

SOUNDS, from page 12

about.

What is focused on (in mainstream Western music) are the superficial aspects of personalities. It becomes personality driven because the music itself is so indistinguishable. The only way it can be sold is through these false distinctions, the personalities.

I think it's a trap for audiences and performers alike. I'm not anti anything. I certainly can understand the comfort that people might have in hearing something familiar and the reality is that certain recordings have accompanied people almost their entire lives.

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.

S.Z.: Tell me what got you in the door of the Zomba Prison in Malawi, Africa.

I.B.: The signs were positive that they would approve the project, but they would not guarantee it without meeting us in person. We went there and it was all kind of a formality.

The commissioner of the prison at the time said that he also wanted me to teach some classes for the prisoners and the guards as a part of being there. I was not only willing to do that, I wanted to. It was a win, win.

It led to a deepening of the experience and of the prison and quite literally, it was the key to getting inside the male side of the prison – where the male musicians play in a separate, privileged area.

S.Z.: Your Zomba Prison Project album was nominated for a Grammy in 2016. Tell me how does that happen for an album, mostly sung in the local Chichewa language by inmates in a Malawian prison?

I.B.: The world (music) category has become very predictable. It's democratic, and it's secret ballot, but it is driven by these big names, most of whom put out a record every year.

Between this little pool of people that are stars in the world music category, you pretty much know it's going to be those names every year. And it was, and Zomba Prison was mixed in with them.

S.Z.: I'm assuming if they are in prison, that they have been charged with quite serious crimes.

I.B.: Yes and no. (Zomba) is the maximum prison for Malawi. There're actually 33 prisons (in Malawi) of differing sorts.

There are people there that have committed very serious crimes. There are also people there who are awaiting trial or on appeal who may or may not be innocent. That is quite troubling.

There really is no good way to incarcerate another human being. There are a lot of systems and a lot of attempts. It certainly is necessitated by people who are sadistic, which make a small percentage of even the criminal population. Aside from those individuals, you really have to look at it and ask, "Is this the best we can do?"

Given that Malawi is the world's poorest country, I'm not so sure that their conditions would be radically worse than what you saw in Oregon.

S.Z.: Was there anything else unique that struck you during the recording of the album?

I.B.: Half of the songs on the record came from the women, who have nothing. They have no instruments, they have no support. And they really were convinced that they were not singers, as far as solo singers, or songwriters and over half of the songs on the record, come from them. The thing that has been so frustrating is that the media has almost completely ignored them. Completely ignored, deleted their contribution to the record.

Press that has gone there to visit, has not been gone to the women's side. Partially because the prison has supported that. They want the band to be the story, but in fact, the band was not nominated, the record was nominated. A record made by 60 people in Zomba Prison, many of whom are

no longer there and have been transferred or released, and one of whom tragically died in the prison. She was only 36 years old when we recorded.

When people go there and they interview and take photos of these people, it has nothing to do with the record. It's very troubling, but also revealing to the levels of patrimony and racism that is there. I had a guy send me a picture who said he wanted to do a project with the band. He had two photos taken and he is standing with all of these prisoners, and not one of them had anything to do with the record.

S.Z.: The song, "Women Today Take Care of Business," goes: "While women are in salon doing their hair/their husbands are asleep/ While women are in the market selling onions and things/their husbands are sleeping. While men are awake, all they know is to play bawo." It is great to have a male Malawian singer/songwriter who is commenting on this aspect of his society. It really speaks to global society as well. Let's face it, women are doing a lot of

the work globally.

I.B.: Right. I think those are some of the best lyrics on the record. Those were written by one of the non-songwriters who wrote the song specifically for the project with much encouragement.

It was one of the last songs we recorded. He was very reluctant to even try to write a song and he wrote the best song, lyrically. Not just because of the politics, I just think his writing is more literate and detailed.

He's also, revealingly, one of the youngest people in the project. He was in his early 20s at the time, so I think he was sitting there in prison. It gives you a lot of time to think about things. He had regret and that was his perspective. Hopefully, for him, he's going to be released in the next couple of years. Hopefully he will be able to learn that insight and translate it to action when he is released. I think he will.

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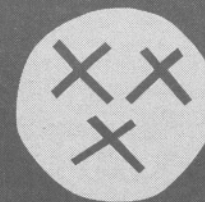
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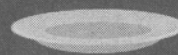
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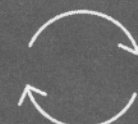
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