



Photo: Noura Mint Seymali by Jacob Crawford via Pitch Perfect

GLOBALFEST 2023: ON STAGE AND TINY DESKS

This year's edition of globalFEST, the 22-year-old music event, brought an eclectic array of artists to New York stages and NPR's Tiny Desk series.



By [George de Stefano](#) / 9 February 2023

For 20 years, [GlobalFEST](#) has brought music acts from around the world to New York stages, introducing audiences to a dazzling array of talent from more than 80 countries. After a pandemic-induced turn to a virtual festival in 2021, it was supposed to return to its longtime East Village venue, Webster Hall, in 2022 but Covid forced its cancellation. GlobalFEST 2023 moved uptown to Lincoln Center, where performances were held January 15 in several spaces in the recently renovated David Geffen Hall.

[GlobalFEST](#) always has presented an eclectic mix of artists, some of whom have never appeared on New York or US stages. This year they came from Mexico (cumbia-punk band Son Rompe Pera); Colombia (salsa band Meridian Brothers & El Grupo Renacimiento); Spain (flamenco singer María José Llergo); Morocco and Algeria (the all-female vocal and percussion ensemble Khadija El Warzazia's Bnat el Houariyat & Esraa Warda); the UK and Italy (guitarist Justin Adams and percussionist/violinist/vocalist Mauro Durante); and the United States (gospel singers the Legendary Ingramettes, the New York Arabic Orchestra, and Los Angeles-based Dengue Fever, with its mix of Cambodian pop and psychedelic rock). Two acts were transplants from their countries of origin to France, Haitian singer Moonlight Benjamin and Malian rock band Tamikrest.

For the third consecutive year, globalFEST is offering something extra: [Tiny Desk Meets globalFEST](#), a three-installment online series on YouTube produced in partnership with National Public Radio Music. The series presents a combination of artists who are alumni of the flagship live event, others new to globalFEST, and several who performed at this year's festival. Hosted by the great Beninese (now Brooklyn-based) singer Angelique Kidjo, the series comprises new videos of nine acts making music in various informal locations—at home, on the road, and in exile. Nothing can beat the experience of a live performance, but the videos, with the closeups of the singers and players and the small-scale, mostly informal settings, create an intimate connection with viewers, unlike the experience of a concert hall or festival stage.

Dakh Daughters



*Photo: **Dakh Daughters** / Courtesy of the artist*

The [first installment](#) features Dakh Daughters from Ukraine, Khadija El Warzazia's Bnat el Houariyat & Esraa Warda, and Chinese rock musician Cui Jian. Dakh Daughters, on stage in

an empty French theater, are an extraordinary mix of cabaret, pop, and folk-rock. In exile from their war-ravaged homeland, the band is an offshoot of the Ukrainian folk ensemble [DakhaBrahka](#). Its members, seven women who also are actors, perform in kabuki-like white makeup, playing string and percussion instruments and accordion. The Ukrainian lyrics of their somber yet electrifying songs are untranslated, but the urgency, passion, and rage come through nonetheless.

In a Beijing club, Chinese rock pioneer Cui Jian and his excellent band deliver a strong set of Bruce Springsteen-ish rock and bottleneck guitar blues on one number. Khadija El Warzazia's Bnat el Houariyat & Esraa Warda, from Marrakech, are a vocal and percussion whirlwind, performing North African celebratory and trance music, *chaabi*, and *houara*. Algerian-American Esraa Warda, who tours with the group, dances and provides English-language introductions to the songs.

The [second installment](#) has artists from Cuba, Brazil, and Haiti. Septeto Santiaguero—despite its name, an eight-piece ensemble—gives a lively and engaging performance of classic Cuban son, bolero, guaracha, guajira, and guaguancó. Bia Ferreira, a singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist from Minas Gerais in southeastern Brazil serves up samba, funk, and hip-hop in a small room with a floor carpeted in shiny, emerald green leaves. Moonlight Benjamin, from Haiti and now living in France, specializes in what she calls “vodou rock”. Backed by a quartet of white French guys on guitars and drums, Benjamin puts her powerful clarion alto to dramatic effect on a set of moody, anthemic-verging-on-punk rock.

