

Considering that each year there are only four months that are reliably warm (June-September), it's no wonder that summer in Chicago is dominated by outdoor festivals, nearly all of them focusing on music; locals are happy to escape their cabin fever. Chicago boasts itself as the city of neighbourhoods and just about everyone of them has their own warm weather party, while downtown's Grant Park, which runs along scenic Lake Michigan, plays hosts to the biggies. Festivals for blues, jazz, Celtic and gospel music bring many thousands together for concentrated two-and-three day extravaganzas of world-class entertainment, all of them free of admission charges.

With this competition, it seems like the odds have always been against World Music Festival Chicago, which was started in 1999 by Michael Orlove of the city's department of cultural affairs. It gets official support from the city, but not its money. Throughout most of its history, Orlove has had to scramble for funding from mostly private sources, a situation that makes his accomplishment all the more remarkable. And because his bookings cast such a wide net, it never fits any handy marketing niche. Arguably the largest world music festival in the US, the event has excelled at bringing together post-modern fusionists with committed traditionalists and international talent with local treasures.

Each year revelations arrive on stages, both giant and small; last year Zanzibar's legendary *taarab* group Culture Musical Club made their US debut with a free concert at the Frank Gehry-designed

band shell at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion, dazzling an audience of 4,500, many of whom might not have known the group from Boy George's Culture Club. But the hundreds of people lining up to purchase one of the group's hard-to-find CDs after the performance made clear how this festival routinely makes converts. A few nights earlier the energetic Brazilian singer Otto achieved the same galvanising effect on a few hundred hipsters at The Empty Bottle in the hot Ukrainian Village neighbourhood, ripping through his dynamic mix of samba, *mangue beat*, funk, and rock with go-for-broke energy and fearless charisma.

**The list of artists that have made local debuts demonstrates a certain vision: Seu Jorge, Gogol Bordello, Lila Downs and Los de Abajo**

"We try to introduce new groups every year," says Orlove, "booking groups making their Chicago debuts or artists that rarely perform here." Indeed, the list of artists that made local debuts at the festival and subsequently gone on to broader success demonstrates a certain vision: Antibalas, Seu Jorge, Ely Guerra, Yerba Buena, Gogol Bordello, Lila Downs and Los de Abajo, among them. Yet focusing on these world music stars misses a crucial aim of the festival. "Our aesthetic from the start is that each year we present the greatest collection of musicians you've never heard of. Other than Youssou N'Dour or Ali Akbar Khan, we've never really programmed anyone who is a known quantity in Chicago, yet they're all of headline quality within their

respective communities."

That desire to introduce people to music is reflected in several ways, chief among them affordability. Of the nearly 100 events, by more than 60 different acts, more than half are free. And when the event – typically a double-bill – is ticketed, admission tops out a mere \$15: a steal when one considers that singers like Natacha Atlas or Cibelle, who both performed in 2006, would usually command twice that amount. While most other Chicago festivals occur at a dedicated site, Orlove cites his admiration for the Vancouver Jazz Festival as the reason he programmes events at nearly 20 different venues scattered throughout the city. "For some visitors it might not be that convenient," he says, "but I think that challenge brings its own rewards. It gets people to visit a bunch of the city's different neighbourhoods. I like the idea of people moving from venue to venue." Practically speaking, it also means that if a family doesn't want to see a group in a nightclub, then odds are they'll get a chance to see them in a kid-friendly environment. Most acts play two or three times over the course of the festival, which also alleviates the potential disappointment of simultaneous bookings. Additionally, the schedule features both day and evening events, allowing for explorations of this splendid, sprawling city – either before or after taking in the music.

Chicago possesses a rich fabric of ethnic groups and Orlove admits that part of his impetus for launching the festival was frustration over the fact that each of these groups routinely brought in musicians – whether it was Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan or Kazem Al Saher – and no one outside



The futuristic Jay Pritzker Pavilion – one of the World Music Festival Chicago host venues. Below: Lila Downs performing at the 2005 festival

of that given community ever learned about the concert. "I wanted to open it up to the whole city while being careful to guarantee that whatever ethnic group a musician represented was still a key part of the audience." Indeed, Orlove and his small staff work diligently to maintain contacts with key community leaders, so that when an artist like Serbia's brass band leader Boban Marković performs in town, a good percentage of the audience are Eastern European immigrants.

The festival does more than tap into these communities to attend shows; they also make up part of the line-up – whether it's introducing an ongoing collaboration between the Chicago-based Polish jazz singer Grazyna Auguscik with the Cracow Klezmer Band or supporting the ambitious Chicago Immigrant Orchestra, a rarely convened group led by former Tom Waits sideman Willy Schwarz that has united local musicians from Brazil, Senegal, Tunisia, Ireland, China, India and Palestine, among others, in a single, genre-spanning ensemble.

The festival places an emphasis on creating dynamic bills. Among last year's most notable pairings: the prestigious Chicago Symphony Orchestra collaborating with Yat-Kha; local *pipa* master Yang Wei and the pan-Arabic Radio Maqam Ensemble in a programme dedicated to the Silk Road; the Serbian Gypsy rock band Kal with the France-based brass

band Slonovski Bal; former Yerba Buena singer Descemer Bueno with the Italian electro-folk ensemble Fiamma Fumana. And then there was the annual closing party at the Chicago Cultural Center where Italian singer Carmen Consoli, Indian slide guitarist Debashish Bhattacharya, Nordic traditionalists Gjallarhorn, Colombian *jaropo* pianist Claudia Calderón and the Israel-based Tajik folk troupe, the Alae Family, all performed under one roof.

What pleases Orlove most might be the way interest in international music has grown in the region. Colleen Miller, who books music at the prestigious Old Town School of Folk Music and has been a partner since the inaugural year says: "Because the fest offers so many events at discounted prices, or even free, it's helped build audiences for even the most regional music. We've seen an overall rise in attendance at our international shows over the past few years." A number of festivals in the Midwest

– in Bloomington, Indiana, Madison and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Toronto – now help defray the expense of initiating US tours and demonstrate a widespread curiosity. Disputing the reputation the US has earned under the Bush administration, Orlove says: "There is a tremendous interest in international music and travel here. Time after time, the performers are met with wild enthusiasm." ●

**World Music Festival Chicago runs September 14-20 2007**  
[www.cityofchicago.org/worldmusic](http://www.cityofchicago.org/worldmusic)



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