

# WORLD BEAT

## Jungle fever

*Chulalongkorn University Ensemble showcase Thai rhythms at Rainforest World Music Festival*

John Clewley



Shannon's fast and furious Celtic dance music from Poland.  
Getting down with the Chula team!



Yelemba's talking drums from Ivory Coast.  
Lost in spice with Australia's Old Spice Boys.

The eighth annual Rainforest World Music Festival was this year held on the weekend of July 8 to 10 at the Sarawak Cultural Village, 35 kilometres from Kuching in Sarawak, Malaysia. World beat was there to cover this fun-packed musical extravaganza, as well as to offer support for the first Thai band to play the festival, the Chulalongkorn University Ensemble.

The festival has grown in leaps and bounds since the first few hundred music fans braved the jungle to see music from around the globe some eight years ago. Twenty thousand music fans of all ages and nationalities turned up this year, and each night was sold out.

Malaysia's Urban Development and Tourism Minister Dato Seri Sri Wong Soon Koh told a press conference during the festival that with "re-prioritised" international marketing, the festival could enhance its reputation by becoming a platform for enhancing unity and promoting cultural diversity worldwide. He added that people can understand different cultures better by listening to other people's ethnic music.

I really enjoy attending this festival because while I may get the chance to see an artist or band I know but have never seen, there will also be new bands and styles to enjoy as well.

Headlining this year's event were bullerengue Queen Petrona Martinez of Columbia, Pakistan's qawwali master Faiz Ali Faiz, Namgar of Buryatia in the Russian Federation, Djamel Laroussi of Algeria, Italy's Acquaragia Drom, Florencio Mess and the Maya K'ekchi' Strings from Belize, Poland's Shannon, The Foghorn String Band, the Old Spice Boys from Australia and Yelemba D'Abidjan from the Ivory Coast. The Sarawakian input was provided by Jerry Kamit, the sape (Sarawak lute) player, who was joined by the local fusion outfit, Tuku Kame and the father and son percussion team, Tabuh Pak Ainal.

One of the features of the festival is the variety of daily workshops on offer; sometimes they focus on one band and sometimes on a theme that brings together musicians from different cultures. To give you an idea, this year we had collected fiddlers in "Wristwork", flautists flaunting it in the "Lip Service" workshop, zitherers and xylophone players in "Plucked and Struck" and a meeting of two continents in "Rainforest People."

The Chulalongkorn University Ensemble held two terrific workshops, one of which centred around the ramwong and yes, it is true, I was on stage for this one! The ensemble, led by Dr Bussakorn Samrongthong also showed a fascinated audience the "musical dialects" in Thailand in another workshop by presenting traditional music from the kingdom's different regions.

As usual, the percussion workshop, this year called, "Skin, Wood and Metal", was jam-packed. And I really enjoyed the square-dance workout with the Foghorn String Band, which turned out handy later when the band did its evening show.

Two other workshops stood out: the Gypsy band Acquaragia Drom explained various dances like the tarantella and then went interactive with a dance in which two men have to duel with their fingers \_ no knives \_ for the favours of a woman; and the Aussie out the old Spice Boys showed how to play two dessert spoons, a kazoo (their version of the jazz standard Misty using this kid's instrument brought the house down) and various homemade instruments in a hilarious session. The Boys explained that their music was really skiffle played with a shuffle beat. "You can call it scuffle, if you like," said drummer Tim Reeves, with a straight face.

With several workshop sessions under our belts, we headed off to the majestic stage setting \_ backed up against jungle-clad Mount Santubong \_ for the first of the evening shows.

Local fusion outfit Tuku Kame hit the boards first on Friday night with an expanded line-up \_ gongs, accordion, sape, percussion and fronted by three female singers. Jerry Kamit was outstanding on sape. Their set brought onto the second, smaller stage, the crazy Old Spice Boys, who immediately grabbed attention with a funny number, Who Gave You A Licence To Drive Me Crazy before playing one of the hits of the festival, a cover of Prince's Kiss. I'm looking forward to the hearing the band's version of Grandmaster Flash's rap classic, The Message, complete with an upper class English accent.

Florencio Mess's hypnotic harp rhythms then took centre stage and he and his band played a low key set during which Mess, a sprightly 74-year old, went down into the audience to show them how Mayans dance. Sarawan then followed, led by Mohsen Kasirossafar on the zarb, a goblet-shaped drum, in a fascinating set of mainly percussion-based songs from Persia and Kurdistan. Off we then went for a short madcap set from Acquaragia Drom, which had everyone singing a chorus of "Utsa, utsa, sa-sa." The evening was completed with a stirring set of Celtic music from, naturally, some Poles! According to Shannon, there are surprisingly around 30 Celtic music bands in Poland, and they play what sounded like the real deal to me; bagpiper and lead singer Marcin Ruminiski was outstanding, and he began proceedings on Saturday night with a haunting bagpipe solo from the second stage.

