bhagwat and Kyungso Park, the Korean gayageum player, creating a new style they jokingly call country and eastern music. On one song they wrote together Mr. McCoy played slide guitar in a modal style to get closer to Ms. Bhagwat’s natural sound, while Ms. Park made her instrument sound almost like a banjo to approximate an Appalachian feel.

“I’m not a person who wants to play museum music, and I’m happy to see all the other fellows think like me,” Ms. Park said. “Here I can open my eyes to new sounds and a new world.”

The initial two weeks of writing and rehearsing new music here also included visits and workshops led by well-known American musicians, with other collaborations planned for the tour. Those participants include the jazz trumpeter Dave Douglas; the guitarist Mark Stewart; the composer and clarinetist Evan Ziporyn; and the Cuban-born drummer Dafnis Prieto.

“This is like a dream come true for any musician,” not just the 32 fellows, Mr. Prieto said after giving a master class that ended with his jamming with an Indian sarod player, Sayak Barua, and Ms. Park. “Instead of having to travel all over the world, getting to know all these different traditions, you have such a wide spectrum of possibilities in one place.”

The OneBeat program is a two-year, \$1.25 million initiative of the State Department, administered by Found Sound Nation, which is a project of the New York new-music organization [Bang on a Can](#). Ann Stock, assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, described OneBeat as a particularly

effective exercise in cultural diplomacy, aimed at establishing links with what she called “young opinion makers and future leaders” abroad.

“We want to engage them in every way we can,” she said. “We want to know them, and we want them to know us.”

She added, “They are not only coming together to write and produce new music, but forming bonds and networks and relationships that will continue to grow.”

One fellow, Hélio Vanimal, is a topical songwriter from Mozambique who said he often goes to rural villages to sing and rap about AIDS containment and agricultural development. Asked if his impressions of the United States might find their way into his presentations, he responded, “How can they not?”

More than 900 musicians from 40 countries, ages 19 to 35, applied for the OneBeat fellowships, organizers of the program said. Despite their young ages many of the musicians are deeply imbued with the traditions of their cultures.

Sri Joko Raharjo, 29, who teaches gamelan theory at a conservatory in Java, said, “My grandfather, his grandfather and his grandfather’s grandfather” all were musicians.

“I don’t want to abandon my tradition, I just want to make it richer,” he said. “Each musician here has given me something new, something I can take and apply in my own culture.” In particular, he added, he was drawn to jazz, “which I had only read about before, but now I can see the reality.”

Weronika Partyka, a 23-year-old Polish saxophonist, with whom Mr. Raharjo was collaborating, said that she had similarly been stimulated by her first encounter with gamelan, noting that “Joko’s scales are ‘wrong’ in a Western sense, but they’re not.” Asked if the contact with other musical traditions would make her a different musician, she smiled and replied, “I have already become a different musician.”

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: October 6, 2012

An article on Thursday about the State Department’s new OneBeat program, which brings together musicians from many countries, included incorrect information from program representatives about a performance scheduled for today in Brooklyn. It will take place at the Autumn Bowl near the waterfront in Greenpoint, not on the Greenpoint waterfront, and it will not be part of the Bring to Light Festival, which is not being held this year.

http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/04/arts/music/us-onebeat-program-melds-32-musicians-from-21-countries.html?_r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1349386610-XSVqPnGFc0m+/5z2ECXHIA&