Cui Jian



*Photo: **Cui Jian** / Courtesy of the artist*

The [third and final installment](#) hosts Romania's Taraf de Caliu, playing their up-tempo dance numbers outdoors and in what appeared to be frigid weather, judging from the bundled-up fans crowding around them. Mauritanian Noura Mint Seymali, seated in a tent furnished with sofas and decorated with patterned fabrics, sings entrancing modal songs, accompanied by her husband on electric guitar and an electric bassist and drummer. Closing out the series are

British guitarist Justin Adams and Mauro Durante, leader of the Southern Italian band Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino (CGS played [globalFEST in 2012](#)). Their set, three selections from their acclaimed 2021 album *Still Moving*, was mesmerizing, a seamless Anglo-American-Italian fusion of rock, blues, and pizzica (the rhythmic, folk-based Italian idiom that's the specialty of CGS). The day before globalFEST, the duo played their first US show at the Colony in Woodstock. There are plans for more shows in August and possibly a 2024 tour.

I spoke with Shanta Thake, one of globalFEST's three directors, about this year's live event at Lincoln Center and the Tiny Desk series on YouTube. (Thake also is the Ehrenkranz Chief Artistic Officer at Lincoln Center.) Thake was elated by the success of the sold-out festival at David Geffen Hall and the collaboration with the Tiny Desk series directed by Bob Boilen of National Public Radio. The following is an edited version of our conversation.

How did the globalFEST collaboration with NPR and Tiny Desk come about?

Shanta Thake: It came about in the fall of 2020. Well, I'll start before that. We've had a long-standing relationship with NPR and Bob Boilen. In 2011, they were doing stand-alone episodes on All Songs Considered around globalFEST. They would capture artists' full sets and were just enormous supporters. So we had this beautiful relationship, and that was such a value add to the artists because one of the things that we try to get out of globalFEST is that all the bands can have some English language press that they can use. Materials they could use to get out and tour North America and other English language markets. So NPR would come and usually bring two or three journalists and then talk through the highlights for each of the artists personally.

When COVID happened, we were thinking about a way to continue to hold the festival. How could we celebrate what is still so important, especially at that time, when we all were sharing this experience of being in our homes, this global experience. That's also what globalFEST seeks to do: connect people. We think of it as soft diplomacy, allowing people a window into a part of the world they've never been to and allowing them to see that maybe this is not as

different from their own experience of the world as I think it is.

Taraf de Caliu



*Photo: **Taraf de Caliu** / Valentin Răzvan via Pitch Perfect PR*

So we were really aligned on that and just wanted to reach out to Bob [Boilen] and see what they were thinking. They had already started these Tiny Desk at Home concerts. Bob said yes to everything we were talking about and agreed to do Tiny Desk meets globalFEST. We collect submissions [from artists to perform] in March. In March 2020, we had gotten a few

hundred artists submitting for what they thought would be an in-person festival. So we did have this amazing group of artists to work from, and we just went back to our normal process, but thinking about what would be a nice match for this [Tiny Desk] format.

We decided this year, which we hadn't done previously, to keep it to folks who had never done a Tiny Desk before. We decided the breakdown would be three artists from this year's festival, three alumni artists, and three brand-new ones representing other parts of the world. Sometimes the alumni artists, because they've been out and touring, have much more of a following in the world. So that was also a way of drawing audiences in to see the other bands, keeping that festival energy but using these alumni artists as the draw.

Although all the Tiny Desk performances were terrific, I was particularly knocked out by Dakh Daughters, the Ukrainian women's band. How did they come to your attention?

ST: Dakh Daughters are alumni of globalFEST 2019. And they blew us away then, just that deep theatricality. Of course, we really did want to have somebody from Ukraine represented. They know how to get a message across; that is their craft. Everything is very deliberate, very intentional, and done with great integrity. I think we were just excited to be able to offer them the platform to tell their story at this time, which is obviously so much on the minds of all of us. GlobalFEST is committed to sharing the stories of all the atrocities happening across the world and places where supporting a band supports a community. So we've presented Haitian artists over the years and supported artists from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Just knowing that when you invest in these bands, they're taking that money directly into their home community. And sometimes that is just the best work you can do.

