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Music video gifts from all over

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When I was growing up, you would never be caught dead listening to your parents' albums, but at least their music was recorded on the same medium as ours. Since then, CDs pushed out LPs and now the young'ns go for the new initials on the block, MP3s.

Being an old, cranky techno-boob like myself is no fun, but I am getting better. My latest foray - a bit late, but us oldsters move slow - is watching streaming videos a la YouTube.

One night I started typing in the names of my favorite bands from around the world and was rewarded with a mix of live performances and art-directed music videos. I even caught Los Lobos playing an old Mexican tune on "Sesame Street."

For those who complain about wanting to hear something new, try some of the best bands in the world: the medieval-metal of Sweden's Hedningarna (choreographed with a type of belly dancing on "Veli"); the agit-prop of Asian Dub Foundation; the art-school men of the people, Café Tacuba of Mexico ("Ingrata"); or the sophisticated updating of folk instruments by Galicia's Berrogüetto ("Xente"). Or check out Manu Chao's "Rainin' in Paradize," a faux-naif anti-war rocker animated with childlike drawings.

As a forum for videos and music from around the world, YouTube is simply remarkable. Suddenly, some old concert from state-sponsored television in the former Soviet bloc is there, as if plucked from the ether.

One downside to skipping around YouTube is that the quality of the videos is wildly erratic. Another is that since you don't know what you don't know, you are essentially stumbling around in the dark.

There are, however, others who are handpicking videos for audiences. Link TV, which is on Channel 375 on DirecTV and 9410 on Dish Network, includes music videos with its mix of news and cultural programming from around the world. Recently, the nonprofit broadcaster, whose motto is "Television Without Borders," relaunched its Web site, offering streaming world-music videos. Link TV also curated videos for National Geographic's new world-music Web pages.

At linktv.org/worldmusic, there are 30-minute blocks with such themes as hip-hop, dance and performances. There are more than 250 individual videos posted, with more going up regularly, searchable by region or genre. Hip-hop from around the world includes the poignant, compelling "Soobax" by K'Naan, a Somalian living in Canada, and songs from one of my favorite bands, the Barcelona-based collective called Ojos de Brujo who have some beautifully done videos illustrating their affecting mix of hip-hop, flamenco and other genres.

Michal Shapiro, Link TV's assistant director of music programming, said the goal is to present high-quality videos - whether it's a performance clip that "captures the moment well" or a visualization that "enriches the song."

Though you still watch a relatively small box, Link TV's higher-quality videos are well-suited for quieter music, such as the exquisite Madredeus or the lambent "Corazón Loco" by Cuban pianist Bebo Valdéz and flamenco singer El Cigala.

"There are some extraordinary collaborations that go on between artists and directors," said Steven Lawrence, Link TV's director of music and cultural programming.

"We don't care if it costs a lot," Shapiro said. "The creativity factor is what we're looking for." On the other hand, she noted that if a song itself is great and the video is of horrible quality, they do not air it. "That's the kind of thing that breaks our heart."

"Most people in the U.S.," Lawrence said, see a world that seems "constantly in crisis" because newscasts are usually dominated by wars and other catastrophes. The world-music videos, he said, show how other countries are facing their challenges, but also show the "celebration of life going on."

"Not as concerned with ratings," Lawrence said. "We're concerned with our mission: connecting Americans to the world."

This is the time of year when everyone suggests things for you to buy. Here's some treats for yourself - no purchase necessary.

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