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Arts and Entertainment

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Shumba brings the Dumi beat of Zimbabwe to Eugene



Clockwise from left to right the members of Eugene's own marimba band Shumba are: Michael MacDonald, Gil Harrison, James Webb, Gary Goldwater, Mellisa Over, Scott Nelson, Janet Bushnell and Maggie Donahue.

"This is not a concert, this is a dance." — Dumi Maraire

Layer upon layer of hypnotic rhythm engulfs the listener, swaying the body and the spirit to an ancient African beat. The room explodes with a joyous vibe as the resonance of large wooden marimbas sends the audience into a dancing frenzy. The happy faces and energetic movements of the musicians mirror those of the dancers, completing the circle that is African music.

This is Shumba, Eugene's own African marimba band. Although they are all white Americans, the members of Shumba are dedicated practitioners of the music of Zimbabwe. From humble beginnings as "The No Name Marimba Ensemble" four years ago, they have evolved into one of Eugene's most popular music groups.

The music Shumba plays was brought to the Northwest from Zimbabwe by a man named Dumi Maraire in the 1960's. Maraire, a musician/teacher with a master's degree, was given a grant to teach at the University of Washington, a school with a strong interest in ethnomusicology.

As a member of Zimbabwe's Shona tribe, Maraire was well-versed in his country's musical traditions, which go back over a thousand years. Maraire came up with a new idea, however. He decided to play Shona melodies on the marimba, which was the national instrument of Mozambique.

In Zimbabwe, music had always been played on the mbira, a small, thumb piano-like instrument. Maraire refined this innovation until he developed the "Dumi marimba formation," a seven-marimba formation consisting of three sopranos, two tenors, a baritone and a bass.

Maraire's influence on Shumba, and indeed on all the Northwest's African marimba bands, has been profound.

Shumba's genesis occurred in May of 1982 when Maraire taught a marimba workshop at the WOW Hall. A small group of Eugene Dumi-enthusiasts took advantage of the opportunity to study with the master. Some of the people at the workshop decided to get together and practice regularly, and they became the nucleus of the early Shumba.

At first, the group had only one large marimba to practice on, which was often played by all eight members of the group simultaneously. "We were playing upside-down, backwards and sideways, so everybody would be black and blue with bruises from getting hit by other people's sticks," recalls Shumba member Gary Goldwater.

So even though they were learning group marimba pieces, the early Shumba never got to experience the pleasure of playing on a full set of marimbas. Then, in

July of 1982, Maraire played the WOW Hall with his performance group, The Maraire Marimba Ensemble. When the group took their break, the sight of all those unmanned marimbas on stage was more than Shumba could stand. Unannounced and without permission, Shumba took the stage and began to play.

"It was a case where passion took precedence over common sense," says Shumba member Michael MacDonald, a University graduate student in English. Ignoring the looks of concern on the faces of some of Maraire's band members, Shumba felt the power of playing on a full set of marimbas for the first time, and played a great mini-set.

"Dumi was so happy he came out and started playing with us," Goldwater recalls. "When we were done he said 'Eugene, this is your own marimba band.'"

"This music is just coming through us really — I see it coming out of the earth in Africa. A lot of people come up to me and say 'I love your music.' I honestly can't take credit for it. It's coming from another culture. We are just vehicles for it."

— Janet Bushnell

With this blessing from the master, Shumba began to practice more frequently and started shopping for marimbas. They played their first gig at the 1982 Christmas Faire as the "No Name Marimba Ensemble". With the realization that they had actually become a gig-playing group, the search for a more appropriate name began. Some members of the band fancied the word "Shumba," a Shona word meaning "lion's spirit." Another name considered was "The Honorary Africans." Also, "The Token Ofays" and "The Buzz-tones" were considered. Fortunately, "Shumba" was chosen.

At first, gigs were slow in coming. But over the next two years, Shumba continued to refine their playing and began to develop a following. A performance in front of the Hult Center during last year's Eugene Celebration exposed large numbers of new people to Shumba's music. A subsequent performance at the WOW Hall established them as one of Eugene's top-drawing local bands.

While many other local groups get gigs on a once-

in-a-while basis, Shumba turns down ninety percent of the offers they receive. All the members of Shumba are students or have day jobs, so the band can only handle a limited amount of work.

Another limitation on the group's personal appearances is its collective disdain for playing in bars. They cite various reasons for this, including audience attitude. "I feel that often people go to bars and expect to be able to talk as loud as they want and have the music as background," MacDonald says. "We have a lot of respect for this music and I think we expect it from our audience as well."

Listening to Shumba's music is not meant to be a passive experience. The dichotomy of audience and performer doesn't exist in African music. The musical performance is meant to be a creative exchange between the musicians and the dancers, and members of Shumba fully believe in this tradition.

"Our playing is directly related to the feeling that comes from the crowd" says Shumba member Jan Bushnell. "Dumi used to say 'Let the spirit be upon the people and we can all move together.' He would always stress that we were all here creating this joyous moment together, and his attitude has had a real strong effect on us."

We're lucky to have Shumba. Unlike reggae and other musical genres that are well-represented throughout the country, African marimba music is virtually unknown in most of the United States, especially at the performance level. It is only here in the Northwest that it is played — the direct result of Dumi Maraire's influence.

Kutamba, the great Seattle marimba band, were students of Maraire's who formed their own group after he went back to Zimbabwe four years ago. Balafon, a marimba group from Corvallis, was also influenced by students of Maraire. Members of Shumba say that even in Northern California, there is little recognition of African marimba music.

The music Shumba plays is as inspiring to them as it is to their audience, and they play it with a sense of respect and humility. "This music is just coming through us really — I see it coming out of the earth in Africa," Bushnell says. "A lot of people come up to me and say 'I love your music.' I honestly can't take credit for it. It's coming from another culture. We are just vehicles for it."

Goldwater agrees. "We were really touched by the spirit of the music that Dumi was playing, and we're trying to pass it on as best we can, to try and bring a little extra joy into the world," he says. "I think what we do best is bring people together in joy."

Story by Kevin Harrington
Photo by Michael Wilhelm