

The 21st Century MVP: Bridge Personalities Who Happily Span Cultures

People who connect cultures play a vital role in an increasingly connected world. This article first appeared in the special TEDGlobal issue of Design Mind, a publication of global innovation firm Frog Design.

In 1984, Paul Simon's recording career had reached a nadir. His last two albums—*One-Trick Pony* and *Hearts and Bones*—were commercial failures. Many of his fans wished the songwriter would return to his previous identity as half of the singing duo Simon and Garfunkel.

Looking for inspiration, Simon became increasingly obsessed with a cassette recording of "township jive" music from South Africa that a friend had given him. Simon was particularly struck by a track called "Gumboots" that had been recorded by the Boyoyo Boys, a group of sax, guitar, bass, and drum musicians who played mbaqanga music in and around Soweto. The music reminded Simon of 1950s R&B, and he asked his record company to get him in touch with the Boyoyo Boys to see if they'd be interested in collaborating.

Xenophilia is a powerful tool for transcending one's own culture.

This wasn't an easy request for Warner Brothers to honor. Starting in 1961, South Africa's apartheid government had been subjected to a cultural boycott begun by the British Musicians Union. Managed by the UN Center Against Apartheid, the boycott prohibited artists worldwide from collaborating with South African musicians, and it maintained an influential blacklist against artists who performed in South Africa. This list took on special importance in 1979, with the founding of Sun City, a resort casino in the bantustan of Bophuthatswana, one of ten Apartheid-era territories into which many of the region's black residents were forced to relocate by the South African government. The Sun City casino paid celebrities such as Frank Sinatra, Linda Ronstadt, and Rod Stewart a lot of money to perform there, even though local residents couldn't afford the tickets. In response, Bruce Springsteen's guitarist, Steven Van Zandt, led a coalition of musicians who recorded a popular protest anthem, "(Ain't Gonna Play) Sun City."

Opposition from the US and UK musical community wasn't the only obstacle Simon would have to overcome to record with Sowetan musicians. In response to resistance efforts in black townships in the mid- to late '80s, South African President Pieter Botha imposed a set of curfews that made movement difficult, especially for musicians who generally performed at night. This made recording logistically difficult. Beyond that, there was little reason for the Boyoyo Boys to trust the intentions of foreign collaborators. Rock impresario Malcolm McLaren in 1983 had a hit single, "Double Dutch," which was

based on one of their instrumental tracks—and the Sowetan musicians had been neither credited nor paid for their involuntary contribution. At the moment Simon wanted to approach the band for a potential collaboration, it was filing a lawsuit against McLaren, in an attempt to collect royalties.

Simon didn't just need an introduction to record with the Boyoyo Boys. He needed a bridge.

Hilton Rosenthal is a fascinating figure in South African music history. A middle-class white South African, he found himself (in the late '70s) in charge of the “black music” division for the Gramophone Record Company, the regional affiliate of CBS Records. At the time Rosenthal wondered whether there was space for music in South Africa that wasn't purely white or black. He began working with Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu, the two musicians who became the heart of Juluka, a racially integrated band that electrified traditional Zulu music and brought it to a global audience. Rosenthal recorded collections of township music and attempted to distribute them internationally. It was one of these collections that had reached Simon in New York.

Rosenthal was able to persuade the Black Musicians Union that a collaboration with an artist of Simon's stature could give Sowetan mbaqanga music the global profile that Jamaican reggae enjoyed. Indeed, that's what the collaboration ultimately delivered. The recordings Simon made over two weeks in South Africa became *Graceland*, a Grammy-winning album widely considered to be one of the ten most influential records of the 1980s. Rosenthal had become Simon's bridge.

For Simon, *Graceland* opened a chapter of his career marked by creative collaborations with musicians from all corners of the globe. He became a musical xenophile, searching for inspiration in whatever was unfamiliar and fascinating, from Brazilian drums to Afro-Cuban melodies to mbaqanga guitar riffs.

