



Afro-Mumanzi - L-R: Theo Vincent, Fahlon Smith, Chris Couto, Kai Buchan and Jasmine Smith

STRIKING ACCORD: TAKIN' IT TO THE STREETS!

By David Morrison

Even though she was exposed to very little of it, in a classic case of the generation chasm I liked the way my grandmother used to describe the music I enjoyed in my youth. Tarring even the mellowest of my teen tastes with the same brush, basically because it was anything but her beloved Mario Lanza, her generic term for my musical world – therefore, by default, that of every other ‘tearaway’ the world over - was simply ‘Thump-Thump-Thump.’ I cannot help but wonder, therefore, what she would have made of such as the original marimba music and decidedly non-tearaway community spirit of the young Parksville sisters, Fahlon and Jasmine Smith.

Just 17- and 20-years old respectively, these most impressive young ladies are integral members of two marimba bands, Afro-Mumanzi and Kumbana (‘Friendship’) Marimba, creating and performing tunes so sunny and life-affirming that they surely win over the hardest, most curmudgeonly of hearts. Yes, I am convinced that even my grouchy old Nan would have loved this music!

For the uninitiated, the marimba is a wooden percussion instrument not dissimilar in design or function to the xylophone or vibraphone. Unlike its relatives, however, the marimba boasts a distinctly exotic sound such that it is impossible to hear one played without images of West Africa, South America or generally warmer climes entering the mind.

Even at such tender years, the Smith sisters are already consummate marimbists, their passion for the instrument shining through. As they tell me, when they play it is not just the listener that is transported elsewhere. “It’s like being in a trance sometimes,” says Jasmine. “The songs go by so quickly because you just get so into the rhythm. Sometimes I’ll just close my eyes and feel the music with my whole body.”

But Jasmine and Fahlon don’t just play the marimba brilliantly, they also teach it, and with the guidance of a crack support team they are taking their skills into the community to spread the infectious marimba gospel.

Last summer Jasmine, Fahlon and their Vancouver-based Afro-Mumanzi cohorts Kai Buchan, Chris Couto and Theo Vincent hosted the well-received, inaugural Afro-Mumanzi World Music Camp in Errington, creating the junior marimba band, Jangano ('Alliance') Marimba, in the process. Aimed strictly at a 9-18 age range, it takes place again this year between August 15 and 19, but in the interim the Smiths have been deeply involved in two projects of a more inter generational nature.

Initiated by the Arrowsmith Community Enhancement Society's Activity Coordinator, Marilynn Sims, and Afro-Mumanzi's founder, mentor and representative, Valerie Dare, "Life is a Celebration: Marimba Music for Seniors" began in January. A collaboration with the Mid-Island Pensioners & Hobbyists Association, School District 69 and the Smith sisters' Kumbana Marimba ensemble, the overarching aim has been to introduce seniors to the instrument, via direct involvement from the construction of marimbas through classes through the founding and debut of a performance ensemble. The marimbas are modified especially for seniors and will be played in public for the first time during the second, interlinking project, "Striking Accord: Building Community Through Street Music."

"Striking Accord is based on a project that was done in New York City, where they moved (upright) pianos around different parts of the city," Jasmine explains. "So we're going to do it with marimbas, moving them to different locations around Qualicum Beach." The original concept Jasmine refers to is "Play Me, I'm Yours," a conceptual 'live artwork' dreamed up by the brilliant British multidisciplinary artist, Luke Jerram. In a nutshell, pianos are left in various interesting locations for the public to enjoy; it's been a huge hit, staged in fifteen further cities around the world since March 2008. "Striking Accord" will mirror this inspirational, fun idea, marimbas being strategically placed around Qualicum Beach on June 21-23 and Coombs on June 24, as a precursory event to Canadian Multiculturalism Day on June 27.

With all activities free, the weekend includes workshops conducted by the members of Afro-Mumanzi, as well as performances in both communities by workshop participants, Jangano Marimba and most likely the New Horizons seniors group. The whole shebang concludes in tail-feather shakin' fashion with a street dance headlined by Afro-Mumanzi. As the act that closed the Friday night of last year's Islands Folk Festival (at Providence Farm in Duncan) to an ecstatic audience of hundreds, these kids are more than used to this kind of thing!

From the evidence of these events alone it is apparent how much sterling background work Sims and Dare are doing to bring musical and cultural joy to the people of this region, but they are delighted to see the recognition Jasmine and Fahlon are receiving for executing their initiatives with such skill and enthusiasm: while they did not scoop the prize, the sisters were nominated in the Youth of the Year category at Parksville's 2011 Glassie Awards. Yet they remain utterly unaffected by the fuss

surrounding them, happy to just play and teach music on their beloved marimbas. They simply relish any opportunity to share what they love with others, regardless of age, keen to demonstrate that most anyone can do what they do.

"I think one thing that appeals to a lot of people with the marimba is that you can't really play out of tune," states Fahlon. "And however much or however little music experience you have, you can just sit down and play. Compared to a lot of instruments, it's really easy to learn."

"The only thing people are likely to struggle with is getting the right rhythms," adds her sister. "The notes are easy to get, but the rhythms can be a bit tricky sometimes. We will be teaching some of our simpler songs, but then I've never come across anyone who can't get the songs within about two minutes!"

"It's a lot of fun when we go into schools and get to know the kids," continues Fahlon. "It's nice to see them grow. Some might have trouble at school or maybe problems at home, but they can come to marimba and grow from getting really good at it.

"A perfect example of this is a little boy who kept saying, 'I hate this, I hate this, I hate this!'" interjects Jasmine. "So I told him that it's okay, you don't have to be here if you don't want to, there is no pressure. But he came around, started to play, and was, like, 'Look, I can do it! I can do it!' That was so fun to watch, because he got so into it."

I can't help but have noticed the increase in popularity of the ukulele in the last few years – everybody's playing one! I wonder which instrument might be next to experience such a strong mainstream resurgence? Granted, the uke is considerably more portable than the marimba, but maybe the marimba's time is nigh? I hope so, as it's so utterly joyous, but if Jasmine and Fahlon Smith have anything to do with it, it may not be long before there's one in every Vancouver Island home! ■

For further information about New Horizons, Striking Accord and the Afro-Mumanzi World Music Camp, contact Valerie Dare on (250) 586 6583 or by email at vgdare@gmail.com. For information about Afro-Mumanzi visit <http://afro-mumanzi.com>.

