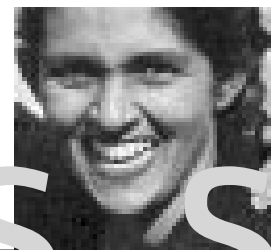


From left to right: Mike Olmos, Jeff Marrs and Marcus Shelby of the Marcus Shelby Orchestra; Producers Colm Ó Riain and Pireeni Sundarilingam



BRIDGE

A C R O S S



Recorded during 2004, *Bridge Across the Blue*

is a beautiful, energetic accomplishment that creatively showcases diasporic voices in American culture.

Reviewed by Peter Koht

Photography of sky: Daniel Furon

"This was always a pipeline dream for us,"

states award-winning poet

Pireeni Sundaralingam as we begin to speak

about the project she's just co-produced,

Bridge across the Blue.

THE BLUE



Pireeni and Colm each recall the sounds of an ancestral tongue in *Celtic Raag*:

If I could choose the language in which I spoke to you,
I would chose the dark red tongue of the Tamil lands
the yearning notes the desert drone
the heated hum on the monsoon rising

If I could choose the language in which I spoke to you
I would choose to speak to you in Gaelic
the sliding scale, the susurruration of breath
the sound of water beating between us.



Mike Olmos, Pireeni Sundarilingam and Marcus Shelby at Polymorph Studios in Oakland, recording "The Margin Of Color."

"What we wanted to do," says Pireeni's co-producer and husband, internationally known violinist Colm Ó Riain, "was to share the blues of each individual culture involved in the project." And with the impressive array of poets and musicians from a wide variety of cultures gathered on this CD, the listener is guaranteed many different blues. In a powerful collection of musical statements, immigrant and Native American peoples express stories from the heart of their colonial histories, stories about the experience of living as a minority in the United States. While the lyrics and poetry are in languages such as Tamil, Gaelic and Tagalog in addition to English, the music spans a genre-bending range from jazz and blues to flamenco and beat-boxing.

In the aftermath of 9/11, with mainstream America's increasing levels of fear towards immigrants and the resultant scapegoating in the media, Pireeni and Colm began to be concerned about immigrant's rights in the US. But despite grave threats, both believe America is still a place that welcomes and celebrates minority voices. "Constitutionally, there is a concern for minority rights in America," relates Pireeni. "Especially on the West Coast, diversity is a priority in life. It is a celebrated facet of life."

With this spirit of cultural celebration and funding from a grant by the Potrero Nuevo Fund, the producers began collecting collaborators to create the CD. They called upon their compa-

triotists in the world music scene in San Francisco and made new contacts with people they respected. Having pulled in talented artists like Indian/Roma musician Oliver Rajamani, spoken word artist Avotcja, jazzman Marcus Shelby and Chicano poet Francisco Alarcón (just to name a few), it seems they're pretty well-connected. Even so, they were surprised when everyone they approached to participate responded positively.

I asked what made their ambitious project so appealing. "There are commonalities between different genres of music, even across vast geographical spaces," Colm stated. "Your reaction to music as a listener is a preconscious reaction... formed in advance of whatever racial or cultural pre-constructs you might harbor. Music is like ripples in a pond, it makes links with other cultures far in advance of those cultures actually sharing a cultural space."

Those musical links between cultures are what makes *Bridge Across the Blue* so compelling. Lots of "world music" CDs are collections of different artists, but those that are truly collaborative musically (and poetically!) are more rare. "We brought together poets and musicians from all over the Bay Area and asked them to tell the stories of their own ethnic groups and how they arrived in America," says Colm. "But more importantly, we challenged them to connect across ethnic and artistic boundaries, to search for a common ground in their myths, their metaphors and their music." This collaborative approach is partially inspired by the spirit of place in the San Francisco

Bay Area. "The album is called *Bridge Across the Blue* because, while there are obviously lots of actual bridges in the Bay Area, the bridge is also a symbol of the best of what exists here", said Pireeni. "When we look at the struggles people faced to get here, we recognize how much we share in common. It's incredibly life-affirming. Other cities are based on walls, on separation and alienation. But the Bay Area is unique. Our society, like our architecture, celebrates the connections between people. It's one of the reasons Colm and I live here."

