

TGU pictured in Kensal Green, London, in March. Left to right: Krupa, Gurjit, Tim, Hamid, Sheema and TUUP



→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Transglobal Underground

They single-handedly forged a whole new musical genre and are still impossible to categorise. Andy Morgan relives the exotic beats of TGU

In the early 1990s, world music was in the grip of a nasty custody battle. The case of real-instruments-and-noble-traditions versus dance-sweat-sample-and-be-damned was the *Kramer vs Kramer* of this nascent scene. The co-opted advocate and champion of the hipper, younger, trendier plaintiffs was a quasi-anonymous collective of West London sonic-freaksters called Transglobal Underground.

Many a brain-fevered hour was wasted arguing whether machines had any business making music; whether world music had to originate from distant exotic realms or could just as well be cooked up on a laptop in Ladbrooke Grove; whether the

term could only describe music with a noble heritage and clear cultural pedigree or just any old scallywag noise that dared to venture outside the straightjacket of contemporary rock pop normality. Transglobal Underground paid little heed to these pimplly debates and just got on with inventing a whole new ball game called... called what? Global fusion? Ethno-techno? Club world? Global electronica? Ethnic beats? World dance?

The fact is, Transglobal Underground have always been the victim of stomach-worrying showbiz semantics. In 1993 their style was new – gloriously and troublingly so – and nobody knew what the hell to call

it. They still don't. Maybe that is in itself a twisted compliment, a perverse tribute to their peculiar and defiantly indefinable blend of heterogeneous sounds and energies. After all, what combination of words could possibly describe the meeting and merging of Primal Scream and Tahitian chanting; drum'n'bass and Bulgarian choirs; *tabla* rhythms and grimy West London toasting; *dhol* drums and deep dub; Arabic chants and the ubiquitous funky drummer?

Their debut album *Dream of 100 Nations* launched the careers of Natacha Atlas, then fresh from a stint dancing for Jah Wobble's *Invaders of the Heart*, and Nation Records, the inspired production

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vehicle of Aki Nawaz who was to radicalise Transglobal's fusionistic approach with his own band Fun-Da-Mental. But the album also spawned a new and revolutionary way of making music. It gave adventurous musicians licence to indulge their curiosity and fascination for different flavours of sound from every point of the compass, whilst concocting hip, youthful, energetic grooves that plugged straight into the then pulsating grid of the electronic dance scene.

By their own admission, the founding members of Transglobal Underground weren't club-going regulars. But they were drunk on the surfeit of different musical cultures that jostled for attention on their West London doorsteps. Wander for an afternoon from Ladbroke Grove to Southall, via Shepherds Bush Market, Acton and Ealing, and if you're listening attentively, you'll hear all the ingredients of a typical Transglobal Underground record as you stroll along. That's all it was – a new music for a new model of urban life.

Almost two decades later, *Dream of 100 Nations* still sounds fresh. It fathered some inspired children, as well as terrifying legions of wishy-washy, trippy-dippy, plastic Buddha worshipping aural blancmange merchants. But blaming Transglobal for their wayward progeny would be as idiotic as dumping a million tedious and twiddly guitar solos on Jimi Hendrix's grave. As the band state in their own biography: '...the price of innovation is often a trail of shite left in your wake.' Transglobal blazed their own sweet-smelling trail and left their wake to others.

Despite flash-in-the-pan alliances with labels like Deconstruction, Sony Epic and Miles Copeland's Ark 21 Records, Transglobal Underground have basically stuck to the manifesto inherent in their name: remaining subterranean, autonomous and resolutely worldwide. The floating, expanding, contracting collective has comprised characters with names as mysterious and polyglotal as the music they purvey: Man Tu, Tax D, Alex Kasiek, Goldfinger, Terry Neale the Human Quica, rappers Sheriff, Coleridge and TUUP, Aki Nawaz, Natacha Atlas, Count Dubulah, Neil Sparkes, Attia Ahlan, Satin Singh and Johnny Kalsi. Their first single, 'Temple Head,' was eagerly consumed by the more adventurous dons of the dance floor, including Andy Weatherall and Danny Rampling, was voted Single of the Week in *Melody Maker*, and was used by Coca-Cola as the music for one of their adverts. That was the last time Transglobal ventured so far overground.

