‘World music’ or ‘world beat’ are marketing terms referring to music which combines the Anglo-American pop music idiom with musical elements from other parts of the world primarily Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America. World beat emerged in the 1980s ‘specifically to cultivate and nurture the appetites of the North for exotic new sounds of the South’ (Pacini Hernandez 1993:49–50). Some American and European folk music and musics of indigenous peoples of other parts of the world have also been brought to the concert stage, recorded commercially, and promoted as world music.² To the outside international audience, the appeal is the ‘exotic’ or ‘ethnic’ sounds and rhythms of the music.

World music brings into the foreground the dialectics between the local and the global and the tensions between cultural homogenization and heterogenization (Hall 1991:62; Appadurai 1990:2–3, 5). On the one hand, world music has been criticized for exoticising the ‘other’, engaging the audience in visual spectacle and stereotyping ‘traditions’. It promotes musical ‘cut and paste’ and appropriates rhythms and melodies from their social contexts. As Veit Erlmann writes, ‘even though the products of the global entertainment industry purport to represent local tradition and
authenticity, ‘world music’, in this reading, would appear as the soundscape of a universe which, underneath all the rhetoric of ‘roots’ has forgotten its own genesis’ (Erlmann 1993:7). On the other hand, others argue that ‘local musicians, fans, and entrepreneurs take over hegemonic pop forms for themselves...with remarkable skill, vigour, and imagination’ (Frith 1989:5). They indigenize the global idioms to create transculturated forms with local content and concerns (Hannerz 1991; Malm and Wallis 1992).

Critics such as Feld (1994 a and b, 2000) and Meintjes (1990) have drawn attention to issues of ‘ownership’ and ‘cultural equity’ in world music. Pop artists supported by transnational recording companies ‘appropriate’ the performance styles, beats, and genres of musicians from other parts of the world but the ultimate recording belongs to the pop artist. In the Graceland record, for instance, Paul Simon employs South African musicians to perform but sings over their music with his own lyrics. However, the credit on the record jacket reads ‘Words and Music by Paul Simon’ and the collaborative role of the musicians is not highlighted. At the same time, many critics also acknowledge that world music encourages dialogue and participation especially among the younger generation in developing countries and could lead to cultural revitalization (Taylor 1997; Feld 2000).

Local Malaysian musicians began to respond to world music in the 1990s. Using the global pop idiom, local musicians experiment with African and Latin American rhythms as well as their own Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Middle Eastern musics. World music festivals such as the annual Sarawak Rainforest World Music Festival have been attracting local and foreign performers and audiences.

Many of the issues regarding homogeneity/heterogeneity and ownership/cultural equity apply to the local variants of world music in Malaysia. Local music has not been appropriated by foreign singers supported by transnational recording companies. Rather, various forms of local music have been taken out of their social contexts and packaged as world music for state cultural shows and for foreign tourists. Nevertheless, world music has increased rather than decreased musical diversity in Malaysian pop. As I have shown in an earlier article, world beat musicians from various ethnic backgrounds attempt to portray their diverse modern identities by incorporating a variety of local instruments (especially drums), rhythms, singing styles, and forms. For instance, Zainal Abidin combines Malay, Indian, Latin American, and African drumming. Noraniza Idris and Siti Nurhaliza juxtapose Malay rhythms such as asli, zapin, and joget over