



# FOLLOWME

The founder of WOMAD has made his name by not worrying too much about what others are thinking. That's not about to change, he says.

WORDS JANE CORNWELL PICTURE ARNOLD NEWMAN

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ETER GABRIEL IS sitting back on a squishy sofa in his sprawling West London home and explaining why he continues to do things his own way. “At my age you don’t give a shit about a lot of things and you care less about pleasing people,” he says. It’s this kind of attitude, of course, that led Gabriel to ignore the initial disdain of what he calls the “white bread music business” and go out on a limb in his support of world music. The result? The global phenomenon that is the WOMAD music festivals and a record label – Real World – dedicated to promoting artists from elsewhere.

And last week he was standing firm again, refusing to perform on stage during the Oscars ceremony when he discovered that his turn as a best song nominee was to be limited to 65 seconds and sung as part of a medley. “I’m an old fart,” he explained in a video on his website. “It’s not going to do me any harm to make a little protest.”

This wasn’t just about him. Sure, his song *Down to Earth* from the film *WALL-E* was one of three short-listed finalists. But the veteran British artist is a man of principle – and clearly, there was a principle at stake. “Songwriters work bloody hard and deserve a place in the ceremony,” says Gabriel, 59, who co-wrote the tune with American composer Thomas Newman. “It’s a bit unfortunate,” he adds, Zen-like with his white goatee and measured speech. But he still went to the ceremony where he saw the Soweto Gospel Choir, who sang the backing vocals on *Down to Earth*, grab the limelight – though organisers only brought over nine of the 26-strong outfit that has become a fixture of the WOMAD festivals he co-founded in 1982 (they played Womadelaide last year).

In matters of music – world music – Gabriel has always known when to step back. Having sold millions of records as lead singer of 1970s band Genesis and a few million more as a solo singer/songwriter, having continued to stage concert spectacles that fill stadiums, he could easily have stolen the thunder of the various world artists he’s worked with. But as he did in 1988 with then unknown Senegalese singer Youssou N’Dour – whom he brought in alongside Sting, Bruce Springsteen and himself on Amnesty International’s *Human Rights Now!* tour – Gabriel aligns himself just long enough to draw notice. Then he moves on, leaving the artist to capitalise on the buzz.

“I’ve been extremely lucky,” he says, here at the home – a renovated Masonic temple – he shares with his second wife, Maebh Flynn, and their two children, Isaac, 6, and six-month-old Luc. “I’ve been extremely lucky. Sometimes I’m not doing as much of the rock’n’roll as I’d like, but I’m having a fascinating adventure.” It’s an adventure that includes a Grammy-winning, category-defying back catalogue; gong-laden music videos (check out *Sledgehammer* or *Digging in the Dirt*); soundtracks for films including Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* and Aussie director Phillip Noyce’s *Rabbit Proof Fence*;



Peter Gabriel performs at Womadelaide in 1993.

## IT WAS JUST PURE ENTHUSIASM FOR MUSIC FROM AROUND THE WORLD THAT DROVE US

an active interest in everything from new technologies to human rights and environmental issues; and ownership of Real World Records and Real World Studios, a state-of-the-art recording space in an old mill house in England’s pastoral Wiltshire. And then, of course, there is WOMAD: the World of Music, Arts and Dance.

“WOMAD has helped open people’s tastes a bit,” Gabriel says of a franchise that has so far hosted more than 160 festivals in 27 countries. Each year there are up to 10 WOMAD events worldwide involving more than 100 artists. There are WOMADs in Sicily, New Zealand, the Canary Islands, and the first WOMAD Abu Dhabi will take place in April. WOMAD Ltd in the UK (“the mothership”) is the presenter, working with local production organisations rather than controlling all components of each. Womadelaide – which this

year features the likes of Nigeria’s Afrobeat prince Seun Kuti and Cambodian-flavoured alt-rockers Dengue Fever – is widely regarded as Australia’s premiere outdoor music festival.

“I played there in 1993 and loved it,” Gabriel says. “Botanic Park is one of our most beautiful sites, with these huge, shady trees. It’s always been financially successful; they’ve managed to secure [state] government sponsorship, which we don’t have in the UK, and more commercial sponsorship, too. It helped, I guess, that it took off from the start.”

WOMAD UK provided the template. “It wasn’t easy at first,” Gabriel says. “Certainly the white bread music biz was really suspicious of this strange, foreign stuff but that sort of inbuilt racism slowly melted away.” He smiles. “Because we found this music exciting we believed others would, too. And they have.”

Where “world music” – a catch-all phrase to get non-Western artists into record shops – was once the province of sandal-wearing social workers, it is now enjoying mainstream attention. Western artists such as Blur’s Damon Albarn are collaborating with African musicians. Portuguese fado singer Mariza sells out international concert venues. The BBC staged its first World Music Proms at the Royal Albert Hall last year.

And just as Western artists have dipped into this huge melting pot of musical ideas, so are world artists nicking ideas from the West. “I love it when people mix it up. Why paint with only three colours when you can have 30?” Gabriel says. “I think it’s wrong not to follow something you find exciting and seductive. To say, ‘I’m only going down the pure white path’ sounds a little Nazi to me. Music – all music – has the power to uplift, signify and communicate: music has had a central role in the way people live all over the world for a very long time. It’s the glue for occasions when people get together. It expresses feelings and aspirations; we can read it like we read a face. It is a universal language that proves, as well as anything, the stupidity of racism.”

