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This land is your land



Written by Eric Gallippo

Wednesday, 06 August 2008

In case you don't believe the sticker on the shrink-wrap that boasts Sones De Mexico's latest recording is free of any synthesized sounds, the album comes with photographic evidence. Included with the liner notes to the ensemble's 2007 release, *Esta Tierra Es Tuya* ("This Land is Your Land"), is a brilliant color photo of the ensemble accompanied by 70 acoustic instruments that were used to make the recording, including several guitars, violins, drums, wind instruments and even conch shells.

Group co-founder Juan Dies says the Chicago ensemble's mission of playing a wide variety of traditional Mexican sounds from different regions of the country makes such an arsenal a necessity. "It's taken years of collecting the instruments and learning how to play them," he says. "The instruments are owned by different people in the group, so each of us brings our own collection to the ensemble."

Not lacking for things to strum, blow, bow or hit, Dies is still on the lookout to expand the group's tonal palette. He recently acquired a set of hand-drums made by a builder in Mexico City. The instruments were hand-carved from tree trunks to Dies' specifications, which were based on archeological research from Aztec designs.

While the drums are good for playing traditional Aztec songs, they are also helpful for channeling the spirit of rock 'n' roll, particularly the lumbering boom of drummer John Bonham. Hidden deep in the band's collection of folk tunes is an instrumental cover of Led Zeppelin's "Four Sticks."

"The song is sort of an attempt to reach out to a group of listeners that we think would appreciate what we are doing but would not naturally pick up a Mexican folk record otherwise," Dies says.

As disparate as the sounds may be, Dies says Sone's music has a lot to offer fans of blues-based and progressive rock that appreciate intricate musicianship and the reinvention of classic sounds. "The shows we do are very fast-paced," he says. "There is a lot of variety of musical sounds from one song to the other. We like to keep the audience's attention and bring up new elements and surprises."

Dies, 43, came to the United States from Mexico in 1983. After setting aside his roots for eight years to build his technique playing American rock 'n' roll and blues, he returned to his roots and started playing traditional Mexican music again, partly as a response to the portrayal of his homeland by American media. "The media treats it as either a tourist destination with party music and Cancun and Cabo, which is very superficial, and the movies show the technologically inferior, backwards, rural place — the 'Cisco Kid' kind of Mexico."

Thirteen years ago he teamed with music director Victor Pichardo to form Sones de Mexico with a goal of elevating traditional Mexican music to the status of high art, following the model of American jazz.

"Jazz had to earn its own respect," Dies says. "It started as warehouse music, and now it's at Carnegie hall. The Marsalis family has dignified jazz music and musicianship, and we're trying to do the same."



Mexican folk ensemble Sones de Mexico is one of close to 100 acts playing East Lansing this weekend for the Great Lakes Folk Festival. (Photo courtesy of MSU Museum)

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The goal of making a place for Mexican music and culture is also reflected in the title track of the band's last album, a cover of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" sung in Spanish. As the immigration debate in America grew more heated in recent years, Dies was struck by the song. He felt it represented the American dream but also seemed at odds with how some were addressing immigration issues. "What if we sang that song in Spanish?" he remembers thinking. "Just by the act of singing that song in Spanish alone, it would put that contradiction in evidence."

Dies says it is reasonable for immigration to be regulated, for the safety of immigrants and U.S. citizens alike, but he cannot understand the hate and resentment many express toward immigrants. "We don't come here for the weather," he says. "Everyone who comes here, comes to work, and if we don't work, we have to go back."

Dies and Sones have visited many Mexican immigrant communities in the United States, and he says the

people there are eager to hear the music of their homeland. "When they see us, they feel so refreshed and reconnected with a part of their culture they had missed," he says. "When we play this music, they get very emotional."

Mamadou Diabate

Growing up in a village in Mali, Mamadou Diabate never dreamed his family's musical tradition would take him around the world. "I never thought one day I would be in the United States, playing festivals, touring around the world," he says. "You know, in the Malian expression, they say, 'Man proposes, god disposes.'"

Diabate, 33, started playing the kora, a West African stringed instrument that looks something like a harp protruding from a large gourd, when he was 6, and moved to the United States 12 years ago.

On "Foulaya," a track from his 2006 album "Heritage," Diabate flies around the instrument's 21 strings to produce complex passages reminiscent of classical and bluegrass music, then slows down for pronounced, bluesy tones. He says it's not uncommon for listeners to make these kinds of projections. "Some say, 'You sound like I hear some blues, some bluegrass or folk or jazz,'" he says. "That comes from how they receive your sound from their spirit."

In October, Diabate will release a new solo album, "Dougamansa" or "The King Vulture." Diabate explains the significance of the mighty scavenger is to beautify life and teach the world patience. "They don't kill, they eat the leftovers," he says. "Nature is about patience. It's also a way to describe the tradition. The music we play has a meaning. The music is waiting for society."

