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IN CONCERT: New Sound from an Ancient Tradition - The Kenyan duo Kamatana, stopping at SOhO on its first-ever U.S. tour, make a big and fascinating sound, combining voices, percussion and the unique Western Kenyan lyre called the obokano

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IN CONCERT

KAMATANA

When:

6 p.m. Saturday

Where: SOhO Restaurant and Music Club, 1221 State St. (upstairs)

Cost: \$12 with dinner/\$15 show only

Information: 962-7776, sohosb.com

Fans of so-called "world music," particularly the realm of traditional African music, would do well to make haste to the special "dinner show" at SOhO this Saturday. That evening, when the Kenyan duo known as Kamatana stops in town on its first-ever U.S. tour, the sonic results may surprise and delight even well-informed African music aficionados.



courtesy photos

Welcome to the old (and to many, fresh) sound of the ancient Western Kenyan instrument known as the "obokano," a unique, rich-toned and buzzing sound, both percussive and melodic in a drone-based way. Mixed in with rambling and harmonized vocals and tapping into ancient Western Kenyan musical tradition, the compact but mighty Kamatana — being Nairobi-based Dominic Nyauama Ogari and Samwel Ogari Osieko — promises to bring an exciting and jubilant, not to mention exotic, style of music to SOhO.

Both 30something musicians have roots in the Gusii tribe, and are decidedly on a mission to introduce the obokano to various global points. And for the latest chapter of that mission, they had considerable help from a certain protégé/promoter/record label owner/tour manager, Nick Vest.

This week, the musicians and their entourage, with Vest and his wife at the logistical helm, were driving from shows in Oregon down to a show at UC Davis when they took time to talk up this reporter on the tour southward. Fittingly, Vest traced his own personal fascination with the "obokano" to his days as a music student at UC Davis, when he was intrigued by this obscure instrument and wound up getting one and learning technique from Ogari, who teaches in Nairobi.

Eventually, Vest realized his dream of bringing Kamatana to the U.S., with the current West Coast swing, which began a week ago with a recording session in Seattle for a record to be released on Vest's world music label, Echo Location. Further recording will take place in San Francisco, at the studio of noted didjeridu player Stephen Kent, who is slated to join them for a couple of live shows and possibly record with them, for multi-cultural stewing purposes.

As Vest enthused on the phone, "I'm really proud that we're bringing out something that is really unique in world music. In world music, everybody has heard of Tuvan throat-singing and African kora and Sami music. But this is really a brand new sound that nobody has heard.

"People tell me they've been to Kenya six times and they haven't heard of this instrument in Kenya. It's so obscure, but it has such a great and really wonderful sound. To hear it live is amazing. It's something brand new and exciting."

What makes the instrument sing, rattle and roll so? Ogari offers some explanation about the workings of the large, bass-heavy instrument. In addition to its eight thick strings, he says, "there is a skin, a bridge and

wax from the bee, two arms, one cross-bar and some tuning knobs.

"The strings are tuned in different ways. They are not the same. We tune by adjusting the individual strings, and we tune by hearing. We don't know the exact notes. You have to get the instrument sounding very nice, starting from the lower to the upper, and it sounds like 'o-bo-bo-kan-o,' " as he sings a four-note melody.

"That's when you know it is in tune. That's what they say made the Gusii people to name it the obokano, because of the tuning."

In Kamatana (a word meaning "togetherness"), Ogari and his partner Osieko are official, impassioned crusaders for the expanded awareness of the instrument, which is only slowly making its presence known, both inside and outside of Kenya's borders. Ogari taught music at the Bomas of Kenya, which he describes as "the biggest cultural center we have in Kenya," and for 10 years has been teaching at the Kenyatta University, researching, composing music and teaching students from overseas and from Kenya itself.

His mission goes back to a family lineage. "I have been playing this instrument since I was about 7 years old," he comments, "because my father played it. The instrument was almost dying out because it was not popular in Kenya. So I played the instrument and people have started to play it again. We still don't have many people from where I come from playing the instrument, but I have some students in Nairobi who come to me. I have both international and local students.

"So it is slowly becoming more popular."

While the music itself has a joyous and meditative character and undulates with a seductive but gentle rhythmic sway, the songs themselves often take on serious topics, in both English and the indigenous Kenyan language of Kiswahili.

Ogari says that "we play some traditional songs and some I compose with my friend Samwel. At the same time, we use the instruments to sing in different languages around the Gusii communities. We have stories in our songs. We also have educating songs to remind young men not to forget their culture, because you know the world changes and people leave behind their culture.

On another serious note, he comments, "there are some songs warning people not to do something and be very careful, songs about HIV/AIDS in Kenya, which is a killer disease and a huge problem. Malaria is also a problem, and we have some songs to educate people about that. We give out some warnings."

For the moment, on the brink of releasing their first American-recorded album, Kamatana is embarking on the next phase of its grand ambition and journey, to put the entrancing — and well-played — sound of the obokano in as many ears as possible.

"That's what we are doing," he says, "especially in America. We want to give out our music. This is not the first time being outside the country of Kenya. I was in Europe. I have lived with some students who learned the instrument. We want the instrument to be known all over the world," he laughs softly.

And are audiences receptive to what they're hearing, from Helsinki to Eugene, Oregon?

"They are, yes. Whenever we perform, wherever we go, we have never had anybody complaining. They are enjoying the instruments, being unique instruments in their country. So I think people are enjoying what we are doing."