Septeto Santiaguero



*Photo: **Septeto Santiaguero** / Courtesy of the artist*

How did the Cuban band Septeto Santiaguero become part of the Tiny Desk series?

ST: They're globalFEST alumni artists. One of our goals is to make sure that these bands are introduced to the touring market in North America to be able to share their stories more widely. Septeto Santiaguero is one of those bands whose tours were cut short because of the pandemic. So we want to ensure they have the opportunity to get out there again. One thing

that globalFEST seeks to do is give people the tools to present music from around the world because it's complicated. It's not bringing your favorite band based in Columbus, Ohio. It requires visas, enormous support, and multiple conversations with government officials sometimes. Bringing a Cuban band is complicated. But I think the message here is that it's not only worth it, it's necessary.

Is it any easier to bring a Cuban act now than it was under Donald Trump?

ST: No, it's still very hard.

How does globalFEST select its performers?

ST: We do a call for submissions in March through May. And for the past few years, we've asked people, "Are you interested in Tiny Desk only? Tiny Desk or the in-person festival?" So we look at that as a starting point for all our conversations. And then, we move into curation and try to give ourselves the flexibility to take a look at the whole. For the past couple of years, we really haven't known for sure where globalFEST was going to be. So that represents its own challenge of trying to program artists for specific stages when you don't exactly know the stage spaces you will be working with and the capabilities.

We have four curators. We've had guest curators for the last few editions, which has been amazing. This year was Meera Dugal [New York event producer and visual artist]. We collect the submissions, go through them, and divide up the list. We listen to everything and see who's our top choices. Some of these bands we all know already. Then we do a series of listening sessions together. Bill [Bragin], Isabelle [Soffer], and I have worked together for almost all of the 20 years, so we have a shorthand. We know what each other likes, and then we basically work on consensus. Who are the bands that we all can agree on that we think have real touring potential?

Justin Adams and Mauro Durante



Photo: Justin Adams and Mauro Durante / Mandy Adams via Pitch Perfect PR

It's important to us that the bands we bring will have an impact on the market and be able to do well touring in the United States. That can be a number of conversations from "Do they have the right agency in place? Do they have government funding? Do they have all the tools that they're going to need to be able to get out there?" Then, "Okay, what is the region of the world? Do we have enough festival bands? Do we have bands that represent concert hall

environments and club environments?” And really try to get the most diversity of artists out there that we think will be able to do well.

Were you happy with the attendance at David Geffen Hall?

ST: Oh, absolutely. Our biggest globalFEST before this year would’ve been at Webster Hall, where we could sell up to 1,600 capacity. And at David Geffen Hall, we sold out at 2,400.

Are you already planning globalFEST 2024?

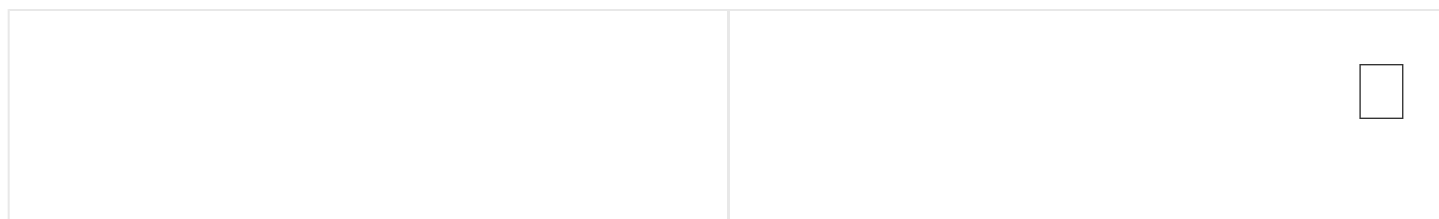
ST: Well, first, we’re resting! But we’ll be starting to figure out the shape of next year very shortly.

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