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Sufi Music: The Rough Guide to Sufi Music (review)

Michael Frishkopf

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Sufi Music: The Rough Guide to Sufi Music. Various artists. London: World Music Network, 2001. One CD-ROM (72 minutes, 20 seconds). 12-page booklet.

Sampling from 11 different source albums, this compilation CD album offers a wonderful collection of stellar performers and powerful performances. Whether the package as a whole—including audio, text, and images—serves to represent the already-problematic category of Sufi music is another matter entirely. Certainly the scant 12 pages of notes, inadequate also in many other ways, do not make a compelling argument.

On its website, the publisher proclaims that “since its creation, World Music Network has released over two hundred celebrated Music Rough Guides.” World Music Network was founded in 1994. Perhaps the pace—evidently averaging more than a dozen discs per year—is simply too quick to allow so much music to be properly introduced, which is a shame, because whatever else it means, world music is almost never music that needs no introduction, a fortiori for anthologies representing multiple audio worlds. But proper introductions, ideally prepared by experts possessing firsthand musical knowledge, are significant undertakings that cost-benefit analyses cannot always justify.

Musical Tourism: Problematizing World Music as a Term

As many critics have observed, world music serves primarily as an industry marketing label for musical performances from “elsewhere,” featuring particular elements (sonic, textual, or contextual) unfamiliar to Western listeners, usually combined with other elements (typically percussive grooves, or—in fusion music—the ever-present timbres of Western popular music: bass, guitar, drum set) conveying reassuring *familiarity*. The typical marketing strategy for this world music includes techniques for selection and description designed to maximize sales, not representational accuracy.

While a few self-declared world music productions aiming primarily for nonpecuniary goals (preservation, scholarship, or education) may largely avoid such strategies, the vast majority, being commercial, deploy them, and unapologetically so. In search of sales, most world music representations, therefore, are biased—in both sound and description—to conform to the expectations for the world music idea, underscoring unfamiliarity by stressing features such as exoticism, ecstasy, trance, and spirituality, often emphasizing physical aspects (movement, dance, possession), and de-emphasizing text in favor of the (supposedly) more transcultural power of musical sound. Through this process, world music publishers distort both musical selection and presentation, garbling the musical message, though not necessarily detracting from its perceived aesthetic power.

Representation in image and text suffers the most. Crass stereotypes abound, in condensed form—the business bottom line doesn't support careful ethnomusicological documentation. These tendencies are perhaps heightened in a CD series linked to travel guidebooks (the *Rough Guides*), since mediated musical tourism and unmediated travel tourism share the same emphasis on otherness, sold as an escape from ordinary workaday life.

Like many in the *Rough Guide* music series, this CD purports to provide an introduction to Sufi music, compiling tracks from many different albums. Such sampling typically exacerbates all the problems already afflicting world music, for several reasons. First, the compiler stands at a much greater remove from the recording than the producers of the original CDs. Lacking broader knowledge of the musical universe from which it was sampled, the compiler performs each source CD—already a problematic sample—as an undistorted, almost unmediated, sonic representation to be sampled yet again. In this way the compilation CD becomes a second-order representation, a representation of representations, a sampling of samplings, doubling the errors inherent in this process. Likewise, compilation entails abridging original liner notes. But when the reality behind those notes is not fully understood, representational errors cannot be corrected; on the contrary such errors are only compounded by cut-and-paste mechanical manipulation—quoting, paraphrasing, abridging. Second, connections between different tracks typically cannot be intelligently described because such connections are not present anywhere in the source material; their interpretation requires knowledge of the broader musical scene that has already been omitted in the original re-presentation. Third, radically different kinds of world music—in this case Sufi music from field recordings, studio recordings, live performances from the world music circuit, fusions with scant existence outside of world music circles—are often juxtaposed without comment, simply because they were marketed under the same labels by the chosen source CDs. Some artists are widely known in their home country, others enjoy only local fame, while still others have built careers in world music and aren't known back home (the essential elsewhere with which they are associated) at all. In the case of music identified as spiritual, some performers are recognized as religious authorities, while others are masters of music alone. Some performances are intended as spiritual utterances, while others have been denatured as a staged art.

