



Samba, but not as we know it

Andrew Weintraub talks to SambaSunda's leader Ismet Ruchimat about bringing Sundanese music to a wider audience

In the Hindu-influenced *wayang* puppet theatre of Indonesia, Samba is the son of Kresna, the last incarnation of Vishnu and an advisor to the five heroes in the *Mahabharata* epic. But Samba also refers to the worldly and restless quality of youth represented as a character in the mask dance of Cirebon, a coastal city on the island of Java and one of the entry points for Islam in Indonesia centuries ago. Samba is also the name of a Brazilian music and dance form with strong cultural and historical

ties to West Africa. All of these far-flung images and associations were circulating in composer-musician Ismet Ruchimat's mind approximately a decade ago as he contemplated a name for his new band based in Bandung, West Java. He liked the notion that 'Samba' had multiple meanings, and he wanted a name that would reflect the local musical language of the band's Sundanese musicians. The combination of Samba and Sunda seemed like the perfect moniker for his new band, which released its first album *SambaSunda: Rhythmical in Sundanese People* in 1998.

Even the titles of SambaSunda's albums reflect the musical cross-fertilisation that characterises experimental music in Indonesia today. *Gebyar Bali Jaipong* (The sparkle of Bali and Jaipongan) and *Sunda-Bali* blend the rapid unison melodies, shifting dynamic levels, interlocking melodic parts, and sectional arrangements of Balinese *gamelan* with the powerful drumming, strident female vocal timbre, and explosive rhythmic cadences of Sundanese *jaipongan*. *Takbir Dan Shalawat* (Islamic recitation and prayer) fuses Middle Eastern drumming and Islamic chant with the band's interpretations of rhythms and melodies derived from African and Indian music. *Salsa Dan Salse* brings the pulsating rhythmic flavour of Latin salsa into contact with the relaxed and light-hearted feeling that Sundanese call "salse." *Reggae and Reggae* filters now familiar reggae rhythms through a spirit of "reggae" – something unique and extraordinary. Based in tradition, the music creates an exciting dialogue with modern sounds from around the world. Ruchimat explains: "Our goal is to develop our traditional music in ways that will reach a younger generation of Sundanese. But our music also connects with people across cultural and linguistic boundaries. For everyone who hears our music, we hope to show how rich the Sundanese tradition can be."

Multi-instrumentalist Ruchimat is the major force behind SambaSunda. Born in 1968, he was immersed into Sundanese gamelan music at a young age. As a teenager, Ruchimat became intoxicated with the drumming and dance style of jaipongan, a wildly popular form of traditionalised Sundanese music and dance that took root in Bandung during the late 70s. In 1989, Ruchimat was invited to join Jugala, Bandung's leading jaipongan company directed by the creative and entrepreneurial choreographer Gugum Gumbira. Ruchimat quickly rose through the ranks to become musical director at Jugala where he was in charge of composing, arranging, and teaching new music to a troupe of exceptionally talented musicians. Ruchimat's fame as a composer and arranger began to spread during the early 90s and he began receiving commissions to compose for local, national, and international groups. His

affiliation with Jugala led to collaborations with visiting artists from around the world who travelled to Indonesia to learn about Bandung's vibrant music scene. Ruchimat made recordings with Spanish percussionist Vidal Paz (Django Mango), Indian *bansuri* virtuoso Pandit Hariprasad Chaurasia, and the Malagasy group Tarika. As a leading member of the Jugala All-Stars, his affiliation with Colin Bass opened up new opportunities in the world music circuit. One of his most successful collaborations was with Sabah Habas Mustapha (Colin Bass) and 3 Mustaphas 3 on the albums *Jalan Kopo* (1997) and *So La Li* (2000), which were highly celebrated within the world music market. "These collaborations allowed us to grow in ways we never expected. And hopefully we gave them something they never expected to find," says Ruchimat.

SambaSunda's success owes as much to their local sound, as it does to their extraordinary musicianship and the visual spectacle of their live performances. Ruchimat notes that: "our music is so different from the music being composed in Europe today. People appreciate creative and innovative sounds. We bring a fresh voice." But the reception of their adventurous extension of tradition has been tepid in their hometown of Bandung, West Java. "There is still a lack of education about traditional arts here. Pop music tends to be more accessible to most people compared to music that comes from traditional roots. Some people have criticised us for going too far, but we believe in what we're doing." The stage never seems quite large enough to accommodate the large ensemble of instruments, which always includes several Sundanese *kendang* – a set of three drums (one large and two small). Audiences are mesmerised by the drummers' syncopated rhythmic patterns, choreographed arm movements, unison shouting and tonal variations produced by pressing a foot against the head of the large drum. Other Sundanese instruments include the *kacapi* (zither), *suling* (bamboo flute), *tarompet* (oboe), *saron* (metallophone), *saron bambu* (xylophone), *angklung* (shaken bamboo rattles), *kohkol* (slit gong), *karinding* (Jew's harp), and metal gongs of various sizes, both hanging and resting on racks. SambaSunda's assortment of percussion instruments from around the world includes *djembé*, *timbales*, conga, bongos, tambourine and Middle Eastern frame and goblet-shaped drums. Rounding out the melodic side are the vocalists, guitars (acoustic and electric), electric bass and violin.

After nine albums and numerous international tours, this 19-member troupe, who refer to themselves playfully as "SambaSundasians," have carved out a space in the largely African and Latin American-dominated sphere of world music, a term that continues to elude easy definition. Unlike some of the groups that have tried to



Above: Dadang Samsudin Sutarno strikes a warrior-like pose on drums whilst the whole band feel the rhythm (right)



ISMET RUCHIMAT'S SELECTION



SambaSunda (1998)
Variety of musical styles that sets the stage for further experimentation and creativity.



Gebyar Bali Jaipong (2000)
Compositions that bring together music from Bali and Sunda and create an energetic and powerful mood as a result.



Rahwana's Cry (2005)
A collection of hybrid sounds that make SambaSunda one of the leading world music bands to emerge from South-East Asia

market their music outside Indonesia, the musicians of SambaSunda have articulated their vision through their music and in live performances, as well as in sleeve notes, concert programmes and on their website. Many of the musicians were formally trained at STSI, the college-level music conservatory in Bandung, and they project an aura of cosmopolitanism as they tour frequently at music festivals throughout the world. Their promotional material is frequently written in English and targeted to audiences outside Indonesia. For each album they seem to explore a different kind of music, signalling their growth as artists and confounding critics who have unsuccessfully tried to classify them. Their appeal lies in the fact that the music stretches out in so many directions, making multiple images, associations, and interpretations possible. True to their name, SambaSunda brings the world into focus, all the while keeping their souls firmly planted in the Sundanese music of their homeland. ●

SambaSunda play at the Larmer Tree Festival on July 15 and at Rhythm Sticks in London on July 19
www.rfh.org/rhythmsticks