



Rekha Malhotra performs under the name DJ Rekha.

Nisha Sondhe

At BU, a global music festival goes the distance

By Zoë Madonna, Globe Staff

September 05, 2018

Over the course of two October days, Boston University will host its first ever Global Music Festival, featuring artists from around the world, and nearby too. Festivalgoers

can attend workshops with the artists and browse a global bazaar where international and immigrant artisans will sell their goods.

As festival artistic director and associate professor of music Marié Abe sees it, the festival fills a need, just like the lunchtime Global Music Concert Series from which it germinated. Speaking over Skype from her native Japan, where she is on sabbatical, Abe said that when she arrived at BU in 2011, music by “dead white men” dominated the concert repertoire that she observed at the school of music. “They didn’t have any regular programming of music outside of that canon,” she said. The concert series was the first step, and this is the next.

“I’m very passionate about what the role of a contemporary university is in society,” said Ty Furman, the managing director of the BU Arts Initiative. “Thinking about what BU gives back to the community, what are the opportunities for the community to intersect with our students, our faculty — and a festival is a really nice way to do that. From the beginning, it has always been intended to be free and open to the public.”

The musical guests from abroad will include the Zhou Family Band (central-eastern China), Jupiter & Okwess (Democratic Republic of the Congo), and LADAMA (pan-South America). But the staff didn’t just search afar for musicians.

“The United States itself is a global place, and that’s why I wanted to highlight Hawaii and Puerto Rico,” Abe said. Boston-based musicians were also a priority for her. “They’re not international, but I wanted to highlight how global Boston is and how global this country is.”

That global ethos is palpable in Debo Band, the local Ethiopian groove collective in which Abe plays accordion. “The period we’re mostly inspired by is the period of the 1970s, a little bit of the ’60s, where all over the world you would have this mix of funk and rock with local traditions,” said Debo Band co-founder and saxophonist Danny Mekonnen. “I’ve kind of looked at it as world psychedelic music.”

The vast majority of Debo Band’s music is Ethiopian, but the band has also put its spin on an Okinawan folk tune and music by Duke Ellington. “Marié [Abe] likes to say imaginary revisionist history is a fun way of saying what we do. It’s this idea of ‘what if? How can we mix things together and come up with a sound that’s uniquely our own,’” said Mekonnen.

Abe herself is a versatile and eclectic musician; in addition to Debo Band, her accordion styles include klezmer, tango, and indie rock. "It really helps that I wear many hats, one of which is a touring musician who's played at a bunch of different festivals," she said.

Having observed and participated in similar events with male-dominated lineups, Abe sought to bring female musicians to BU's festival. Some of the women in the lineup are pioneers in their own right, blazing trails in genres and art forms dominated by men.

One of these is Rekha Malhotra, who performs under the name DJ Rekha. For 20 years, Malhotra hosted the "Basement Bhangra" club night in New York City, where she spun energetic Punjabi dance music and hip-hop. "I wanted to create a space for a really good New York dance party," she said by phone. "It doesn't matter what you looked like. It was a community space." Though it has some female DJs and many female dancers, she explained, the bhangra scene is "99 percent male-dominated."

This also applies to the women of Gund Kwok, a Boston-based Asian women's troupe that studies the Chinese arts of lion and dragon dance. The dances require high endurance and dexterity, and as founder and instructor Cheng Imm Tan explained by phone, they were reserved for men.

"Even now, we hear a lot of feedback that when we take off our [costume] heads and they see that it's women, people are just amazed," said the Malaysia-born Tan, who was the founding director of the Mayor's Office of New Bostonians (now the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Advancement). "Because it's really still a novelty to have women perform."

Another of Abe's priorities was that festival would provide opportunities for education. "That's why we have a bunch of workshops and things, and we chose artists who seemed well-prepared to provide that kind of workshop when we chose them," she said, citing LADAMA and transgender Hawaiian singer Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole.

If you can't make it Oct. 5-6, Abe says the festival is probably going to happen again. "We've already started making a list of artists we want to invite for next year, and we applied for grants," she said. "Right now, it's happening!"

GLOBAL MUSIC FESTIVAL

At Tsai Performance Center and George Sherman Union, Boston University, Oct. 5-6.
Free. www.bu.edu/gmf

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