Continuing on this theme, Diabate offers insights that sound older than his years. "If you are young, you will be an old person one day. In the steps you are making, you need patience and discipline and focus."

If nothing else, it's an accurate mantra for Diabate's rehearsal schedule, a regimented, ongoing education that includes daily practice sessions for solo and group performances. But it doesn't seem he would have it any other way. "I love playing Kora, I love playing my music, I love having good musicians playing together," he says. "That's more fun than anything."



Malian Kora player Mamadou Diabate. (Photo courtesy of MSU Museum)

Great Lakes Folk Festival

Aug. 8-10

6 – 10:30 p.m. Friday

Noon – 10:30 p.m. Saturday

Noon - 6 p.m. Sunday

Downtown East Lansing

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www.greatlakesfolkfest.net/

Friday, Aug. 8

M.A.C. Stage

6 p.m. April Verch

7 p.m. Sones De Mexico

8 p.m. Mamadou Diabate

Dance Stage

6:45 p.m. Tuba Dan’s Family Band

8:15 p.m. New Ballard’s Branch Bogtrotters

9:45 p.m. Jeffery Broussard and the Creole Cowboys

Valley Court Stage

7 p.m. Crooked Road Revue

8 p.m. The Singletons

9 p.m. Cephas and Wiggins

10 p.m. Reveillons!

Saturday, Aug. 9

M.A.C. Stage

Noon Sones De Mexico

1 p.m. Cephas and Wiggins

2 p.m. April Verch

3 p.m. The Singletons

4 p.m. Elizabeth LaPrelle

5 p.m. Mamadou Diabate

6 p.m. Crooked Road Revue

7 p.m. George Gao Ensemble

8 p.m. Wiley and the Wild West

Dance Stage

Noon Les Ross Sr. and the Finnish American All-Stars

1 p.m. Tuba Dan’s Family Band

2:30 p.m. New Ballard’s Branch Bogtrotters

4 p.m. Reveillons!

5:15 p.m. Tuba Dan’s Family Band

7 p.m. Jeffery Broussard and the Creole Cowboys

8:15 p.m. New Ballard’s Branch Bogtrotters

9:45 p.m. Sones De Mexico

City Hall Stage

Noon. Fiddle Traditions

1 p.m. Kirk Sutphin and Eddie Bond

2 p.m. Cats and The Fiddler

3 p.m. Wayne Henderson

4 p.m. Vishten

5 p.m. Guitar Masters

6 p.m. Cephas and Wiggins

7 p.m. Detour

Valley Court Stage

12:30 p.m. Jeffery Broussard and the Creole Cowboys

1:30 p.m. Detour

2:30 p.m. George Gao Ensemble

3:30 Wylie and The Wild West

5 p.m. Sones De Mexico

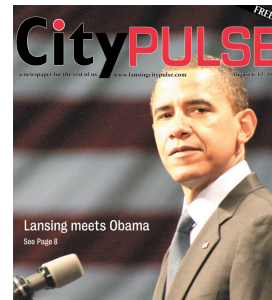
6 p.m. Reveillons!

7 p.m. The Singletons

8 p.m. Vishten

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9 p.m. Mamadou Diabate
10 p.m. April Verch

Legacy Stage

1 p.m. Larry Plamondon
1:45 p.m. Les Ross Sr. and the Finnish American All-Stars
2:45 p.m. 2008 Michigan Heritage Award Presentation
3:45 p.m. Johnny Sarweh
4:30 p.m. Seikichi Iha
5:15 p.m. DJ Krogol
6 p.m. Cats and The Fiddler

Sunday, Aug. 10

M.A.C Stage

Noon Mamadou Diabate
1 p.m. Reveillons! Quebecois
2 p.m. Crooked Road Revue
3 p.m. George Gao Ensemble
4 p.m. Cephas and Wiggins
5:15 p.m. Vishten

Dance Stage

Noon New Ballard's Branch Bogtrotters
1:30 p.m. Les Ross Sr. and the Finnish American All-Stars
2 p.m. Finnish Music
2:45 p.m. Jeffery Broussard and the Creole Cowboys
4:15 p.m. Wylie and the Wild West

City Hall Stage

Noon Wayne Henderson
1 p.m. The Singletons
2 p.m. French Connections
3 p.m. Roots Run Deep
4 p.m. Mamadou Diabate

Valley Court Stage

Noon Wylie and the Wild West
1:15 p.m. Vishten
2 p.m. Cephas and Wiggins
3 p.m. Detour
4 p.m. April Verch

Legacy Stage

12:30 p.m. DJ Krogol
1:15 p.m. Issues in Native American Tradition
2 p.m. Larry Plamondon
2:45 p.m. Issues in Native Stone Carving
3:30 p.m. Les Ross Sr and the Finnish American All-Stars
3:45 p.m. Finish Music
4:15 p.m. Woodcarving Traditions

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