

# Indian oceans of sound

## - Raga South is North: Jon Hassell's raga in electric blue

The name **Jon Hassell** is synonymous with *Fourth World*, the other-worldly, technicolour musical collages the man's been creating since the late seventies. This in-depth interview essay explores the sources, ecological and technological connections and possible futures explicit in Hassell's music, dream theory and ongoing book project, 'The North and South of You'

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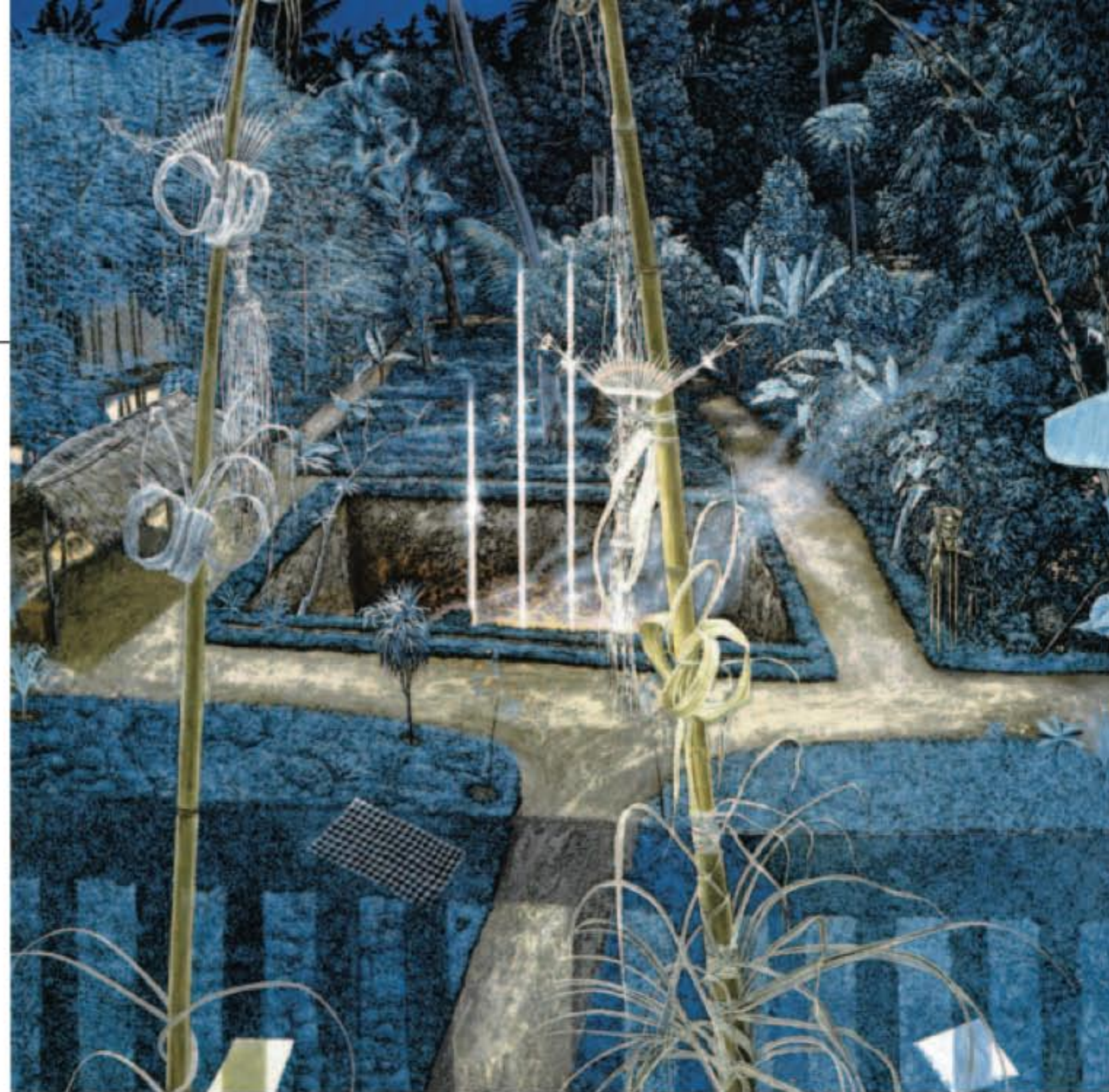
When the first Womad Festival occurred around the summer of 1982, showcasing a dazzling diversity of musicians brought in from around the world, it felt novel and, as it turned out, ahead of its time. Although a large audience manifestly failed to turn up, bringing on sudden bankruptcy for Womad – only saved by Peter Gabriel reforming Genesis for a one-off reunion – the line-up was top-heavy with Western musicians who, along with writers and the independent end of the music business, had been pushing this internationalisation of music for several years. Alongside Gabriel were The Police's drummer Stewart Copeland, a reincarnated Robert Fripp, The Beat, and Don Cherry, Colin Walcott and Nana Vasconcelas, the line-up that constituted the proto world-jazz outfit Codona. Also eagerly awaited and making his debut in the fields of Shepton Mallet that weekend was the avant-trumpeter, Jon Hassell.

