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Marie Daulne (center) with other members of Zap Mama

A joyful noise

Two Reel Music gems come to the Northwest Film Center

by Kelly M. Bryan

Miziké Mama, directed by Violaine Villers, introduces us to Zap Mama, a women's a cappella singing group who perform a heady "one-world" blend of songs. Based in Brussels, Belgium, the group's five members are African, African European and European. Like the band's make-up, its music reflects a mix of cultures. In concert, the group rapidly switches between these influences, like changing TV channels—hence the word "zap" in its name. Culture shock is an outmoded idea for these women, who've grown up on diversity and a mélange of traditions. The quick succession of disparate forms of music, even the blending of these forms into individual songs of a new breed, is what Zap Mama is all about.

Several segments of this straightforward documentary feature the band members describing their ethnic backgrounds and personal history with Zap Mama. But the focus is on Marie Daulne, the passionate, self-assured founder and leader of the group. Music pulses through this woman, permeating her slightest gesture. Her voice and theatrical presence are mesmerizing. In the film she relates how her search for the "African side" of her heritage led her to the music she performs.

Although she was raised in Belgium, Daulne was born in Zaire, which is located in Central Africa. Her Zairean mother (who appears in the film, but is not named) had left her village to avoid an unwanted arranged marriage. In the city, she met and married a Belgian man. A week after she gave birth to Marie, her husband was killed in riots which erupted during the country's de-colonization struggles. She escaped with the children to the forest, taking refuge with the Pygmies, whose lands neighbored those of her own people, the Bantu. During this stay she learned the song style of the Pygmies, a particularly beautiful form of yodeling, which she later taught to her daughter. Eventually, the Daulnes were airlifted to Belgium with other evacuees. (As the wife of a colonial, with children of mixed blood, she believed that she and her family risked execution if they remained in Zaire.)

Daulne has augmented the musical traditions taught to her by her mother, and those of her father's relatives (such as liturgical and classical music), with studies in Arab, Asian and African polyphonic techniques, creating a beguiling mix. She and her band mates readily admit that their

approach is not traditional, not a preservation of original musical forms. It is a joyful, vibrant hybrid born of a world that is ever growing smaller, of cultures metamorphosing and merging. The small taste of concert footage in this one-hour film is more than enough to send you into the music store for Zap Mama's recording (on the Luaka Bop label).

Playing with *Miziké Mama* is Laurent Chevalier's *Djembefola*, a portrait of Mamady Keita, a celebrated virtuoso of the djembe, a type of drum. (*Djembefola* means drummer.) The film takes us on a funny, lyrical, poignant journey as we follow Keita on a return visit to his native Guinea, on the West African coast.

We initially see Keita as a grinning, sweating, powerhouse of rhythm—a man possessed by joy. In the opening moments of the film he is teaching a drum class to a group of beginners in Brussels, where he lives and works. With them he is open, warm, laughing.

On the first leg of his voyage home, he is reunited with friends and colleagues of the Djolimba Ballet in the capital city of Conakry. As a boy, he was recruited from his village along with talented performers from around the country, to join this national ballet company—at the time, a cultural arm of the "people's revolution" that swept Guinea in the decades after the end of French colonialism in 1958. Musicians and dancers challenge him to duels of skill, trying to prove that he has lost his touch.

As he presses still further into his past, driving into the countryside to the natal village he has not seen for 26 years, we are witness to deeper levels of Keita's personality. We see his discomfort when his old djembe teacher greets him with anger and rebuke for his long years of silence. Although they make up, there is a tension as Keita jokes with him, describing his military-like instructional techniques.

Most moving of all are the scenes where Keita rejoins his sisters and brothers (his parents have died long before). There is naked pain, shame and longing on his face amid the pleasures of reacquaintance. The final sequence is a rapturous, bittersweet finish to a film which is as much about the ways that political events shape an individual's life as it is about music.

Miziké Mama and Djembefola
play on Friday, Jan. 28, at 7 pm and on
Saturday, Jan. 29, at 2 pm, at the Berg Swann
Auditorium of the Portland Art Museum, on SW
Park at Madison. Tickets are \$5.50 general,
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