

Worldly Dinner Show

CONCERT REVIEW: Making its first U.S. tour, the Kenyan duo Kamatana, featuring the distinctive indigenous bass lyre known as the obokano, made a dynamic appearance during a sensational “dinner set” at SOhO on Saturday.

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If the generic connotation of a “dinner set” suggests mild-mannered music of a sort unlikely to demand too much attention or rile the digestive process, Saturday night’s dinner show fare at SOhO broke the mold in at least a couple of delightful, delicious ways. The Kenyan duo known as Kamatana, featuring the little-known but fascinating bass lyre called the “obokano,” stopped by while on its first U.S. tour, and put on a fascinating, organically commanding show. The evening also qualified as the first notable “world music” performance in Santa Barbara this year, steeped in a sense of discovery.

As it happened, Kamatana - the Nairobi-based musicians Dominic Nyauama Ogari and Samwel Ogari Osieko - did abide by the “dinner set” condition of soothing music. The pair summoned up a hypnotically rhythmic and rolling musical sound on the twin obokanos – sturdy handmade instruments with eight thick nylon strings over large hide-covered gourds and with a sound flecked by an entrancing buzzing timbre.

Dressed in colorful, traditional garb, the tightly-synchronized pair laid out sweet, chant-like songs sung in hearty unison or call-and-response fashion. Mr. Ogari’s rhythmically steady right foot served an added percussion role, with bells strapped on his ankle. They offered humble explanations of the subjects of each song, which varied in theme from cautionary admonitions for young Kenyan males to respect their culture to warnings about HIV/AIDS and celebrations of life and community.

As with many strands of traditional African music, the music itself bubbles with life-affirmation and joy, even while the lyrics may grapple with darker life and social forces relevant to conditions in Africa. They also played a song, about a particular African insect, which they wrote on the plane from Nairobi to Seattle recently.

But far from representing a general cultural world, these inspired and culturally-committed musicians are micro-roots-specific. They hail from the small western Kenyan Gusii tribe, and besides working their indigenous traditional musical trade with skill and passion, they’re admittedly on a mission to spread awareness of the obscure but seductive world of the obokano.

They have a strong ally in promoter, tour manager and world music record label head Nick Vest, who arranged their current, compact west coast tour, during which they also recorded an album, in Seattle and San Francisco. Vest offered some background information, musically and culturally, at the microphone on Saturday, and the musicians answered questions towards the end of their two-set performance.

Questions naturally arise over the coveted, exotic sounding - and looking - instrument of choice, as well as whether they had yet played for President Obama (they haven't), whose father originally came from the same region of Kenya.

Time and the mysterious world music market forces will tell, but the intriguing and fresh-sounding while ancient and folkloric realm of obokano music, with Kamatana in the lead, could make its presence known more widely in coming years. If so, a happy clan of Santa Barbarans can say "we heard and saw it here back when, and over dinner."

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