Xenophilia is a powerful tool for transcending the limits of one's own culture and seeking opportunity in the world. But it's a complicated tool, one that's easy to misuse. What transformed Simon into a successful xenophile was his decision not only to interact with the cultural artifact—the cassette he'd been given—but also to make a connection with the people who'd made the music. This differed greatly from McLaren's approach (he merely sampled the music). There are lots of fans of African music, but xenophiles are the ones who can transcend the mere collecting of records and turn their interest into learning, playing, recording, and exploring the music and the people who make it. Simon did all that—and then starting advocating for the music, too.

To move beyond contact into cooperation and co-creation, people typically need bridge figures like Rosenthal to lead and guide. Bridging requires not just the trust of the two parties you're bringing together; it requires identifying with each one. Rosenthal wasn't merely introducing Sowetan musicians to the international music scene—he had his feet in both worlds and a deep desire to connect the two.

Those who channel their love of cultures often end up with superpowers useful in a connected world.

Of course, not everyone with the good fortune to be born bi- or multicultural wants to be a bridge figure. Some people would rather choose one culture over another than try to strike a balance among them. Sometimes it's far easier to forsake that sari for jeans after moving to the US or reconstruct a virtual Mumbai in Michigan. But those who channel their love of various cultures often end up with a special set of superpowers that are useful in an increasingly connected world.

Take, for example, Erik Hersman, who was raised in southern Sudan and Kenya as the child of Bible-translating American missionaries. After returning to the US after high school, Hersman became a US marine and a top software developer. He now lives back in Kenya, where he runs the popular blog Afrigadget, which introduces African technological hacks to a global audience, and iHub, a digital co-working space, which connects Kenyan software developers to best practices in the international IT industry. Hersman is able to wander around Gikomba, Nairobi, and talk to local metalworkers in Swahili to find out how to turn the drive shaft of a Land Rover into a cold chisel, because he's one of them—he's Kenyan. And he can tell the story of Africa in a way that's interesting to an audience of American geeks because he's an American geek. Lots of people have one of these skill sets. Bridge figures are lucky enough to have both and to be animated with a passion that drives them to bring cultures together, introducing each to the peculiarities and powers of the other.

The Internet age should be a golden age for bridge figures.

Most of us can't aspire to be bridge figures—we're simply not rooted in multiple cultures. But we can aspire to be xenophiles. It's my argument that we must. The world we live in is so complicated and interconnected that solving many problems requires openness, understanding, and the ability to communicate with people from different cultures. Imagine trying to solve climate change without talking to Indian and Chinese citizens. Or living a full life in an urban neighborhood without connecting with your neighbors who speak different languages.

The Internet age should be a golden age for bridge figures and for xenophiles. The same tools that make it possible for me to obsessively follow Ghanaian politics and Japanese sumo wrestling from my home in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, also allow Erik to guide me through Nairobi without ever leaving my house. Learning about South African music—and collaborating with South African musicians—no longer requires airplane tickets, passports, and Paul Simon's recording budget (though having a Hilton Rosenthal may still be a pre-requisite).

That said, the information that the Internet puts at our fingertips also represents a major challenge by enabling us to cocoon ourselves in information that's unthreatening and unsurprising. If our friends are interested in the same people and places we are, we end up reinforcing our biases and prejudices by following the links they forward us, rather than expanding our worldview. At times, the Internet seems to be heading not towards a future where it's a universal platform for communication, but to a series of loosely linked echo chambers where it's possible for American conservatives to speak to other American conservatives, Egyptian reformists to other Egyptian reformists, and so on, without these conversations escaping into a wider space for dialogue.

Bridge figures face the challenge of finding people who are willing to listen and try to understand the variety of global and cultural dialogs. Xenophiles face the challenge of locating and listening to these different voices without being overwhelmed by the roar of the Internet. For those of us who believe that we benefit commercially, creatively, charitably, or politically from encountering a wider world, the challenge is figuring out how to make the Internet more powerful for xenophiles and bridge figures alike.

[Top image by Jack Versloot]

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