On Sufi Music

Sufi music presents problems of its own. First, one must consider the different perspectives on music (both as word and as phenomenon) and related concepts (e.g., *sama'*, spiritual audition; *ghina'*, singing) in Islam, and in Western discourse

about Islam. In my opinion, the crux of this problem is not that the word *music* must never be used to describe the sounds of Islam—certainly the semantic scope of this English word is broad enough to encompass that which many cognates (e.g., Arabic *musiqa*) do not—but simply that this status, and discourse, must at least be discussed, and the etic use of the word *music* acknowledged. The present CD does not problematize the term at all. Second, and perhaps more critically, is the slippery concept of Sufi, a word whose ethnocentrism is masked by its status as a legitimate Arabic word describing certain particularly pious Muslims of mystical inclination. Sufism, on the other hand, is an English neologism; the corresponding Arabic term is *tasawwuf*. In fact, as scholars such as Carl Ernst and William Chittick have recently observed, the current English sense of Sufism (like the terms Salafism and even Islam) has been shaped and promulgated by Orientalists, as a blanket term to designate diverse phenomena—from theosophy to voluntary religious associations (*turuq*), from ritual ecstasy to simple veneration (*madih*) of the Prophet Muhammad—throughout Muslim lands, in contrast to an imagined orthodoxy. Yet no single term covers such a vast range of phenomena in the languages of the Muslim majority regions, and indeed until the modern rise of Islamism, Muslim societies did not distinguish two spheres now known as Sufism and Islam; what is now called Sufism permeated rather than counterposed Islamic belief and practice. Sufi thus appears as a crypto-etic term.

My point here is not that the term Sufi music should never be used, but rather that such a term (and its constituent parts) should be problematized, however briefly, considering its etic status and Orientalist genealogy, and (consequently) the ways it tends to mask difference. On this CD examples of this difference masking occur between the Gnaoua brotherhood as represented by Hassan Hakmoun (an important Moroccan fusion artist based in New York City; track 5); the Mevlevi brotherhood as represented by Julien Jalal al-Din Weiss (a Swiss-born musician and convert living in Damascus, as well as a tireless champion of the Arab musical heritage, featured on the qanun [lap zither], though not mentioned in the notes on page 9; track 10); a quite different Mevlevi representation by a Turkish cultural foundation (track 1); the staged public performance of mystical poetry by Sheikh Yasin in Paris (track 4); the *madih* of Ahmad Barrayn (track 9); or the unique mystical vision of Ostad Elahi (track 7), drawing upon the Kurdish Ahli Haqq traditions.

Thoughts on the Contents of the *Rough Guide to Sufi Music*

Having outlined some of the pitfalls that pertain to Sufi music and its representations, I turn to a closer reading of this particular production. The notes, though brief, are replete with misleading stereotypes, Orientalist-inflected,

market-driven verbiage (alongside some outright errors). In short, the forces of world music as a marketing label appear, at every turn, to emphasize the music's exoticism, emotionalism, trance connections, and rhythm aspects. Via descriptions, the selection of textless instrumental music, and omitting transliterations and translations of sung material, musical features are stressed more than poetry on the CD. Yet, in most Muslim practice (Sufi or otherwise) language is foregrounded. In addition, many statements appear quoted out of context, without attribution (e.g., quotations from liner notes I wrote for Sheikh Yasin's source album, *The Magic of Sufi Inshad*). The lack of attribution is perhaps excusable in a nonacademic work such as this one. What is not excusable is the distortion of meaning that often results from quotations which are neither attributed, nor fully understood before being copied and pasted into position.

