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Big City: Beating a Path to a New Trend

BY JOEL SELVIN

They call it world beat because the musicians got tired of stringing together adjectives to describe their music. Afro-Cuban-juju-salsa-mamba-reggae was just too complicated.

Nobody remembers exactly who came up with the term, but there are several bands involved in this burgeoning trend on the San Francisco music scene — an unprecedented cultural cross-pollination that may end up the liveliest new musical movement to come from this town in years.

The members of Big City, world beat specialists who played their first headline engagement at the Great American Music Hall on Saturday, never played much rock. Co-founder Robin Balliger, for instance, learned to play bass only recently, as a member of the Appliances, a short-lived punk-funk band around town. But she also studied African music and dance and boasts 15 years as a classically trained flutist.

The other six musicians come from backgrounds in African music, Brazilian music, calypso, jazz, reggae and rhythm and blues. Not surprisingly, the music of Big City

combines all those elements and comes up with a unique sound as original as it is refreshing and vital.

Since David Byrne of the Talking Heads began experimenting with African sounds several years ago, the juju music of Nigeria,

furthered the sound of the dark continent Stateside.

But this kind of full-scale immersion into ethnic music in the pop arena by American musicians is a breakthrough of potentially enormous proportions. The lively, scintillating polyrhythms of African and Caribbean music give the songs of Big City an irresistible beat, something sort of new under the sun. It's going to find big favor with a lot of people getting tired of hearing synthesizers wheezing and drum machines clicking.

Not that Big City isn't fully contemporary. Drummer Arnold Young mixed judicious bits of synthesized drumming with his trap pounding. The band's other co-founder, guitarist Joe Gore, said he wants to break down the division of labor between the rhythm and lead guitarist and form what he called a web of guitars with the band's second guitarist, Bob Razon.

One of the musicians called the synthesis a "hodgepodge," while another referred to it as "a meeting of the minds." Whatever, the music is a spindly interlacing of firm rhythmic figures, pounded home by the three-piece rhythm section, with the two guitarists and saxophonist Danny Bittker stirring up the top end. Angular instrumental lines

pierce the rhythmic intensity like spokes breaking loose from a turning wheel.

Visually the focus rests on Kathleen Mary Maguire, the stunning lead vocalist whose athletic, sexy dancing gives the throbbing music a physical counterpoint. On songs like "If Streets Could Talk," "Too Much Fun" and "African Disco Dub," Maguire breathed fury and fire into the lyrics of John Tompkins, the band's songwriting collaborator since its inception last year.

This exciting group could do with African music what Santana did with Latin salsa and give the mainstream pop scene a shot in the arm, courtesy the incandescent rhythmic fire of the Africans and the distinctly American sensibilities of Big City.

La Pena's Films on Spain

Several films on Spain postponed because of a power failure last month have been re-scheduled for 7 o'clock tonight at La Pena in Berkeley. The program includes two documentaries, on gypsies in Spain and on Picasso, as well as the feature films "Pascual Duarte" and "Mi Querida Senorita," the latter concerning persecution of homosexuals under the Franco regime.

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the Zulu folk music of southeast Africa and such exotic influences have gained a certain currency among the new wave rock crowd. American tours by Nigerian pop maestro King Sunny Ade also have