

review music

this week's essential reading

Gloria Gaynor speaks to Jerry Portwood, Rolling Stone magazine

"Disco had that thing of camaraderie ... If disco had stuck around, we don't [know] how much less terrorism we might have in the world now. It puts everyone in a good mood"

Moroccan beats

Half a century ago, writer Paul Bowles travelled through Morocco to record the sounds of its people. A CD box set breathes new life into this joyous, mystical music, [Andy Battaglia](#) writes



Music of Morocco:
Recorded by Paul Bowles,
1959

Various artists
Dust-to-Digital
Dh220

The notion of it could not be more enticing: Paul Bowles, distinguished man of the arts and patron saint of William Burroughs and all the venturesome Beats who followed his exile's lead, driving through dusty Morocco in a Volkswagen bug with a bulky tape recorder and a yearning to hear otherworldly sounds.

It was a time when foreign lands could be perfectly foreign and unknown. Days or weeks could go by without the tiniest blip of communication. Music from points of origin removed from routine remained a mystery.

It was 1959. Records existed, of course, and although they moved music around the world it was with nothing like the pace and regularity of now. To hear a zither or an oud required getting your hands on a rare piece of vinyl and sitting around it, like a congregation. Then there was the process of getting that piece of vinyl made, first with enormous recording horns and later machines that were a long way still from being pocket-size.

So it was when Bowles recorded the 30 performances that make up *Music of Morocco: Recorded by Paul Bowles, 1959*, a set of archival riches now released in a lavish fabric box. Inside are four CDs, a digital download code and a 120-page leatherette book of a kind you can imagine making its way across Morocco, with a cover decorated with elaborate gold stamping and the initials of its polymathic muse: PFB.

Paul Frederic Bowles is best known as the author of *The Sheltering Sky*, a 1949 novel about displaced Americans travelling the North African desert and learning the limits of their knowledge of the world. But he was many other kinds of character too: a composer with ties to Aaron Copland and John Cage; a creator of theatre music for Orson Welles; a poet, a translator and, in general, a sort of magnet for like-minded souls who followed him to his adopted home of Tangier.

In the 1950s and '60s, the city became an outpost for leading lights of the Beat Generation, with Burroughs a mainstay as well as Brion Gysin, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and more.



In the mid-20th century, Paul Bowles drove through Morocco in a Volkswagen Beetle with an Ampex 601 tape recorder to capture the music of its people before the arrival of modernity. Above, Bowles, and right, a double horn group. Courtesy Dust-to-Digital / Library of Congress



Bowles lived there from 1947 until his death in 1999, after a first visit as a young man at the urging of the writer and avant-garde oracle Gertrude Stein.

Music was a source of Bowles's interest from the start, and especially when he concocted a plan to travel around Morocco to record indigenous sounds he feared might be dying off.

With a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, an American philanthropic enterprise,

and the United States Library of Congress, he hit the road with an Ampex 601 – a tape recorder of a “size and weight roughly equivalent to an overnight bag filled with bricks”.

The quote comes from an excellent essay in the box set's booklet by Philip D Schuyler, an ethnomusicologist who tells Bowles's story in great detail.

Recording wasn't so easy at the time, so Bowles had his work cut out for him as a sound engineer when he ventured out into

a country where electrical power could be hard to find.

Then there was the inescapable fact that, as Bowles once wrote in relation to the complexities of Moroccan music, “the more one hears and learns, the more conscious one becomes of one's ignorance, of the vast lacunae in one's knowledge”.

After intermittent spells of work over a period of about four months, Bowles wound up with 250 recordings from 22 locations, with a distance of travel

estimated (“rather generously,” the book notes) at 25,000 miles. The result is a triumph – a living, breathing, beating, yelping, seething, singing travelogue that sounds vital and dynamic more than 50 years down the line.

Bowles was no novice, as evidenced by the rigorous notes he catalogued for each song (not to mention other writings of his, like the travel-essay compendium *Their Heads Are Green and Their Hands Are Blue: Scenes*

from the Non-Christian World). But nor was he a buttoned-up academic in search of data without an excitable bone in his body.

The upshot of his manner is an idiosyncratic collection of sounds that are notable as sounds first and samples of musical behaviour second, only after the wild and transporting effects of them are experienced in an immediate and visceral way.

Music of Morocco opens with an eruption of percussion and voices occasionally flying into the fray. The combination accompanies a circular dance in which the musicians playing it also writhe in time to the beating drums, and the listener can hear the heaving that goes into the swirl of it all.

As Bowles noted, “It was an extremely hot night; everything and everyone was suffused with heat: the singers' and dancers' faces ran with sweat, and the drums, after being heated, remained taut, giving their sound a dry, precise quality...”

The second song is more sparse, with a solitary male voice speak-singing what are evidently words about a clever jackal, while bowing an instrument called a rabab outfitted with horse-hair string. After a few minutes of that, the music opens up and grows more collective in nature, with what sounds like bells ringing and a chorus chiming in through call-and-response episodes.

There is palpable joy in it, a sense of music serving a purpose to activate and engage every spirit within its reach, across vast distances and great spans of time.

Brokering deals of the sort is a specialty of Dust-to-Digital, the superb American label behind *Music of Morocco* and numerous other archival releases that do a great service to the world.

Like others in the catalogue – including *Longing for the Past: The 78 rpm Era in Southeast Asia* and fantastic surveys of traditional music like gospel and blues – the new set devotes great attention and care to the appreciation of musical artifacts whose value only increases with time.

Listening to *Music of Morocco* – all four-and-a-half hours of it, with manic energy in every minute and not a middling track to be skipped – makes a compelling case for that value as a virtue.

Beyond borders and decades set so ineluctably in the past, it offers a thrilling communion in which mutual understanding and utter mystification are part of the same whole. And it sounds good and mesmerising all the while.

Andy Battaglia is a writer in New York whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, Frieze, The Paris Review and more.

the playlist three more albums that will not gather dust

Goodbye, Babylon
Various artists
Dust-to-Digital (2003)

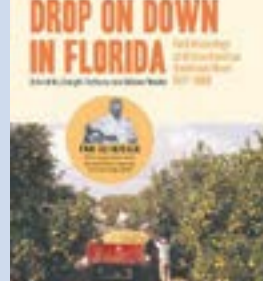
The set that put the Dust-to-Digital label on the map, this 6-CD collection surveys gospel music from 1902 to 1960 in all its rousing, rollicking, spirit-raising glory.



Drop on Down in Florida: Field Recordings of African-American Traditional Music 1977-1980

Various artists
Dust-to-Digital (2012)

Deep blues rules on this spooky and spectacular Dust-to-Digital tribute to the strange, sun-streaked American state of Florida.



How Low Can You Go? Anthology of the String Bass

Various artists
Dust-to-Digital (2009)

How many labels would devote three CDs and a book to the low-down legacy of the bass in the early age of recording from 1925 to 1941? Just one, in all likelihood.