A particularly haunting example of this cross-cultural bridging is the a cappella duet "Cumha Olowan" (Song of Exile) created by Lillis Ó Laoire and John Carlos Perea. (*Cumha* is Gaelic for "homesickness" and *Olowan* is Lakota for "song.") The Irish half of the duet is the song "Is trua nach bhfuil mé in Éirinn" (It's a pity that I'm not in Ireland). Originally composed in County Donegal, the lyrics tell the story of an Irishman awaiting execution in an American jail. Undesired and mistreated, his pain and homesickness are common emotions among immigrants coming to the US.

But immigrants are not the only ones to feel a deep homesickness, as the interwoven Lakota song shows. Sung by John-Carlos Perea, it tells of a Lakota youth on the eve of his departure for state-sponsored boarding school. Taken from their families and traditions, Indigenous children were forcibly relocated and re-aculturated for the express purpose of "killing the Indian to save the man."

Having first heard the Irish and Lakota songs separately, on a hunch Pireeni and Colm had the two singers try them together, and were astonished by the result. When Ó Laoire and Perea performed the song live at the *Bridge Across the Blue* CD release concert, I felt chills when they started singing, followed by a palpable wave of sadness from the stage. In an act of power, the two singers embodied sorrow and longing produced by very different historical circumstances, and distilled it into universal emotion we all could recognize.

This multi-dimensional bridge across the blue connects generations as well, bringing through powerful ancestral voices. As the originators of the blues in the post-Civil War South, African Americans have a deeply held tradition of honoring their ancestors. In a raucous anthem called "Oaktown Blue" Avotcja rejoices in the World War II jazz and blues heyday on 7th Street in West Oakland. On her website (www.avotcja.com) she says this "Harlem of the West" at that time was populated by "disoriented Black sharecroppers, lonely imported Filipino men, Black entrepreneurs, Latin Dancers, intellectuals and slicksters." "Oaktown Blue" is her way of "saying thank you to the spirits that still roam up and down 7th Street."

Backed by jazz notes from an Ellington chart and augmented by a Filipino kulintang (played by Jimmy Biala), in "Just Before Waking" poet Jamie Jacinto evokes the "taxi-dances" of early Filipino immigrant communities. One such community existed in the International Hotel in San Francisco, near Chinatown. Thousands of the Filipino workers, *manongs*, who labored in the orchards and canneries of the Bay Area flocked to this residential hotel, not only for a sense of community, but also to attend dances. There, separated by law from their wives and forbidden to marry by government decree, they could listen to bands and buy a dance from a young woman for ten cents.

The excellence of the producers' own addition, "Celtic Raag," sheds light on how they were able to assemble such accomplished artists. By interweaving Colm's melancholy viola with Pireeni's musically enunciated poetry, the piece explores the politics of language and the longing for a connection with one's mother tongue. Both Colm and Pireeni come from cultural backgrounds in which their language was suppressed. The indigenous language of Ireland, Gaelic, was outlawed by the British in the 19th century to further repress expressions of Irish culture. Similarly, in Sri Lanka as late as 1956, the Sinhala-only rule outlawed all who spoke the Tamil language in order to consolidate power over the Tamil minority.

The sense of shared sadness and yearning for contact in "Celtic Raag" pervades the entire collection. But like the traditional blues, it doesn't stop there. Courageously examining exile and racist discrimination head-on, these stories undergo a "sea change" from being tossed into the blue, becoming something deep and strange. They thrive on the paradoxical ability of music (especially the blues), to morph an expression of pain into a shot in the arm for resistance and a celebration of life and survival. *Bridge Across the Blue* is a triumph of transformative collaboration, a multi-faceted jewel of human creativity and a blueprint for cultural sanity.

"Music in all its genres evokes similar ideas and emotions no matter where it is created," says Colm in conclusion to our conversation. On a lighthearted note he adds, "The same ideas keep popping up in different regions. Some people have commented on the similarities between the North African *tar* and the Irish *bodhran*. I don't know if there is a direct relationship, but there are only so many ways that you can hit a goat." •



For more information and to purchase the CD, go to www.bridgeacrosstheblue.com