



Spellbound by the Shamisen

VINCENT WOUASSI JR.

Cameroon-born Vincent Wouassi Jr. is the driving force behind the distinctive sound of the Tokyo-based Wouassi and Roots Band.

TOSHIO MATSUBARA

THE seven-piece Wouassi and Roots Band has all the typical features of an African band – guitars, keyboards, fiddle, congas and bells – but the musician who holds the center stage gives the group a sound that is probably unique in world music, one characterized by the plucking and striking of the traditional Japanese instrument that is the shamisen.

Vincent Wouassi Jr., the youngest of four siblings, comes from a musical family. His oldest brother is a guitarist, and both the second oldest brother and Wouassi himself are drummers. Wouassi first encountered a shamisen in 1994 when he came to Japan to play the drums and was introduced to a master of the Shinai-ryu school of shamisen playing.

“The music he played sounded like the Japanese blues. I was so inspired by it. Soon afterwards, I became a pupil of Kikusaburo Fujimatsu, a Grand Master of the Shinai-ryu school. I traveled to his school in Asakusa [Tokyo] every day, even though I never dreamed that I would continue to stay in Japan. Honestly, this must be destiny.”

Wouassi and his wife, Naoko, who share singing duties in the Wouassi and Roots Band

Wouassi describes the unexpected difficulty he found perfecting the Shinai-ryu style.

“The Shinai-ryu sound is very spiritual,” he says. “I had to work very hard under the guidance of my master to begin to recreate the melancholic sound.”

Eight years later in 2002, Fujimatsu bestowed on his pupil the title Natori, which indicates a player who has successfully acquired the appropriate technique, as well as the Shinai-ryu stage name Fujimatsu Wouassi. The master also suggested that Wouassi incorporate his home country’s sound into his shamisen playing going forward instead of just perfecting the traditional Shinai-ryu shamisen. The master’s advice has had a tremendous impact on the musical stylings of Wouassi ever since.

“My musical abilities have changed a great deal as I’ve sought to pursue my own sound using the shamisen. The most important thing in music is the heart. If you don’t put your heart into your music, you end up just creating sound,” he says. “I have been playing the shamisen for twenty-three years. It took me almost the first fifteen years before I clearly understood the feelings that the shamisen creates. The shamisen has changed how I think about music – including how I play the drums.”

Wouassi calls his band’s style of music “Afro-shamisen.” Wouassi himself writes all the songs, mostly in Japanese, French and Spanish. Wouassi’s



wife, Naoko, shares vocals in the band. Wouassi met his future wife in a Japanese pub. He invited her to join his band because he was very moved by Naoko’s voice as she was singing along to some Japanese pop songs.

When audiences watch the Wouassi and Roots Band perform for the first time, Wouassi says they often seem surprised by the sound. However, it’s not long before they are clapping their hands along with the rhythm and losing themselves in the music.

Wouassi dreams of taking the band overseas, while continuing his work teaching the drums in Japan.

“We got a great reception a few years ago when my wife and I performed at my brother’s birthday party in France,” says Wouassi. “It is a challenge to succeed in the music business, but I’d love to perform around the world. There are no borders for the heartfelt music.” 



The Wouassi and Roots Band performs at a Tokyo music festival.

All photos: Courtesy of Vincent Wouassi Jr.