Hassell was already a cult figure in Britain brought to the post-blank generations' attention by his collaboration with Brian Eno. In 1980 they had released *Possible Music*. It was Hassell's record but Eno's name headed the cover and Eno took up the promotional tour of duty, talking up Africa as the future of the next hundred years at every opportunity. Alongside the main title was the phrase and promise, *Fourth World Volume 1*. By the time of Womad two summers on, another release had slipped into the world: *Dream Theory In Malaya*, described as volume two in the Fourth World series. And the next summer a third, *Magic Realism* (though without any volume control) completed what for many was a truly inspirational trilogy of records. Before this there had already been a lead up to this triad. In the mid-seventies Hassell released his first record, *Vernal Equinox*, a mellow first step into Fourth World, trumpet raga lines mixed with minimalist electronics, followed in 1977 by the jazz-rock

inflected *Earthquake Island*. All these records, in Hassell's words on *Magic Realism*, proposed a 'contemporary coffee-coloured classical music'. Recently in an attempt to deflect his work from being too closely identified within the all-consuming category of world music, Hassell has taken to the working title of 'worldly music'. All three of the records highlighted the beautiful phased trumpet playing, a glissando effect he had already cultivated for over half a decade, since journeying to the east, and arriving at the feet of the renowned Indian vocalist, Pandit Pran Nath, keeper of the flame of the Kirana Gharana or school. No stranger to technological adaptation, he has repeatedly used a series of devices to multi-track the trumpet so he can play against and alongside himself, techniques that both anticipate and have become a commonplace since the emergence of computers in music.

As rhythmic and textural backing to the trumpet, Hassell built spectacularly intricate soundworlds, intimately reminiscent of musics from any number of gone worlds: Moroccan Mahgreb and the whirling dustworld of the north African desert; the lush swamp-like verdencies of the Indonesian tropics; or the bare heat-ridden plains of north India. In instrumentation these promiscuously mixed both hi-tech futurism and lo-tech ancient tradition, bowl-gongs and the studio as instrument, loops upon loops. The music resembles, yet is never formally connected with, any specific tradition, although Hassell can claim many years of familiarity with the Indian classical raga and drone tradition contained within the bones of this possible music's body. Hassell made this space *sans* any specific place, a key into his fourth world. Within the music fraternity Hassell is seen as a founding father of early ambient, turning up the heat on many a chill-out compilation.

Twenty years on from the Womad debut on UK shores, and Hassell is once again in Britain, this time to



Alexander's Dream by Mati Klarwein

perform with Baaba Maal and Howie B at a special *Only Connect* evening in London's concrete art cavern, The Barbican. The evenings music is, Hassell says himself, ninety percent his, put together in four days 'wall to wall' rehearsals in the run-up to the concert. Much of the evening is a return journey through Hassell's possible musics; a sample from ADJ floats across the auditorium as the evening sets in. But what is different is Maal, a vocalist of unworldly power and focus, who sets up a tension within the sound palette, against the sultry and languid instrumentation. 'An

experiment,' says Hassell of integrating vocals into the palette. He appears keen to continue this vector in the life story of Fourth World, which on the April evening has reaffirmed the influence and prescience, along with a startling originality, of the early Fourth World albums.

If the ambient cognoscenti know these records well, Fourth World is also part of the musical frame, which has borne influence and imitation, becoming a generic term for identifying related sub-genres. Down the years, while this influence has seeped into the minds of