

CONTACT US
Erick Bengel | Features Editor
ebengel@dailyastorian.com

WEEKEND BREAK

FOLLOW US
facebook.com/
DailyAstorian

A MUSICAL TRIP TO SENEGAL



Denise Reed, center, with musicians and friends in Senegal.

Much of what we're taught about Africa and its people is wrong

By DENISE REED
For The Daily Astorian

Last year, I received an invitation from the International Federation of Choral Music to lead a series of workshops on African-American spirituals and gospel music in Senegal, a country on Africa's west coast.

I've presented workshops before and conducted programs containing spirituals with many choral groups, but the predominant language of the Senegalese is French. I took two years of French in high school and often sung music with French lyrics, but actually teaching in the language — about music or anything else — is a different story.

I had never been to Africa, but I recalled what I and other Americans of my generation had been told and read in history books. In the 1956 Hitchcock film "The Man Who Knew Too Much," Jimmy Stewart is traveling with his family in Africa. His son remarks, "In school, they call this the Dark Continent" (though, he observes, the country is "twice as bright as Indianapolis"). Of course, we all realize that the phrase "Dark Continent" has multiple connotations.

Dakar, the capital of Senegal, is the country's largest city and the closest point to the coast of the Americas. From this place, countless Africans were shipped to America and surrounding islands, and sold as slaves to the colonists.

Dakar is like any other large city in the U.S. or Europe, relatively modern but retaining vestiges of the past. Through many sections of the city, you might encounter cabs, modern SUVs and horse-



Denise Reed photos
Denise Reed (in the background) with choral workshop attendees in Senegal.

drawn carriages.

During my trip, I got the chance to see that much of what I had been taught about Africa and its people — the untruths that have been told, printed and circulated over many generations — is flat-out wrong.

Monolingual among bilinguals

The people of Senegal are composed of several tribal groups but adopted the language of the French, the dominant colonists of the region.

The people, tall and regal, wear colorful garments as they walk or ride through the city to their various places of work and play. The air is hot with moist sea breeze

at this location near the equator. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the city and its inhabitants.

I had been told that Africa was a dark place inhabited by subhuman individuals only capable of being slaves. Might this still be a belief held by some people even today? (I recall having to take several I.Q. tests back when I was the only African-American applying for a college prep program in a Chicago secondary school. Most applicants take only one their entire life.)

Where do assumptions like this come from? There is a long tradition of writers, including some Founding Fathers,

expressing a belief in the intellectual and physical inferiority of the peoples of Africa.

The most interesting revelation of my trip was that I, the American, was the one who had communication problems. In fact, to my knowledge I was the only person at the choral festival proficient in only one language. All of the choruses and workshop attendees were proficient in both French and at least one of their tribal languages.

Some were also proficient in English and could translate the information I was attempting to convey about the African-American music forms. The school-age children of the conference director were already bilingual and taught English early. They were dressed like Americans but spoke like international students, able to communicate on many levels.

The music of Africa

I had my notes on spirituals and gospel music translated so that my workshop attendees would at least understand the history of this American music. The actual music had to be taught in English, since that was the language the music was composed in, and, to understand many of the hidden meanings of the spirituals, the lyrics needed to be explained (as best I could manage).

The music presented at the conference concerts on two evenings was wonderful, very pleasing to the ear, despite that these were not the harmonies I was taught in my music theory and composition classes at DePaul University. My submitted theory lessons and compositions could not

See SENEGAL, Page 2C