



PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

Rhythm national

Portland musician Chaz Mortimer blends the worlds of tradition and technology

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

The popular adage says it takes a village to raise a child. Local percussionist, educator and producer Chaz Mortimer will tell you it also takes a village to raise a musician.

Mortimer has roots that tap deep into the music community around the world and here in Portland. He mentors youth throughout the city and will be making a trip to Nigeria this summer to co-produce a documentary film about the Afro-Cuban tradition of batá drumming.

Mortimer has taken traditions that are steeped in the ways of ancestral Africa and combined them with 21st century technology in his music, mentorship and film projects.

He grew up in Boulder, Colo., and started playing jazz drum set when he was 8 years old. He progressed to congas and Afro-Cuban percussion, and in high school he took his first job working in a drum shop. He has studied with diverse talents, including Portland-based trumpeter Farnell Newton, Oberlin College's Dance Diaspora leader Adanika and Miami-based master batá drum maker Ezequiel Torres.

"When I was a kid, music was a way to break down barriers and deal with reality," Mortimer said. Boulder is not a very diverse place, he said, but it was there that his foundation of passion and respect for other cultures began.

"When I was growing up, kids around me were often very involved in their family's religious practice, but I didn't have that structure around me. I began practicing meditation as a teenager, and spent a lot of time in nature, and always felt that music had this deep way of opening up the spiritual world. So, after spending more time around spiritual drummers from the Caribbean and the African continent I began to understand how deeply I felt the connection."

At Oberlin College, he was invited to play percussion for Dance Diaspora, an Afro Cuban dance troupe. The group traveled to Cuba where Mortimer played and studied.

"I went through a crisis in my 20s when I was at college and my grandmother had passed away," said Mortimer. "I took time off from school and in some ways my life just fell apart. That is when I went back and reconnected with my godfather, Baba Adetobi Ajibilu."

The medicine and healing practices of the Afro-Cuban Lukumi traditions became a natural source of therapy, Mortimer says.

"In Cuba, it is not 'weird' for a white person to find sanctuary in African traditions,"

Mortimer says. "We are always encouraged to draw on the strengths of our personal ancestors and at the same time wash away the weaknesses that we may have inherited or may be at risk of passing on. Over the years I have found the same spiritual support and healing power from those who practice traditional spirituality on the continent of Africa, too."

One of his first lessons with his godfather was playing batá drums. "If you really want to learn batá traditionally," Mortimer's godfather told him, "part of your apprenticeship is to go out and make yourself a set to learn on."

Mortimer has become a part of the very village that raised him.

Since his arrival in Portland in 2007, he has dedicated much of his time to the community's youths, producing and teaching hip hop, audio engineering, production, songwriting and developing a beat-building curriculum.

"Working with youth has been a big calling for me," Mortimer said. "When I work with kids, I let them lead the way. My strength is bringing out their strengths."

His most recent work with youth is a team collaboration with J. Ross Parrelli and Kevin "Yamio" Winkle titled "Beats, Lyrics, Leaders." It is a series of interactive workshops, residencies, and projects developed to build character and leadership skills through the art of music. The workshops used an iPad to create, which Mortimer says is a good tool for people who don't have access to instruments.

"I had been skeptical about the iPad when we wrote it into the curriculum, but when I saw it in the hands of these kids, it just blew my mind."

One of Mortimer's former students, Laray Thomas, was homeless, living in a shelter downtown and making it to class at Helensview High School intermittently. In 2008, Thomas' ankle was shattered in a gang shooting that left him unable to bear weight for seven months.

"I took a music development class at my high school," said Thomas. "We had a studio and Chaz would teach me how to make beats. He helped me with memorizing lyrics and basically just motivated me to be my best."

By the end of his time in the program, Thomas was working eight hours a day in the studio. He would show up before school to work on his projects.

"Working with Chaz was a real blessing," Thomas said. "Before I met him I was so wrapped up in the gang life I didn't remember who I was. I believe he saw something in me. I see now what Chaz saw in me then."

Thomas is still involved in music today and works under the name, Laray "Ray Ray"

Thomas.

On May 23, Ibori Records – Mortimer's label he created in 2011 – released, "Iyanla (Oro Cantado)", by Seattle-based Omo Alagba. The album features a sequence of songs that are sung in ceremonies of the Lukumi tradition from the Europa people in Nigeria.

"There isn't really a recording that has that sequence of songs, but they are sung in every community," said Mortimer. "We wanted to create a CD that people could study, so that when people come together, they could participate (in the ceremony)."

In tandem with the recording of the album with Omo Alagba, Mortimer began a film project with two local filmmakers: Sidony O'Neal and Alex Riedlinger. Riedlinger owns the E'Njoni Cafe, a Portland restaurant inspired by the Mediterranean and North African cuisine. The trio set out to document the making of the Omo Alagba album and established the film production company, Ibeji Pictures.

Kola Bimbula, a visiting law professor at Seattle University, is also a high priest of the tradition of batá drumming. His family has been organizing the International Congress of Orisa Tradition and Culture festival since 1991. Bimbula heard about the Omo Alagba recording project and invited the group to perform at the historic 10th International Congress this summer in Ile-Ife, Nigeria.

The group, which includes all of the members of Omo Alagba, the film crew, Portland poet Rashida Shani Young Miya'asu and Mortimer's godfather, Baba Adetobi Ajibilu, will travel to Nigeria and continue their documentation that traces the story of the batá drum of Nigeria.

"With all of the projects I've taken on this last year, there have been challenges and learning experiences every step of the way," said Mortimer. "This trip to Nigeria is a moment of fruition. It represents rising above the odds to be a part of something that is bigger than the individual – an experience that will have a ripple effect in all of our communities."

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