

## National Identity

Mark Helyar reveals the heady mix of cultures and musics emanating from an office in the south of England.

## Integrated traditions

I'm sitting in TAPS' Hampshire offices. Musa Mboob, a master drummer from the Gambia, and Tom Fairbairn, the company's Assistant Artistic Director, are preparing for a Boka Halat gig. The phone rings: a teacher books TAPS for an AfroCeilidh workshop. Roger, the company's Artistic Director, smiles: "She knew exactly what she wanted. I've lost count of the number of teachers who've asked us to provide a beginners' African drumming workshop," he explains. "They miss the point! We bring together diverse artists and participants to create new work. We don't teach people how to play the drums, African or otherwise. We encourage them to learn or improve skills in a wider context."

Roger Watson, an internationally respected player, singer, songwriter and teacher, established TAPS as a music development organisation in 1989. Emerging from the narrowly focused Folk movement of the sixties, he began to collaborate with musicians from other cultures and genres. TAPS now has a reputation for encouraging people of all ages and backgrounds to use their own resources to make music.

What kind of music is it: folk, world, fusion? "We're never happy with labels," says Tom. "Take Boka Halat's music, for example, our dance and concert band." "Boka Halat means 'mutual inspiration' in my language," explains Musa. So it's multicultural? "I prefer the term 'intercultural'," says Roger. "We take a stimulus from another culture and respond to it with something from our own. An African song won't sound like Ladysmith Black Mambazo or an English song like Show of Hands!"

Roger and Musa formed Boka Halat in 1999. It has included musicians from several cultural groups and jazz, rock and classical backgrounds. Its current core line-up is four musicians: Musa, drums and vocals; Roger, melodeon and vocals; Tom, fiddle and bass; and Ousman Beyai, also from the Gambia, who plays guitar and bass. "Boka Halat's music exemplifies what TAPS is all about," says Roger.

"We aim to change the way people think about 'folk' music and dance. It's not just about the past; it must be relevant now. Nurturing people's own creativity is vital for the continuation of tradition. A tradition without creativity is in danger of being mistaken for a museum. Traditional music and dance has always evolved that way. Look at what happened in the Caribbean in the 19th century. African slaves took the choreography of the European quadrilles back to their camps and blended it with their own rhythms and body movements. So, why not develop the idea of what happened then in the context of now? By bringing together English melodies and Western instruments with rhythms and sounds from, say, African and Asia we can create something new that enables English dance music traditions to evolve and survive."

Are there any tensions in working like this? Musa laughs: "In the Gambia, when I play, people get up and do their own thing. Not like the structured English Ceilidh dancing. I find that difficult; I like spontaneity!" "Invariably we are challenged when a highly skilled musician wants to contribute a complex and iconic piece of music," continues Roger. "Instead, I suggest: 'Here's an African rhythm and a chord sequence which will resonate with Caribbean, Jazz and other musicians. What can you adapt from your own culture to play with that?' Therefore, we need to know our own tradition thoroughly. Indeed, this kind of collaboration has made me a better English musician, because it keeps my own music relevant. Musa, do you remember what I asked you when we recorded a particular song for our last album?" Musa says: "You asked if it was an old song or one of my own." "And you replied 'Yes!' " That's TAPS' mission: tradition on the move. Mark Helyar is a freelance director, writer and musician. His book, 'A Shower of Springs – India's Hidden Voices', will be published by Empty Canvas later this year.

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