



PHOTO BY MARILENE DELLI

Pictured here is Alfred of the Malawi Mouse Boys. He's one of numerous musicians in Malawi that Ian Brennan has recorded for a world audience.

## Ian Brennan Sounds of another world

**BY SUZANNE ZALOKAR**  
STAFF WRITER

Ian Brennan has worked to bring music diversity to the ears of listeners around the globe since he began making field recordings in San Francisco in the early 1990s.

His first journey to another culture was with his wife, documentarian Marilena Delli, when they went to Rwanda. Delli's mother was visiting her native land for the first time since the genocide of 1994, and Brennan's wife was making a documentary about her return. The duo also wanted to actively search for music while they were there.

Brennan said they were fortunate to meet The Good Ones, a trio of Rwandan genocide survivors who play joyous, acoustic love songs written in the ancient local street dialect. He recorded with them and helped create their first album.

Brennan said he and his wife rather liked searching through hundreds of thousands of miles of African savannah and desert to have the chance to work with the outstanding musicians that they found – even if that meant listening to as much, or more, bad music than good along the way.

Tinariwen, a band whose tribe is in Mali, North Africa, recorded the album "Tassili" with Brennan and his portable studio. The album won a Grammy for Best World Music Album in 2012.

Another group, The Malawi Mouse Boys, named for their side job of selling grilled mice kebabs on the side of the road, were introduced to the global music scene by Brennan and Delli. They released their third album "Forever is 4 You" on April 8.

And then there is The Zomba Prison Project, with 60 collaborators – all

incarcerated in a maximum security prison in the southern Malawi city of Zomba. The album, "I Have No Everything Here," received Malawi's first-ever Grammy nomination in the World Music category.

"Each project is a labor of love," said Brennan. "I know we can continue to find good music. I hope we can continue to find platforms for that music to be heard and exposed, even if it is by a small number of people."

Earlier this year he released a book on music theory, "How Music Dies (or Lives): Field-recording and the Battle for Democracy in the Arts."

**Suzanne Zalokar:** When you say, "One of the only guitar bands in the last 25 years worth listening to," do you mean of all guitar bands ever – this guitar band from Malawi, one of the poorest nations in the world, is the guitar band to listen to?

**Ian Brennan:** Guitar is an extremely overplayed instrument. It has pretty much been exhausted of its possibilities.

The hype that surrounds English-speaking, two guitar, bass, drums combos is pretty tiring.

There have only been a handful of bands

that have done anything very interesting and of those, Tinariwen, because they bring such a different perspective on time – the way they structure rhythms, and the way they play together as a unit, often three or four guitar players at a time.

**S.Z.:** What do you think of the label, "world music" or "indie rock"?

**I.B.:** Those are ways of selling music for the most part. I think world music is especially problematic because it dictates something as the center and everything else is "other," and I think that is a

very dangerous concept.

Cultures that are so very different from one another get clumped together as one category whereas, what's the difference between heavy metal, rock, hard rock, alternative? Those lines are nearly indistinguishable sometimes. Yet, in world music you are talking about everything from Inuit music to spiritual music from Pakistan to somebody who is playing a 20-piece symphonic beat music from Ethiopia. It's sort of ridiculous putting them all together.



**"The repetition is unhealthy, neurologically. Diversity is healthy. It's not a political or philosophical stance, it's just a literal, nutritional reality that variety is good for you."**

– IAN BRENNAN

Everybody wants to be an outsider, but it is usually extremely hollow. It's not real at all. As a genre, indie rock has become just as predictable as any other genre that they are supposedly rebelling against or offering an alternative to.

For people in America or in the U.K., when they have nothing else to call something, they want to call it "blues," and because so much American music originates from the American Blues, a lot of times people will overly prescribe that to being influential in places it simply is not.

I mean, there is blues music in Cambodia and there is blues music in India and in Africa and they were not influenced by American Blues. Maybe in some recent fashion, but most of these forms have been around for hundreds of years or longer, and they are completely independent of the American Blues.

**S.Z.:** You have a new book: "How Music Dies or Lives: Field recording and the battle for democracy in the arts." Can you speak to the damages of colonization in generalizing distinctive variations?

**I.B.:** We live in a time where people potentially have the opportunity to hear more voices than ever before, but in fact, they listen to fewer. Certain voices dominate. Stylistically there is a real repetition, which is the nature of recorded music. It's the ability to repeat and copy without error, exactly what has come before.

There are dangers in that. There is beauty in it too, there are strengths in it, but there are dangers.

The book is about bringing up points for people to reflect on and have a dialogue

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