

When Jacob Edgar is in New York, he often checks out the lineup at Barbés, a music venue in Park Slope, Brooklyn.



Q & A

NAME
Jacob Edgar

AGE
43

BORN IN
San Francisco, California

RESIDES IN
Charlotte, Vermont

JOB DESCRIPTION
As the founder of the world music label Cumbancha and host of the PBS travel series *Music Voyager*, Edgar crisscrosses the globe in search of artists to record.

TIME SPENT ON THE ROAD
4 to 6 months a year

PLACES VISITED IN THE LAST YEAR
Denmark, Israel, Jamaica, 14 countries in western and southern Africa, and Nashville, Tennessee

SOUNDS TRACKER

BY AARTI VIRANI

Q. You started your own record label, Cumbancha, in 2006. How did you get interested in world music?

A. When I was a teenager, I spent a year as an exchange student in Reykjavik, Iceland. I went with a choir to what was then the Soviet Union. I had my guitar with me and found that music was the gateway to meeting people. After completing my master's degree in ethnomusicology at UCLA, I felt the academic side was too stodgy. I was more interested in energized, real-world stuff. So in the early 1990s, I started working for a small French company that exported

music from Africa and France to the United States. Eventually, I met Dan Storper, founder of the Putumayo world music label. He asked me to be his researcher. From there I launched Cumbancha. Finding the next Bob Marley has been my goal ever since.

What have been some of your most surprising discoveries?

Earlier this year, I was a guest speaker on a National Geographic Explorer cruise along the West African coast. We stopped at São Tomé and Príncipe, two islands that make up one nation. I'd heard of only

one musical group, Africa Negra, from that country. My local contact took me to a "record store"—basically a man with a computer who burns CDs for you—and I found gem after gem of amazing artists and songs. The musicians I spoke with rattled off the names of about 20 or 30 rhythms, reflecting all the various cultural forces that have converged on those islands.

When you're in a country for the first time, how do you find good local music?

I don't waste time. If I don't have a

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JACOB EDGAR'S FAVORITE PLACES TO EAT, STAY, AND VISIT AROUND THE GLOBE

1. STRAWBERRY HILL HOTEL & SPA

Kingston, Jamaica

"Founded by Chris Blackwell, the music entrepreneur who introduced Bob Marley, U2, and others to the world, Strawberry Hill is located 3,100 feet above sea level in the Blue Mountains. Bob Marley convalesced here in the original Great House after he was shot in 1976. A stay in one of these hillside cottages would probably heal all wounds." *Irish Town, St. Andrew, (876) 944-8400, islandoutpost.com/strawberry_hill*

2. TROPENMUSEUM

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

"I'm not a big museum person. I usually prefer to hang out in the streets with the local people, but the Tropical [Tropen] Museum is great fun. The collections and exhibits explore



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3. NATYACHARYA'S SCHOOL OF MUSIC & DANCE

Chennai, India

"Here is an off-the-beaten-path destination for music fans. Make sure to stop in the head office for permission to wander through the walled estate of founder Natyacharya Sri S. Balachandra Raju. In the cottages around the grounds, you can glimpse young students learning the finer points of Karnatic dance and such instruments as the vina (a relative of the sitar) and the tabla."

12a Sakthi Nagar Second St., Choolaimedu, 91/(0) 44-2374-1154

4. ABU GOSH RESTAURANT

Abu Gosh, Israel

"My parents were hippies, so I grew up eating hummus and pita bread. But the U.S. version tastes like Spackle and cardboard compared with the ambrosia found throughout the Middle East. The argument of where to find the best hummus is never-ending. Abu Gosh Restaurant has an amazing story, in which a poor Palestinian-Israeli tow truck driver won more than \$20 million in the U.S. lottery and returned to his homeland to start the hummus restaurant of his dreams."

65 Hashalom, 972/2-533-2019, abugosh-restaurant.co.il



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the diversity of humankind, turning a building that was once a symbol of Dutch colonial power into a celebration of common roots and values. The attached theater also hosts a wonderful series of world music concerts." *Linnaeusstraat 2, 31/(0) 2-568-8200, tropenmuseum.nl*

local contact, I just start talking to people on the street. Typically, I have the name of a local musician that I use as an icebreaker. When you mention a familiar artist, people's defenses usually drop. We'll often start by talking about politics. Sometimes, they'll invite me to their homes. Eventually, I'll get to a place—a record store or a local label's office—where I can find the music I'm looking for. If you dig far and hard enough, you'll find that old calypso singer who lives in a shack.

Is there an artist you are particularly enthusiastic about right now?

I'm working with a really interesting 32-year-old musician, Bombino, from Niger. He is Tuareg, a seminomadic Saharan people, and plays electric guitar. Bombino's music may remind Western listeners of John Lee Hooker's blues and Jimi Hendrix's or Led Zeppelin's psychedelic rock. But it's actually more rooted in the folk rhythms and melodies of the Tuareg people. Pop groups like the Dave Matthews Band and Arcade Fire have asked him to open for them. He's the sort of artist I'm always looking for, someone with multigenerational appeal who is also cool.

What can music tell you about a place and its people?

Music is an audio representation of history. It reflects the different influences in a country. Some of them can be recent, like hip-hop or rock, and some can stretch back thousands of years. If you know how to recognize those influences, you can actually learn a lot about what happened in a culture's history. Hindustani classical music from North India, for instance, was heavily influenced by the 12th-century Moghul conquerors who arrived in the region from Central Asia. And like any art, some of the greatest music in the world comes from suffering. I just spent a lot of time in countries such as Cape Verde that were very involved in the slave trade. But from the crucible of that horrible history have come musical forms like salsa and jazz. **A**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF STRAWBERRY HILL HOTEL & SPA; JAN RONALD CRANS; COURTESY OF MEINL PERCUSSION; COURTESY OF ABU GOSH RESTAURANT