

PRESENTING
AFRO-MUMANZI WORLD MUSIC SUMMER CAMP

By David Morrison

While poking about online for additional interesting information with which I might embellish this article, I stumbled across this description of the instrument it principally concerns: *A marimba is a wooden percussion instrument with a keyboard whose bars are made of wood and with resonators. It is played by striking the wooden bars using mallets.*

Not staggeringly interesting, I admit, though wholly accurate in its matter of fact way of describing the marimba. But reading this coldly technical summation of the form and functionality of the instrument without knowledge of how it sounds gives absolutely no impression of its exquisite, joyous musicality. The marimba, at least to my ears, emits an utterly beautiful sound – way beyond what may generally be perceived as percussive. Watching or listening to it played by musicians who understand it can be a magical, transcendent experience, even more so when presented in an ensemble format.

One such group of talented marimbaists, especially for ones so young, is the fantastic Afro-Mumanzi. And when I say young, I mean young: Errington-based sisters Fahlon and Jasmine Smith are 16 and 19 years-old, while their Vancouverite bandmates Kai Buchan, Chris Couto and Theo Vincent are just 19, 22 and 23 respectively. Yet despite their youth, these kids are already experienced and recognized music tutors, regularly teaching world music classes and workshops throughout B.C. To this end they will be bringing their skills to the Errington War Memorial Hall between August 16 and 20 for a youth-to-youth World Music Summer Camp, holding marimba and hand drumming classes for youths aged 9 to 19 years-old. The programme is such that students should be performing together for the community after just those five days. That's what I would call effective teaching!



Chris, Fahlon, Kai, Jasmine and Theo of Afro-Mumanzi • SUBMITTED PHOTO

Camp coordinator Valerie Dare founded Afro-Mumanzi and has been acting as an agent to secure them live shows. When I spoke to her recently about her talented charges and how the summer camp came to be, she explained the origins of this exciting young group. It all started when she was teaching at Britannia Secondary School in Vancouver:

“It’s a very multicultural environment, and it was the first opportunity I’d had to work in a school where Caucasian kids were in the minority. It occurred to me that it might be a good idea to introduce a curriculum to include learning about countries around the world through music, as everyone understands or appreciates elements of music. So we got together with some world music artists in Vancouver, of which there are many, and devised a curriculum we could use with the kids. We got money to bring musicians in to do workshops. Then I became a member of the Arts Advocacy Committee for the Vancouver School Board,

and went every year to the showcase for artists that want to tour schools; one of the groups that came up was Marimba Muzuva (meaning *Wooden Voices in the Sun*) from Victoria – the oldest marimba group in the country. One of the things they offered was instrument building workshops. So we got some money to build a set of marimbas at Britannia, which went out to different schools as part of their music programme. It was really popular and the first summer we – meaning me, the Vancouver Folk Music Festival and the Roundhouse Community Centre – put on a two-week world music camp. The kids that came out of that camp the second year decided it would be a nice thing to stay together, continuing to learn world music tradition through the community centre at Britannia. They fell in love with the marimba and formed a group called Jabulani (Zulu for ‘rejoice’ or ‘bring joy and happiness,’ and the name of the controversial World Cup 2010 soccer

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all), which merged into the guys from Vancouver in Afro-Mumanzi play in Kutapira, which started in 2005. For the last two years they've been touring with that group – mainly school shows, but also community shows – and composing their own music. That's something that Fahlon and Jasmine haven't aspired to until now; they've been working mainly with traditional and contemporary Zimbabwean songs."

If I may use the words "despite their youth" once more, Kutapira have already joined the ranks of Canadian marimba music royalty. Not only that, they have performed before *actual* royalty. In 2007 the group travelled to Scotland as Canadian representatives at the Aberdeen International Youth Festival, doing their beautiful thing for Her Majesty the Queen at Balmoral Castle. I can guarantee you now that those regal toes will have been tappin' away like Michael Flatley after a gallon of Brazilian espresso.

At this juncture it could be a good idea to see and hear for yourself just why and how Kutapira ended up in such a lofty situation. For those without access to a computer right now, I can only apologize and ask that you believe me when I tell you how brilliant these kids are. For those who have one to hand, head firstly to YouTube and search for "Kutapira entertains on Granville Street." Incredible stuff, no? Now head over to the Audio & Video page of Afro-Mumanzi's own website (URL below), and watch the video for the song, *Rain*. Okay, did you watch that? Now chew on the fact that the second performance was just the *third* time these musicians had ever played together, and also that the violin part was added to the arrangement on the morning the performance was filmed. Even if you were unable to watch what I'm talking about here, you may be gleaning that what those who could just witnessed is pretty remarkable.

It is this level of talent and commitment to their art that the five members of Afro-Mumanzi will be employing to introduce the youngsters of this area to the marimba at their World Music Summer Camp. The Smith sisters have recently been recognized by the British Columbia Association for Community Education for their "outstanding contribution to community education," so it is safe to say that students will be in the best possible hands, even though these young ladies have yet to enter their twenties.

It is probable that the World Music Summer Camp will become an annual event, and it is a certainty that the group will continue, but opportunities to learn from Afro-Mumanzi, or even see them perform, will be limited for a while. As Dare explains, the group members will soon be dispersing around the globe:

"The group is going to be scattered for a while. One of them is travelling Europe with another group; one is travelling to Mozambique and Portugal to visit family; one is going to Costa Rica and the sisters are going to Guatemala!"

In 2006 a family road trip saw Fahlon and Jasmine Smith visit Mexico and Guatemala, where the marimba is the national instrument. They explored the marimba traditions of the Mayan people, an education they will be continuing on a similar trip later this year. Furthering their knowledge of the history and culture of their chosen instrument will not only benefit the sisters, but undoubtedly their great many students for years to come. ~

For further information about Afro-Mumanzi's World Music Summer Camp, visit www.erringtonhall.bc.ca, looking under Events, or contact Valerie Dare by phone on (250) 586 6583 or email at valvgdare@gmail.com. For information about Afro-Mumanzi visit www.afro-mumanzi.com and for Kutapira visit <http://kutapira.com>



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