Staying under the radar but passionate



and busy at the same time has been Transglobal's secret for inner fulfilment. The mainstays of the band, Hamid Mantu and Tim Whelan, appear on the credits of umpteen credible and adventurous music projects, including albums by Zulu singer Doreen Thobekile, Natacha Atlas' hit albums *Diaspora* and *Gedida*, Egyptian pop idol Hakim and lately The Imagined Village. In 2008, the world music scene belatedly recognised Transglobal's enormous – almost clandestine – creativity and influence by awarding them a BBC Award for World Music.

Early on in their career, Transglobal made a decision, rare for studio-based beat freaks and DJ collectives at the time, to create a live show on a par with their studio dreams. This prescient strategy has allowed them to be Transglobal in body as well as mind, and perform in places far beyond the usual Western gig circuit, such as Tunisia and Venezuela. In 1998, Transglobal supported Robert Plant and Jimmy Page on a Europe-wide tour. The pair had been fans for months beforehand, turning up unannounced to Transglobal gigs with stories of their own musical adventures in Morocco and India in the early 70s. Performing live has also allowed Transglobal to survive the current collapse of the recorded music industry and continue to thrive as a fantastic live band, mixing booming bass with *sitar*, toasting and a kaleidoscope of percussion and samples. Next stop is Georgia apparently. ●

TOUR *Transglobal Underground are touring Europe this summer*

ONLINE *Hear excerpts from all of the Best... albums at www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/061 www.transglobalunderground.net*

Competition

We have five copies of *Run Devils and Demons* to give away. To enter, simply answer the following question:
What was the name of Transglobal's debut album?
See p5 for *Songlines* competition rules and address.
Closing date August 7 2009

BEST... ...ALBUMS



Dream of 100 Nations (Nation Records)

The first album and, in the opinion of many, still the best. The freshness and youth of Transglobal's sound has survived the years intact; the balance of the global colours and local energies is well nigh perfect, especially on 'Temple Head', 'I, Voyager' and 'Shimmer'.



Moonshout (Mule Satellite)

This, their latest studio album, was released on Transglobal's own label, and harvested the best crop of reviews and reactions since *Dream of 100 Nations*. Aural colours from Brazil and the Punjab to Bulgaria, the Middle East and Bollywood – Transglobal make sense of them all, with the help of myriad guests. Reviewed in #45.

...COMPILATION



Run Devils and Demons (Nascente)

A brave attempt by Transglobal and global dance DJ Phil Meadley to summarise an epic career in one neat and well-annotated package. It's a well-paced orgy of eclecticism and dancehall energy. Tribal-house-world-fusion-ambient-dub anyone? Oh just shut up and dance! Reviewed in #60.

...COLLABORATION



Natacha Atlas, Diaspora (Nation Records)

The Anglo-Arab diva's first solo album had Transglobal Underground's mark branded in its lush, modern, bass-heavy sound. It launched both Transglobal and Atlas on a path to mainland European success.

...AVOIDED



Yes Boss Food Corner (Ark 21 Records/Universal)

Transglobal's brief association with showbiz mogul and ex-manager of The Police, Miles Copeland, brought the band plenty of material benefits but unfortunately little in the way of creative or musical success.

LIKE TGU? THEN TRY... DUB COLOSSUS



A Town Called Addis (Real World)

A fine application of the TGU spirit to the vocal and instrumental treasures of modern-day Ethiopia, deep booming bass and delicate toppings, put together by Count Dubulah, aka Nick Page, one of the original TGU pioneers.



Sintayehu 'Mimi' Zebe of Dub Colossus