The CD's cover depicts a pensive, bearded man holding a frame drum (*daff*), but no further information is provided about this striking image. Indeed there is no explanation either of images appearing on the inside cover, or CD tray, all of which appear selected more as marketing devices designed to evoke an oriental mystery than as well-intentioned illustrations of the CD's musical contents. In the cover statement "Islamic mystics harness the power of music"—sometimes true, though certainly not always—the sensory is transformed into the sensational, a technique for selling CDs. On page 3 of the notes booklet appears the phrase "hypnotic and trance-inducing"—an exemplary instance of world music marketing. There are also factual errors, obstacles to understanding. After correctly noting the ineffability of Sufi experience, the notes continue, "[t]here are a number of Sufi sects." Sufi orders, known as *turuq* (paths) can only rarely be properly described as sects, a sociological term implying schism and dissension, whereas Sufis typically conceive of their multiple paths as harmoniously alternative spiritual routes to the same destination, superimposed upon a primary religious affiliation to Islam. The text also incorrectly implies that Sufism is tantamount to the aggregation of all such sects, misrepresenting a phenomenon stretching far beyond them, and permeating nearly all aspects of traditional Muslim life, including popular religious festivals and life-cycle rituals. This distinction is inadequately covered by the notes. Adding that these "sects . . . have links to, and the basis of their worship in, Islam" understates the case. Until relatively recently, Sufi orders were central threads woven throughout the tapestry of Islam, encompassing rulers and scholars, rich and poor, rural and urbanites alike. The notes continue, "the religious orthodox have tried to keep music out . . . but the Sufis have harnessed the power of music . . . and turned it to the service of God." This statement misleads in several directions at once. First, if music is taken in its broadest sense, even most Sufi writers tended to object to music in general and would approve of particular forms of chanting and—occasionally—instrumental performance only in carefully prescribed and

regulated contexts. Second, if music is taken to include religious chanting, even the orthodox have always accepted certain kinds of music such as the cantillation of the Qur'an (*tilawa*), the call to prayer (*adhan*), and the recitation of religious poetry (*inshad*), provided that its themes remain within the bounds of religion, that the musical practices focus on text rather than emotion, and that men and women do not mingle. Even the Prophet himself was praised by one of his companions, the poet Hassan ibn Thabit.

Orthodoxy is a loaded term. If it is used to imply correctness, when the term is juxtaposed with Sufi it suggests a Sufic incorrectness. Such value judgments are relativistic. But the objective historical fact is that in most times and places, from the twelfth century to the nineteenth, mainstream Islam was utterly permeated by Sufi ideas, social institutions, and practices, and many of the most distinguished scholars participated in Sufi activities. At the same time, this particular iteration of the Orientalist orthodox/Sufi opposition obscures the reality that the liturgies of many *turuq* evince few musical features beyond limited intonation of religious texts, while more mainstream festivals held to celebrate Eid or the Prophet's Birthday (*mawlid al-nabi*) are often musically rich. Much music in Islam occurs outside the framework of Sufi orders.

The first page of notes contains the puzzling statement that “. . . the Sufis have helped nurture and develop Arabic music . . .” either betraying a common misconstrual of Muslim as equivalent to Arab, or perhaps more likely a simple mistake resulting from decontextualization. Most Muslims are not Arabs; most of the musicians presented on this CD are not Arabs either, and neither are the musical traditions represented by their music. Such a statement, perhaps derived from the notes of one of the source CDs, may have been perfectly intelligible in its original context, but the error illustrates the dangers of copying and pasting unaccompanied by critical acumen.

So much for the first paragraph. In the second, one finds further representations of Sufism through rituals and festivals that are described as exotic, dramatic, extreme, and ecstatic; a bodily spirituality reaching heights of bliss while radiating agony and death, evoking both Eros and Thanatos; ironic transfigurations of similar discourses today deployed—harshly—by so-called Muslim fundamentalists, the *Salafiyya*, for whom such features constitute adequate proof that Sufi ritual is a wholly illegitimate *bid'a* (heresy; literally, innovation), having nothing to do with true Islam. Orientalist fantasies and fundamentalist critiques, both drawing on Sufi stereotypes, are thus unwittingly paired.

