

'A new musical language'

Okavango brings together African cultures

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FIRST POSTED: THURSDAY, AUGUST 29, 2013 06:53 PM EDT



Okavango: An African Orchestra, a diverse-sounding group that blends different African sounds, christened itself after the wildlife-rich Okavango Delta in Botswana.

TORONTO - If someone were to ask you to quickly name a song inspired by Africa, chances are pretty high you'll come back with Toto's massive hit, Africa.

Dig a little deeper, though, and you'll discover an army of African bands whose music is inspired by ancient rituals and sacred traditions and address universal themes like struggle, pain and joy.

Nadine McNulty, who helped form Okavango: An African Orchestra, says the collective christened itself after the wildlife-rich Okavango Delta in Botswana for several reasons. The group plays Harbourfront Sunday night as part of the Hot & Spicy Food Festival.

"It's a place where many different animal species come together to feed and find water," she explains. "Predators and prey are forced to co-exist and share the meagre resources because of the harsh environment around them.

"Similarly, the band brings together the traditional music and instruments of several major African cultures that historically have had little or no interaction."

McNulty says that musicians in West Africa who usually play the kora, balafon or tama (talking drum) would not use an instrument from East Africa like the krar to create music or vice versa.

"By the same token, a Malian kora would sound alien to a farmer in the Ethiopia highlands who's used to the one-string fiddle called masenko," she says.

It's obvious that Okavango respects the continent's myriad musical traditions. It's in the glorious mix of rhythms in their songs, the fact that the five core members — Donne Roberts, Sadio Sissokho, Daniel Nebiat, Kooshin and Tichaona Mareza — play 13 different instruments, and sing in 10 languages.

Even more admirable is that they're on a mission to break real and perceived barriers between different African countries and traditions, creating a musical delta where everyone's welcome to dip in and dig the grooves.

In doing this, McNulty says Okavango has created "a new musical language that harmonizes their different tuning systems, rhythms, and timbres.

"The musicians and instruments represent a continuum of traditions and cultures from time immemorial to the present day," she says. "The multicultural spirit of modern day Canada bridges ancient African solitudes (in their music)." 13-09-09 10:09 PM

McNulty says the band's sound embraces "Somali jazz, Tigrinya folk music, Malagasy ballads and salegy, hybrid sounds of

Show folk and popular music of Zimbabwe and Ghanaian highlife.” Rest assured, you don't have to be from the area to enjoy these musical-language sounds to sway or dance to them.

As admirable as their mandate is, the orchestra doesn't come across as a museum piece, dusty and stuck in the past.

“Their music isn't static, they're experimenting with traditional and modern instruments trying to find a medium where they all co-exist on a single stage,” McNulty says. “Okavango is continuously evolving through its introduction of other traditional instruments found throughout Africa.”

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