



WHAT A COMBO

MANU CHAO & THIEVERY CORPORATION

PERFORM AT MERRIWEATHER

By Alfredo Flores



A unique musical friendship was formed last summer at Lollapalooza in Chicago's Grant Park, where more than half of the 100,000 people in attendance rocked out to headliner, hometown hero and R&B superstar Kanye West. But based on the near-riot-like soccer match atmosphere and deafening decibel levels from Manu Chao's fans — a fourth the size of West's audience — at a nearby stage, you'd think that this third-billed global pop icon was headlining the festival.

Washington, D.C.'s own internationally renowned downtempo electronica DJ duo of Eric Hilton and Rob Garza — better known as Thievery Corporation — performed right before Chao, and had the best view for his remarkable 90-minute set, filled with chants of "Ole, Ole, Ole", mosh pitting, slam dancing, head bobbing, and just plain general chaos that has become a trademark for just about all of the 45-year-old Chao's live performances.

"We've been longtime admirers of Manu's music and how he goes about it," said ESL Music label manager Mat Whittington, who manages Thievery. "At Lollapalooza, he was phenomenal. His live show is amazing."

But little did they know that after seeing and then hanging out with Chao after their respective sets that Thievery would have the chance to help out one of their favorite musicians. Chao, now in the middle of his 22-city and most extensive U.S. and Canada tour to date, was having trouble securing a good D.C. area venue earlier this year, until I.M.P. Productions, ESL Music and Thievery Corporation came up with an interesting concept.

Thievery is now hard at work on their new album and had no plans on touring this summer, but that changed when Whittington got a call from his friend Tom Chauncey — Chao's agent.

"We knew he was touring this summer, and they were having a little difficulty finding a good space for Manu to play," Whittington said. "The people at I.M.P. then came to us about doing a co-headline with Manu. There was no way we could say no."

ESL Music — named after Dupont Circle's famed Eighteenth Street Lounge, which was founded by Hilton and is where Thievery got their start — also is home to DJs Ursula 1000, Nickodemus and Thunderball. They — along with bossa nova star Bebel Gilberto, who has worked with Thievery in the past, most notably in the remix of her hit "Cada Beijo" — will be part of the house, reggae, and other international-tinged music in the "A Day in the World" festival at Merriweather Post Pavilion this month.

For Thievery — known for spearheading the sophisticated "downbeat generation" and their mastery of the "outernational" sound that fuses a plethora of world music with electronica (think bossa nova, easy listening, Latin dub, roots reggae, rock, Middle Eastern beats, jazz, soul; guest performers on horns, percussion and sitar), and have worked with Madonna, Gus Gus, Stereolab and rock legends Perry Farrell, The Flaming Lips and David Byrne — this music festival provides a unique opportunity to play alongside musicians of somewhat variant styles.

"I think it's a meeting of like minded musicians," Whittington said. "And while the music might be a little bit different, I think the bands have a similar outlook on the world. And this meeting makes a lot of sense, really."

Both Chao and Thievery are lauded for their willingness to challenge themselves with new music genres.

Chao is an interesting character, to say the least. He has been called somewhat of a pop musical messiah, but also is considered an activist artist who has not mellowed with age. Even though he is now middle-aged, gray haired, short and super slim, suffering from tendonitis on his ankles, one would be amazed at the sheer energy he and his crack raucous band Radio Bemba Sound System — named after a slang term meaning gossip or word of mouth — brings to their sold-out live shows of tens of thousands around the world.

Chao — Paris-born and Barcelona-dwelling, and whose first new studio album in six years comes

out this September — also is the personification of a human pogo stick, tendonitis be damned. He sets the tone for many of his reggae-influenced songs with a downbeat to start, many in the audience swaying back and forth; and then, in an instant, he strikes that one cord on his guitar and all the house lights light up the stage, in a cue that lets everyone know go ahead, go nuts. As Chao jump kicks and hops on stage, and Radio Bemba — with its drums, timbales, backup guitars, keyboards and mega bass — go into pummel mode.

His 2001 album "Proxima Estacion: Esperanza" topped the European charts and was named one of the best albums of the year by Rolling Stone. His solo debut "Clandestino" remains one of the best-selling albums in French music history, with more than 2.5 million copies sold to date.

Garza is a huge Chao fan. He's has been listening to Chao since he was 18 — back when Chao was the frontman for the French rock group Mano Negra. Like Chao, he also often sports a beret, but shares a lot more in common than headwear.

Along with Hilton, the duo has been "undisputed masters of cool" — as one fan called them — for 12 years now, is best known for their albums "The Richest Man in Babylon," "The Mirror Conspiracy" and "The Cosmic Game," and has sold over half a million albums. This is a staggering total for DJs, who make their reputations in clubs, not necessarily in studios — like the one in Adams Morgan that ESL Music studios calls home. Like Chao, they perform in front of packed crowds of thousands of people all throughout Europe, even playing one time for an unheard of 30,000 people in Portugal.

So what's the best part of getting these "like-minded" musicians on one stage, for what's expected to be more than 15,000 people at Merriweather?

"All of them are people that we would consider, you know, friends," Whittington said. "So, that really would be the push behind the show, putting people together that like each other and would be a good fit musically for a day-long type of festival."

"Thievery Corporation & ESL Music Present: A Day in the World" featuring Manu Chao Radio Bemba Sound System & Thievery Corporation Live with Bebel Gilberto & DJ Sets from Ursula 1000, Nickodemus and Thunderball is on June 23 at Merriweather Post Pavilion, 10475 Little Patuxent Parkway, Columbia, MD, 21044. 410-715-5550. For more information visit www.merriweathermusic.com/concerts.html.