

# Batagyil: Valerie Naranjo with Africa→West

By Valerie Naranjo

Many of our forefathers lived their lives within literal borders—religion, dress, food, housing, language—that all reflected the nation in which they lived. National borders changed occasionally, generally reflecting power struggles and politics. Artists have had the responsibility to “blur borders” and elucidate common bonds between peoples, establishing friendship and trust. One prominent bond is the close relationship between the arts of West Africa, Cuba, and North America.

The project Batagyil: Valerie Naranjo and Africa→West, strives to pay homage to this relationship. Naranjo met the music of gyl master the late Kakraba Lobi in 1984, and has made 21 trips to Ghana to study with Kakraba, Ba-ere Yotere, Newiin Baaru, and others. She has also journeyed to South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Egypt, Morocco, Togo, and Madagascar to explore and study African percussive arts.

Also influenced by studies abroad, Africa→West (Josh Ryan, Jamie Ryan, and Ryan Korb) is dedicated to the dissemination and performance of African and Afro-Caribbean styles of music, as well as that of Western percussion music. Africa→West is an ensemble-in-residence at Baldwin Wallace University.

West African people who were forced into slavery in the Caribbean were severely abused, yet found the ability to celebrate their religious and cultural roots, often secretly. This practice influenced the bulk of Caribbean music. In Cuba, these concurrences produced such styles as rumba, danzon, and son. Eventually, the tables turned and Cuban music began influencing African musicians. This first major “reciprocal influence,” based primarily on recordings of Cuban music, began in the 1920s and continues today. African bands played note-for-note covers of a wide range of Cuban artists, such as Trio Matamoros, Sexteto Habanera, and Johnny Pacheco, and began composing original music in Cuban styles.

The art of playing gyl is a long-standing tradition of West African marimba artistry. Each rural community has unique tonality, musical masters, and styles of playing. The cultivation of this art takes place in private apprenticeships with gyl masters, usually within specific family lines. If prospective students have a keen interest, they can consider gyl

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study. If they are evaluated (via the gyl maestro) to be of high enough personal character, they are considered. If students are intelligent and observant, they will begin to grasp the complicated repertoire. If dedicated long enough, they will begin to play, and if they play long enough, they may be considered to play at the funeral, the peoples’ most important event.

National borders between Ghana, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast separate those peoples who play the gyl, yet Ghana’s first president, Kwame N’kruma, formed the Ministry of Culture to support Ghanaian arts, which then flourished, albeit locally. As late as the 1980s many Ghanaians of the South were not familiar with the beautiful art of the gyl.

Batagyil’s program explores the manners in which West African music has influenced Cuban and North American music. The gyl provides melodic and harmonic thematic material, which is orchestrated with drumset, Ghanaian Ewe drums and percussion, Afro-Cuban shekere and bata, congas, timbales, and cowbells. Batagyil also includes the timbres of European-American symphonic percussion, reflecting the members’ vast musical experience.

## THE PROGRAM

A Lobi villager knows immediately when someone has died. To announce a death the gyl master plays in front of the deceased’s home. One can tell by the style being played whether the person is male or female, young or old. Darkpo is funeral music for a man of some youth, perhaps a young grandfather.



In Batagyil’s program this funeral music is orchestrated with music for the Cuban orisha, Yeggu. Yeggu is a Lucumi saint whose music is also played for the deceased. The two come together in Batagyil’s Darkpo.

Guan is a style that is played for the funeral of an important person. While traditionally its rhythmic base is asymmetrical, its melodies and left-hand lines hearken to many familiar Cuban and North American popular styles. In 2007, Kakraba placed



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World Clinic/Performance

his “seal of approval” on Valerie’s arrangement of his signature Guun, commenting that this music could “bring different people to the same understanding.”

Guun contains nine movements in a song cycle. The music continues without pause, traditionally so that people can dance continually. Movements 1 and 2 are set in an R&B/contemporary style; movement 3 in the classical style; movement 4 in the Afro-Cuban Makuta and salsa/a caballo; movement 5 is a British march; movements 7 through 9 hearken to Afro-Cu-

ban and Afro-Brazilian samba; and movement 10 combines minimalism and R&B.

Batagyl’s Guun demonstrates the combination of classical, contemporary, and world music skills that a percussionist needs to have in order to play modern chamber music, Broadway, and film music: reading, maneuvering complex metric modulations, as well as understanding subject specific musical language.

Kparbinne (“Kpar dance”), once the music of the Kpar religious practice, became popular among ev-

eryone who played gyl. Batagyl’s rendition, which was a favorite of Kakraba Lobi, is set to the Cuban batarumba style.

Joro is itself a fusion or derivative style. Kakraba Lobi wrote in the traditional bem kpom bile style, and named this related style Joro (“running”) after a common funeral practice, where the mourners form a line, approach the musicians, and dance a circle around them. As the piece develops, dancers cease the more strenuous step and simply run in a circle. Kakraba played Joro as a solo concert style. He sanctioned it to become a concerto for gyl and symphony orchestra. The PASIC Batagyl rendition of Joro will be a world premiere.

Valerie Naranjo, a member of NBC’s *Saturday Night Live* band for 22 years, is the only Westerner to receive a first prize at Ghana’s Kobine Festival. She traveled to Ghana 21 times, and has appeared with *The Lion King*, Philip Glass, the Paul Winter Consort, Carole King, and more. *Drum!* Magazine’s reader’s poll named her “World Music, and Mallet Percussionist of the Year” three times. With her mentor Kakraba Lobi she compiled several CDs, the transcriptions WAMMS (for solo marimba), and Joro (five concerti for gyl and orchestra). She teaches at NYU and recently traveled to Cuba with NYU’s Global Institute for Advanced Studies.

**Africa→West Trio** (Jamie Ryan, Ryan Korb, Josh Ryan) is dedicated to the performance of African and Afro-Caribbean styles of music in addition to Western music for percussion. Their unique compositions and arrangements of folkloric styles are influenced by studies abroad and with master musicians in African and Afro-Cuban genres as well as their backgrounds as classical and jazz musicians. They are in residence at Baldwin Wallace University. **PN**

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