

Another Sort of Diplomacy

By MICHAEL GORDON



The Michael Gordon Band at the town square in Catania, Sicily. From left, Bryce Dessner (guitar), Michael Gordon (keyboards), Christian Bongers (bass) and Todd Reynolds (violin). (Photo: Todd Reynolds)

[This article was written by the author last week while on tour with the Michael Gordon Band.]

I'm writing from Sicily, where I just arrived with my ensemble, the Michael Gordon Band. We're playing a concert at the Etna Festival in Catania. As I'm sitting here in this beautiful Italian hotel, I'm thinking about how lucky I am to be able to travel around the world playing music. There's no way that this could be possible without the weighty investment that most Western and Asian countries make in the arts. Those of us who perform and compose semi-popular music — that is, experimental, art, classical and jazz — cannot survive in the free market like rock, urban and country musicians do. Although there is a fan base for these more esoteric types of music that numbers in the millions, it just doesn't add up to the large CD sales and stadium tours that the popular music stars enjoy.

The arts play an extremely important role in European life. I'm not a statistician, so don't hold me to exact numbers, but a quick search on the Web brought me this information: In the most recent study on government

spending on the arts, Finland, which leads the European countries, spent about \$91 per capita. (The data is summarized in a [January 2000 research note by the National Endowment for the Arts.](#)) Most European countries trail that figure by a bit, but they're all in the same ballpark. However, the United States, the world's greatest economic power (isn't that what our political leaders keep telling us) spent about \$6 per capita on the arts.

Here in Catania, the city itself is a work of art. The streets are lined with beautiful black stone made from volcanic ash that covered the city after the great eruption of Mt. Etna in 1669. The buildings and churches were built by artisans. They are adorned with fine detail, sculptures and gardens. You might think they care about art because they live in it, whereas in the New World, where everything is built pre-fab, we don't have the same appreciation.

In Venezuela, though, they have [a national music program](#) that has 250,000 kids playing classical instruments. It's not an enrichment program for the wealthy suburbs. Rather, it is aimed at the poor and working class. Over the past 40 years they've found that a 14-year-old boy in a rough neighborhood, when given a viola to play, is less likely to get into trouble and more likely to lead a productive life. The Venezuelan program provides instruments, lessons, after-school coaching and supports 200 youth orchestras. Needless to say there is no national music program here in the United States.

As we find ourselves with less money for education (please, someone, explain that to me) the trend here has become to cut music in the schools. My high school in Miami, where my family moved after living in Nicaragua for 15 years, was a big, rough place with three competing ethnic groups — Latin, African-American and white. There were fights and muggings and eventually police were posted in the hallways to keep the peace. But we had a huge music program with three music teachers, and I can attest to the fact that the kids in band and orchestra, no matter what their race, all got along. It may have been dangerous out in the hallways, but inside the band room kids from Cuba, the affluent suburbs, and the inner city were playing music and having fun.

Excerpt from Michael Gordon's "Receiver," from the CD, "Light Is Calling." ([mp3](#))

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Here in Catania it was explained to me that the Etna Festival is a joint project between the cultural ministry and the tourism board. Italy, like many Western

countries, has a minister of culture. I'm not expecting the mayor of the city to come to my concert, but in October 2005, when my orchestral work "Grey Pink Yellow" was premiered by the Lucerne Symphony, the mayor of Lucerne was there. In 1991 I saw the Queen of The Netherlands at the premiere of "De Materie," a music theater work by Holland's leading experimental composer [Louis Andriessen](#). In Basel in 2001, I was at the opening night of European Music Month (a festival of new and experimental music) and the president of

Switzerland was in attendance. And in England they knight their artists — not only former Beatles but experimental composers as well — *Sir Harrison Birtwistle*, *Sir Michael Tippett*, and more.

But I've never seen a senator, congressman or president at a concert of experimental music in New York. Now that we're into the political season, might one ask our leading candidates what their arts policy is?

Now I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "How can this guy be talking about an arts policy when we have Iraq, AIDS, global warming, and terrorism?" Well here's my answer.

There was a time when all that human beings did was hunt for food. But as we became more clever, as we learned to farm, to control fire, to build permanent dwellings, we started to concentrate not only on our physical existence but on elevating ourselves mentally and spiritually. Philosophy, art and religion became central to our identity and development as humans. Are we here in America going to revert to a permanent state of survival mode?

What we remember about a culture after thousands of years is most likely to be their arts, architecture, writing and achievements in thought. Is it worth nurturing, exporting and preserving our culture? Most countries think it is. But in the United States this isn't a Democratic issue or a Republican issue. It's a non-issue.

In February 1991 I went with my band to Estonia when it was still part of the Soviet Union. Remember all those Soviet tanks in downtown Tallinn? The state department issued a warning: No American citizens should be in the Baltic states. But I'm a musician and I wasn't going to pass up a gig. And I had spent a year applying for grants to go. My trip was partially funded by Arts International, a now defunct project of several large foundations and, yes, the C.I.A. During the cold war the C.I.A. used to fund cultural diplomacy projects to parts of the world it considered vital to its interests.

When I went to the Soviet Union, I wasn't briefed. I wasn't asked to do anything or say anything. I wasn't given a mission or any instructions. (I only found out at a later date that the C.I.A. was involved.) My band and I, six Americans, were just supposed to go and play music.

If there ever was a time in my life when I felt the full power of cultural diplomacy it was during my trip to Estonia. It was an extremely low point in Estonian history: The Russians had again clamped down on the country's ongoing attempts to break away from Soviet rule. Because of the State Department warning, it seemed like we were the only Americans in the country. I could not have imagined how much having Americans — to them the symbol of hope and freedom — meant. When we arrived at the airport the director of the festival made a speech right outside of customs, welcoming us on behalf of the entire country.

Our concert was packed, televised, and as we walked around Tallinn we were treated like celebrities. After our concert there was a private reception with a few dignitaries. Champagne was opened and there were more speeches and toasts in which the Estonians exclaimed what this concert meant to them. It wasn't the music or the virtuosity of our performance they were talking about. It was simply that in a totalitarian regime having Americans present meant something.

After our arrival here in Catania the local cultural emissary took my band out for dinner. As usually happens in Europe our hosts asked us how we could have elected George Bush as president. I have heard the conversation many times. We reminded them that half of the country did not vote for Bush. As members of my band tried to assuage the negative impressions these Europeans had about Americans, I thought that here a different type of cultural diplomacy was going on. There are thousands, maybe tens of thousands of American artists performing around the world — not passing through like tourists but having real, meaningful, positive interactions with the citizens of other nations. In these many small interactions, we communicate a different America.