The bright young star of qawwali music Faiz Ali Faiz then took centre stage with his seven member ensemble that included two harmonium for a powerful and uplifting set that was too short to fully enjoy this fine singer's full range. Baun Lenjau and Tabuh Pak Ainal entertained from the small stage before Namgar sang a set of Mongolian-style songs that suffered from sound problems and ended up a little disjointed.

Despite this lull, Petrona Martinez, a whirlwind of energy at 66 years of age, took to the stage telling us about her music and its Caribbean origins. Four telepathic percussion masters kept a relentless rhythm going, accompanied by a three-person chorus and some of the longest flutes I've ever seen, while Martinez twirled around the stage. Great music.

Algeria's Djamel Laroussi closed the Saturday show with a more rock-oriented set that many of the younger members seemed to like but I found it out of step with much of the rest of the festival.

The final night brought Thailand's own Chulalongkorn University Ensemble to the stage. The band focused on bonglang and mor lam for the most part and the funky rhythms found in Thailand's Northeast went down very well, especially when two of the members got down to the front to dance and interact with the audience. It was a special treat for the one person in the audience who was identified as Thai, a young woman living in Malaysia. She told me that she was so proud to see some Thai music being played.

Two really exciting sets stand out from the Sunday shows. The Foghorn String Band from the USA played a thrilling set of what they called, "Hillbilly" music. "If you want to sing a big 'yee-hah' do," said the banjo player. As the band started Kicking Up the Devil On A Holiday outbreaks of square-dancing began like a bush fire, prompting one of the band to shout out, "Hey, no-one dances like that in America. Can we stay?"

The final act of the festival was Yelemba d'Abidjan. This was one of the best percussion performances I have ever seen \_ duelling drums, solos, duelling balafon xylophones, acrobatic dancing, chanting and call and response and a finale that featured masks and costumes were just a few of the sublime moments in this set. One mask, a huge wooden construction that looked like a crocodile actually spat real red-hot cinders and smoke, and the man who performed with it, artistic director Lassina Coulibaly, managed to dance at the same time as well. The energy levels of the musicians was astonishing and the rhythms incessant. A fantastic performance.

Yelemba set up a groove for the rest of the performers to join them on stage for the festival finale and then they carried on into the night back at the resort where we were all staying. A perfect way to end three days of terrific music in the jungle.

Many thanks to all at the Sarawak Tourism Board and Malaysia Airlines. More information on the festival at: [www.sarawaktourism.com](http://www.sarawaktourism.com).

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**INFORMATION AND ALBUMS FROM THE BANDS AT RWMF**

Faiz Ali Faiz: Look out for the album nominated for the BBC WM Awards, "Your Love Makes Me Dance" (Accords Croises, France, 2005). Other albums of note include "Vol.8 Nigahen" (Qawwali) (Oriental Star, UK) and "La Nouvelle Voix Du Qawwali" (World Village). For more information check [accords-croises.com](http://accords-croises.com).

Florencio Mess: Key album is "Maya K'Ekchi' Strings" (Stonetree, USA, 2000). For more information, see [cdroots.com](http://cdroots.com) and [calabash.com](http://calabash.com).

Namgar: Recommended album is "Hatar" (Xatap-Dance) on Sketic Music, Russia. More information can be found at [tarbbagan.com/namgar](http://tarbbagan.com/namgar).

The Old Spice Boys: Check out the boys own site, [oldspiceboys.com](http://oldspiceboys.com) for information on their three albums: "Lost in Spice", "Alibi of Birdland" and "Live At the Rails".

Yelembe D'Abidjan: The Ivory Coast percussion masters also have their own website, [yelembe.com](http://yelembe.com). Check out the album "Homage: Percussions & Songs From Ivory Coast" (Buda, France, 2002).

Shannon: Their three most recent discs are: "Shannon" (1999), "Green Hypnosis" (2003) and the latest one, "Tchortvee Scoont Folk" (Folk Music \_ Where the Devil Is It From?). Check out [shannon.art.pl](http://shannon.art.pl). For those wanting to plug into the Central European Celtic scene, check out [europeanirish.com](http://europeanirish.com).



Petrona Martinez: Get hold of her wonderful album "Mi Tambolero" (Factoria Records, Columbia, 2004). Singing and percussion from the Caribbean coast of Columbia.



The Foghorn String Band: "Rattlesnake Tidal Wave" (Siren Music, USA) which, quite apart from the downhome hillbilly music, is worth it for the cover art alone. More info from [waltzingbear.com](http://waltzingbear.com).

Tuku' Kame: The local Sarawakian fusion outfit features virtuoso "sape" player Jerry Kamit. Check out the albums "Tuku' Kame \_ Gadong" (Zanzibar Media, Malaysia) and Kamit's own "Semmpai Sayan Flora" (BHMP, Malaysia)