

world beats

WORDS: CARSON BARKER

Rattletree

Talking to Joel Laviolette about his band, Rattletree, is like listening to world music while reading a *National Geographic* magazine. Every aspect of the band tells a tale of Zimbabwean history, culture and spirituality. But Laviolette didn't absorb this information by reading magazines, researching encyclopedias or surfing the net. His knowledge is direct from the source.

"The most noticeable difference is the tuning," says Laviolette. "All the Zimbabwean marimba bands in northwest America tune their marimbas to the western scale of C. I built my marimbas in tune with the mbira, which is the northeastern Zimbabwe matape."

Rattletree is Austin's own five-piece Zimbabwean marimba band, consisting of a variety of members depending on who is available: four to five marimba players, a drummer and other percussionists. The music is based on a traditional Zimbabwean instrument called a matape, which is a set of steel keys inside of a hollowed-out gourd that is plucked by fingers.

"While I was in Zimbabwe I was studying matape," says Laviolette. "I came into this music playing mbira, not marimbas, so the music I know is from that repertoire. Ours is more ceremonial, and based on the spirit possession music that they do in Zimbabwe."

Just as Rattletree is multi-faceted, Laviolette's role encompasses several different responsibilities: director, songwriter, booking agent and, above all else, instrument maker. All five of the instruments, including the towering five-foot-plus bass marimba, were built and tuned from different kinds of wood by nothing but power tools and Laviolette's own hands.

Mhumhi Records

A mhumhi is an African wild dog that roams the deserts somewhat like a scavenger. It feeds off of the carcasses from other animals' kills, like a vulture. Its rough, spotted hair and mangy face make it anything but attractive, but it's not ever considered a threat.

When you look at the mhumhi, the last thing you think of is a spiritual guide. But Joel Laviolette, owner of Mhumhi Records, has a spiritual connection to this wild animal, as do many other musicians in Africa.

"They say that if you hear dogs barking in the middle of the night, then that means the lions are nearby," says Laviolette. "The dogs follow the lions and eat the carcasses they leave behind. Mbira players play for the ancestral spirits, the head spirit is the Mhondoro or lion spirits. They're said to inhabit lions when they are not possessing a person. So just how the dogs follow behind the lions, the mbira players follow behind the Mhondoro spirits."



"I learned by just watching people," Laviolette says. "I had an idea of what to do; I knew that I wanted marimbas in my tuning so I decided to learn how to build them."

So what does a Zimbabwean marimba band sound like? Take five octaves of the same instrument and layer them together using separated harmonies. Now add a driving drum set, occasional congas and hoshos (Zimbabwean shakers) and mix in some spiritual vocals in the native Zimbabwean language of Shona. After that, make the music danceable like the trance-inducing raves of the '90s. According to Laviolette, the music stems from ancient Zimbabwean ancestry that's so old, it can't be dated officially.

Laviolette's label is unique, even in a town like Austin where everything claims uniqueness. He started his label, where he runs and records everything, ten years ago on a personal quest to find true native Zimbabwean music.

"There are about five main types of mbira in Zimbabwe, and they're all regional," says Laviolette. "There was only one type in America, so I wanted to go to Zimbabwe and record the other types, purely for selfish reasons. I bought all this recording equipment and traveled Zimbabwe recording bands. I had seven microphone stands and seven mics, DAT recorders in briefcases and other equipment. It was all battery powered. I started just by going to the rural areas and asking around."

Just as the mhumhi follows the lion, mbira players began to follow Laviolette's Mhumhi Records. "People started hearing and knowing about me so they would come to me to record music." Currently, Mhumhi Records has 13 bands, eleven

"No one knows exactly how old the songs are. The Iron Age in Zimbabwe was over 1,000 years ago and they found iron mbira keys in the ruins of great Zimbabwe, so they know the mbira at minimum is 1,000 years old."

Being the only Zimbabwean marimba band of his style in Texas, Laviolette hopes the band's influence spreads feverishly through the Lone Star State. Judging by the crowds at their performances, his dreams are already coming true.

"My desire is to get as many people into marimba music as possible, and I would love to see 50 marimba bands in Austin," says Laviolette. "It's ancient music; that's what the music is designed to do."

from Zimbabwe. The other two are Laviolette's band, Rattletree, and his solo gig. The bands were discovered while he was traveling Zimbabwe.

"Newton Gware and I started a band together and started playing around Zimbabwe," says Laviolette. "Along the way I would take these jaunts with other mbira players and record them, and keep studying the different types—that's how I met the other bands and my matape teacher."

Though he sells CDs worldwide through his website, mhumhirecords.com, Laviolette claims that he doesn't make a dime from the sales. "It's a non-profit label," says Laviolette. "When I sell the CDs, the profits go back to the musicians." He might not make money, but hearing Zimbabwean music and sharing it with others is worth more than any sum of dollars in the world.

"I believe this music is pre-human," Laviolette said. "Whether its spirits, Gods, aliens or nature, this music is geometric. It's like a musical Mandala." **am+e**