The problems are compounded by nonspecificity—another vestige of Orientalism. What festivals (“certain festivals”) are being described here? How can such a precise description also be so generic? The reader might well wonder why should Muslim festivals around the globe be so uniform as to admit of such precise description? There are also technical errors. For instance, the notes

declare that “the spiritual leader (or sheikh) conducts the congregation, reciting Sufi poetry.” This is typically not the case—the reciter tends to be a specialist, and does not usually chant while conducting, even when he is capable of doing so.

Page 4 of the notes is primarily devoted to the Mevlevi, introducing Jeleleddin Rumi, founder of the famous order. Such devotion is not surprising in a world music CD—the Mevlevi were perhaps the first Sufi group to draw widespread Western attention, and the whirling dervishes have continued to stage their rituals for cultural consumption, at home and worldwide. Such devotion is also consistent with the CD’s audio content—Mevlevi-related groups are featured on tracks 1 and 10. But there is an unintentional disconnect—Arabic transliterations (Mawlawiyya, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi) are used in the description of the latter, and Turkish in the former (probably copied from source CDs); as a result the uninformed reader cannot link the two tracks as Arab and Turkish manifestations of a common tradition.

There follows a short blurb for each track, providing limited context, frequently hyperbolic in tone, while tending to omit crucial features of the performance itself, especially the context (ritual? concert? studio?) in which each performance was embedded, the text performed, and its central themes. Missing too are observations of connections—musical, thematic, occasional, social, or spiritual—*between* tracks, probably because the method of sampling multiple albums and abridging liner notes precludes observations not already contained in a single source disc. Often images are insufficient, or incorrectly placed. Blurbs should have been numbered in accordance with tracks, with titles clearly listed (they appear instead on pages 10–11, and on the CD’s back cover).

An Overview of Track Descriptions

Track 1’s blurb provides limited background on the Mevlana Culture and Arts Foundation, with no indication of where the group is based or whether this performance is ritual, staged, or studio recorded. Why do the editors insert four photos (one on the following page), while there are none for many other artists? As noted earlier, the close connection to track 10 goes unremarked. The selection of a stately and beautifully performed instrumental *Peşrev* (not “*Peprev*”) by Ismail (not Ysmail) Dede Efendi also displays world music influence, favoring music over poetry; in sound and text, Rumi’s voice is conspicuously absent.

On track 3 the miraculous Sheikh Ahmed al-Tuni is introduced as “one of the last great *munshid* of Upper Egypt,” one of few who “can provoke mystical love . . . through the power and influence of his voice.” Here and elsewhere the poetry, the central repository of Sufi meaning, should have been supplied. Track 4 notes are paraphrased from the source CD—for which I wrote the notes—without citation. I only wish that the cribbing had been more thorough, and that the

beautiful text, by the most prominent Sufi poet writing in Arabic, Umar ibn al-Farid, had been included. The context for both tracks 3 and 4 (a Parisian theater) should have been mentioned as well (at least to account for applause). Track 4 is an excerpt from an hour-long recording which clearly could not have been included in toto. However, the selection again betrays a world music bias toward the nontextual—following an extended instrumental introduction Sheikh Yasin doesn't have time to complete even one line of poetry before the selection is stopped.

Track 5 notes should have emphasized that this particular recording (though musically wondrous) does not represent traditional Gnaoua, but rather exhibits a stylistic fusion—in collaboration with world music trailblazer Adam Rudolph—by an artist far better known as a creative force in Western fusion music circles than among Gnaoua of his home country. Once again, neither text nor themes are provided. For track 6 the description of Abida Parveen—“at age of 5, she was chosen by her father . . . out of his disciples as most deserving recipient of his mantle . . .” —sounds like nepotism more than praise. This is most unfortunate, since she is indeed recognized as one of the greatest exponents of the *kafi* genre (not described here). Unusually, the poetic theme is provided, though not the text.