In 1980, Gabriel’s curiosity in non-Western music was piqued after researching African musicians for *Biko*, a protest song that was essentially a eulogy to murdered anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko. Gabriel wanted to produce them in an English context; a group of journalists and promoters persuaded him to expand on the idea. “We were a bunch of rank amateurs, really. It was just pure enthusiasm for music from around the world that drove us.”

In 1982, the first WOMAD festival took place in the English village of Shepton Mallet in Somerset. Acts included Gabriel and his band, Ireland’s the Chieftains, English post-punksters Echo and the Bunnymen and Africa’s Drummers of Burundi, then best known for accompanying Adam and the Ants’ *Kings of the Wild Frontier*. When, by way of accompaniment, the crowd drummed a grain silo to the ground organisers knew they were onto something. Financially, however, it was a disaster. Gabriel and his family (first wife Jill

Moore and daughters Anna and Melanie, now 36 and 34) even received death threats from out-of-pocket traders. "It was really unpleasant," says Gabriel, who briefly rejoined Genesis to repay debts. "So I removed myself as a director and became a WOMAD board member, there in the background if anyone needed me. Now, 27 years later, we've outgrown our second home in Reading and found a new one in Wiltshire, in the beautiful Charlton Park."

These days Gabriel rarely performs at WOMADs. He'll do so if he feels like it, to kick-start a new festival, say, or commemorate a long-standing one. In 2007, he headlined the 25th WOMAD UK in its first year at Charlton Park, a glorious country estate that fell foul of the weather and was later infamously dubbed WOMUD. Last year's festival was nirvanic in comparison: having welcomed Luc into the world a week earlier, Gabriel wandered briefly about the grounds clutching Isaac's hand then returned to his country home near Real World.


Luc – chubby, happy, blue-eyed – is sitting on his nanny's hip when I arrive; the beautiful Mrs Gabriel, a 30-something Irishwoman who was once Gabriel's sound engineer and is now a costume designer, has dashed past en route to an appointment. For a while we stand in the big, open plan kitchen, coo-ing at Luc while his father – in army pants, blue shirt and khaki Crocs – ponders the varying strength of the coffee "pods" next to his shiny Nespresso machine. "This really is a toy for the boys," he says, making us two cups at Strength 7.

"That old dilemma of trying to get a balance between work and family life is something I'm a lot more fascist about," he says when we've sunk into the sofa.

"I was very busy when the girls were young. I know that I'm extremely lucky to have this second chance. Now I'm less concerned about my worldly success and more interested in bringing up my boys."

Professionally, he says, there are three things of which he's most proud: his philanthropical involvement in the Elders, a group of global statesmen – Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu and Kofi Annan among them – dedicated to good works; his founding of the organisation Witness, a watchdog group that uses video to advance human rights; and WOMAD.

"There are two boxes: Them and Us," said Gabriel one balmy evening in 1993, standing onstage at the second Womadelaide festival. "And WOMAD puts everything into the box marked 'Us!'" The audience roared their agreement as he welcomed an array of special guests: Zulu group Mahotella Queens, Ugandan musician Geoffrey Oryema, Aboriginal outfit Yothu Yindi, Melbourne band Not Drowning, Waving, and many more. The ensuing finale, a rousing version of Gabriel's hit *In Your Eyes*, was part mass sing-along, part United Nations rally.

"It's amazing to think that WOMAD is now a hugely successful model that travels all around the world," Gabriel says. "There's something really special that people find in WOMAD that they don't find in other festivals. Purely through the enjoyment of music different audiences have gained an insight into cultures other than their own. I mean, can an Academy Awards ceremony do that?" Gabriel, who came away from the Oscars empty-handed but unperturbed, flashes a grin. "Well, maybe this time, for 65 seconds," he says of the scaled-down Soweto Gospel choir performance. "But really, I don't think so." 



#### WOMAD MUST-SEE

More than 380 artists from 30 countries will appear at the Womadelaide music festival in Botanic Park from Friday. Here are some of the highlights.

- 1 NEIL FINN (NEW ZEALAND)** Returns to Womadelaide for the first time since appearing with Crowded House at the first Womadelaide in 1992. May be joined on stage by his sons Liam and Elroy.
  - 2 NATACHA ATLAS (EGYPT)** Explores seductive links between disparate musical genres, from R&B to Hindi pop and French chanson. Her soaring voice bridges Middle Eastern and Western styles.
  - 3 SEUN KUTI (NIGERIA)** The youngest son of the late, great bandleader Fela Kuti is an equally vibrant musical and political activist who has taken over his father's legendary funk orchestra Egypt 80.
  - 4 GEOFFREY GURRUMUL YUNUPINGU (AUSTRALIA)** The former member of hit-making rock band Yothu Yindi has emerged as the most distinctive voice in modern Aboriginal music.
  - 5 ROKIA TRAORE (MALIA)** Singing in the Bambara language, Traore is credited with introducing a blues-rock edge to West African music with her Gretsch electric guitar.
- Full program and other details are available at [www.womadelaide.com.au](http://www.womadelaide.com.au)