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Production sidetracks raw talent

“*Laya Project*’s musicians are the people of . . . communities in the 2004 tsunami-affected regions of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Indonesia, Maldives, [Burma] and India,” the booklet accompanying this elegant double-CD plus DVD package informs us. On the face of it, that’s a great idea (although it’s not clear whether profits from the project are being directed towards the rehabilitation of those regions). It goes on: “This production is based on regional folk music traditions, recorded and brought back to the studio to create a composition that mixes and enhances the original recordings.” That’s reasonably accurate, although I’m inclined to query the value of the enhancement process because the consequence is an anodyne Asian melange that seems condescending to artists and listeners alike. It needn’t have been so. The vocalist on *Muliya*, Fajar Siddiq, bears more than a passing resemblance to Youssou

N’dour. *Hai La Sa* from southern India, the Maldivian contributions *Farihi* and *Touare*, *Water Side Tales* from Thailand and even Burmese chants in *Rain Buddha* would all have benefited considerably had they been offered without embellishment. The gratuitous percussion, strings and bass lend these discs an unnecessary and annoying new age vibe. I have rather fewer complaints about the DVD component: a beautifully shot and intermittently poignant documentary that features some of the music and has won several awards, including best film at last year’s Byron Bay Film Festival. Some of the *Laya Project* artists appeared at this month’s Perth International Arts Festival and are scheduled to return next year for a full Australian tour. One can only hope that the live performances allow audiences unmediated access to the folk artists.

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