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PRIDE

Sink your teeth into Rubyfruit

Women pass on a musical language
that is never written down

BY PAT YOUNG



Pride Parade crowds love Rubyfruit Marimba Ensemble. Standing, from left: Sujahni Blacker, Tey Morris, Susan Terry, Judy McLean, Ellen Wolfson, Jo Mahler, Lea Shapiro. Sitting: Lois Miller.

So my editor said to write a story on Portland's seven-member all-lesbian marimba band. I went to one of their rehearsals and kept counting eight. Finally, I had to ask, "OK, who's the straight one?"

They laughed. Turns out they had recently recruited an eighth member, Sujahni Blacker, to play percussion. (And she's a lesbian!)

They call themselves Rubyfruit Marimba Ensemble, and you can see and hear them June 20 in Portland's Pride Parade. The members also play in other marimba bands because they love the music so much.

A couple of years ago, Judy McLean, Susan Terry, Lea Shapiro and Tey Morris were performing together in a band and decided to form another one to give themselves more playing time. Heck, we're all lesbians, they said, why not form an all-lesbian band? Gaydar activated, they quickly found three more: Lois Miller, Ellen Wolfson and Jo Mahler.

They practice at McLean and Terry's house, which means that a couple of times a month the family room turns into a sea of marimbas, which are large instruments of the xylophone family. Wall-to-wall music.

Although the massive bass and baritones are a permanent part of the room décor, other members need to haul in their sopranos—not exactly an easy task. After all, these things are heavy, and most of the Rubyfruit folks are in their 50s. They laughingly agree they could use a few groupies to do hauling and setup (preferably young, strong dykes).

When the rehearsal starts, the room comes alive with music. High-energy, fun dance music. The women sway with the beat, their brightly festive ties moving across colorful shirts. The song ends and laughter begins. It's contagious.

It's easy to see why these women love to play Zimbabwean-inspired music with these instruments. "Once I started playing, my love of this music deepened," explains McLean. "I got hooked. It still affects me that way, even after five years. It's in my head all the time. You get the rhythm into your body."

Morris cites the joy marimba music brings to people as a reason to continue playing. "I wouldn't want to do it just for my own satisfaction," she says. "It is so joyful for other people. It lifts them up, too."

She sees this every time the group plays in public for events such as fund-raisers, receptions and last year's International Women's Day Celebration.

Also last year, the women were in the Pride Parade riding on a flatbed truck trying to keep their balance as they played. When they turned the corner onto Broadway in front of Pioneer Square, the crowd went crazy. Morris smiles as she shares the memory.

Playing in marimba bands fulfills Mahler's desire for participating in group music. "As a musician, the polyrhythmic nature of traditional Zimbabwean music has added a new, exciting and challenging aspect to my previous musical experience," she says.

Mahler is also the group's mentor, which is helpful because marimba requires a completely different learning process from other instruments. The music is not written down; instead, the tradition is passed on orally.

Rubyfruit members explain how in the late 1960s a teacher from Zimbabwe came to University of Washington and eventually his music made its way to the Portland area. People began studying with him and forming their own groups. Some became teachers, and the music started to spread.

Rubyfruit members come from different musical backgrounds. Wolfson explains that some had played other instruments before, while others had not. Some have several years of experience with the marimba, others less. For Wolfson, different musical backgrounds and different methods of learning were part of the challenge of being in this group.

Having Mahler as a mentor has helped the group along musically. "I loved being able to share, but everybody here has contributed in their own way," she says. "We have all mentored each other in different ways."

Wolfson adds, "It's about teamwork, really."

The photographer arrives to take some photos for the article. The group eagerly plays a song for her. I tap my foot to the beat. I missed my bowling night for this. Don't mind a bit. 

Contact RUBYFRUIT MARIMBA ENSEMBLE by calling Judy McLean at 503-284-9022 or Lea Shapiro at 503-231-7401.

PAT YOUNG is a Portland free-lance writer and gay and lesbian historian.