Ostad Elahi, featured on track 7, is a curious selection. While undoubtedly a fascinating philosophical-musical figure, Ostad Elahi does not properly fit the Sufi label, as the notes acknowledge. His metaphysics derive from his father's writings in the Ahl al-Haqq tradition of Kurdistan. While the listener should be grateful to hear this recording, would it not have been even more appropriate—given the CD's title—to broaden coverage by incorporating a track representing Sufi music of Southeast Asia, East Africa, or other areas of the world that have not been represented in this compilation?

The notes for track 9 should have mentioned that Sheikh Ahmad Barrayn is the third Egyptian munshid to be presented on this disc, and drawn contrasts to tracks 3 and 4, especially with reference to his supposed status as an authentic artist performing the ancient tradition as opposed to the Western-influenced style—such statements require explanation. Muslims and scholars will also take issue with the phrase “Koranic verse singing.” The Koran is traditionally understood to be chanted, not sung.

One of the CD's greatest anomalies, though wholly explicable by world music logic, occurs on track 10. The recording apparently features munshid Hamza Shakkur. But despite a thorough and deservedly laudatory introduction for Shakkur in the notes, his voice is *entirely* absent from the audio track, which features instead the virtuosic performance featuring Swiss-born Arab music exponent Julien Jalal al-Din Weiss. Musically one greatly respects Weiss, but the mismatch is very odd, not only exhibiting world music preferences for

instrumental music over sung text, but also suggesting that the compiler of notes and the compiler of audio were not the same person, or even in communication with one another! As mentioned earlier, no connection to the other representation of Mevlevi ritual (track 1) is made. Finally, in the notes to track 11 one encounters strange praise for the great Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who was apparently “considered the Pavarotti of the Sufi world.” Here world music discourse is only referencing itself.

Pages 10 and 11 of the booklet present “the sources of the music,” an intriguing heading reaffirming my earlier observation that this Sufi Music sampler is a second-order representation, representing world music media, rather than live musical tradition, and serving, at least in part, as an advertisement for these “source” discs, much the way iTunes provides 30-second samples as a means to entice the sale of an entire track. (One wonders why only 10 of the 11 albums are pictured.)

In sum, all the artists and recordings presented here are aesthetically outstanding, though the relation of performers and performances to Sufism is quite variable. Most tracks appear to be concert or studio performances (often in international world music contexts) rather than field recordings, a limitation which could easily be excused if it were at least acknowledged. The selection is limited in range (so many regions and traditions have been omitted, while others are overrepresented), and biased toward instrumental music (though sung poetry nearly always prevails in Sufi contexts). Finally, the notes, which appear to rely entirely on texts drawn from source CDs (thus repeating and compounding their errors), suffer from serious inadequacies. Worse than unscholarly or error-prone, they are badly afflicted by overgeneralizations, unproblematized categories, essentializations, and world music stereotyping, echoing Orientalist discourses, presenting misinformation, and failing to suggest important connections. Finally, understanding is severely curtailed by the absence of poetic translations. It is a rough guide to Sufi music, indeed.

As a result, this album can only be recommended for teaching music, ethnomusicology, or Islamic cultures under two conditions: (1) if it is supplemented by additional readings and critical classroom discussions; or (2) if it is presented as an instance of the world music phenomenon, to be interrogated as such. For the listener, however, these tracks present a rich aesthetic experience, one that can easily be extended by recourse to the generally available source CDs, and beyond. For this service, and for highlighting the work of these remarkable musicians, the editors and publishers of *The Rough Guide to Sufi Music* deserve commendation.