

ULTRASOUND

Koca drums up business

FAR FROM AFRICA: He's busy bringing his music to his new home

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It's a long way from Guinea-Conakry to the Market Courtyard at Granville Island. But mere kilometres don't come close to the cultural differences experienced by immigrants from the West African nation to B.C. Here, Kocassalé Dioubaté, 28, is a very fine percussionist. At home, he is a griot or jeli; born into a specific caste comprising poets, praise singers and travelling musicians who are repositories of oral tradition.

Among the Mandingo peoples, this role commands respect and has a demanding apprenticeship.

"My family are all very good musicians," says Dioubaté. "From eight years on, I played drums, made instruments and danced, trying always to be better."

"During my studies towards my diploma, I won the national best musician in 2001 and in January, 2005, I came in third place for dance."

In a country where the traditional culture is alive and well, winning such honours means impressing judges who've seen a lot of similarly talented players come across the stage. With a grandfather who was in the acclaimed Les Ballets Africains, Koca — as he calls himself — had personal bests to achieve above the standard contestants. He also felt it his duty to promote the culture at home and abroad.

In neighbouring Gambia, Canadian volunteer Aimeè Epp, 26, was working on developing tourism infrastructure and putting together a cultural show to exhibit the music and history of the tribal peo-



Kocassalé Dioubaté is a West African griot and musician who often plays at Granville Island.

ples of the area. She met Koca, who was passing through town to record a session with artist Mousa M'Boom and "roped him into playing the gig." The two fell in love and have daughter, Mairie, named after a sister of Koca's who passed right after she was born. They moved to Canada and he started performing. Aimeè translates in English interviews. He speaks fluent French.

"It's good," he says. "I miss my culture and my family, but people here are very nice and open-minded."

"Being here, I bring Africa with



KOCASSALÉ DIOUBATÉ
Dunya Ragiri (Life's Destiny)
(rootsofrrhythm.com)

Fourteen seconds into this CD, you know you've got something special on your player. The chanting singing and soft grooves are so deep and organic that they just grow to be a part of you. Soothing and expertly played deep West African songs. **B+** — SD

me and I want to share my traditions with people so they can learn about them."

His shows at Granville Island and festivals around the province delve deep into songs from the Susu, Malinké and other tribal groups.

"I put on the same show here that I play in Africa as well as the music on my CD, *Dunya Ragiri (Life's Destiny)*, and then see what else happens live."

"My dream is to be able to continue performing and also develop my business."

That is **Bèròsanke Percussion** (www.therootsofrrhythm.com), a teaching centre and clearing house of handmade drums and rare West African instruments. Most are crafted by family and friends in his village, providing employment in otherwise underemployed zones and keeping instrument-making techniques alive that might otherwise be lost in time. In addition to familiar drum-circle standards such as djembes, he's importing more exotic items such as koras (West African harps), balafons (giant wooden xylophones) and the bolon.

"It's a very traditional Manding instrument that is specific to

hunters who can use it to call the animals," he says. "Once, you could only use it for that purpose, but the role of the griot has changed and now it can be integrated into modern music as part of an inter-tribal fusion."

Mixing his drumming styles with Western, Asian or any other locals who want to jam has proven rewarding. He has no complaints about finding musicians to play with.

"It's very easy to have a group, but it is true that there are few Africans here in general, even fewer from my region. So I'm looking for anybody from any culture who wants to mix it up. But I keep my own music separate and pure."

The results can be heard on his CD, expertly produced by another transplanted percussion star, Joseph "Pepe" Danza. Doubtless, Danza has enjoyed having access to well-made ngonis (lute), bolons and koras, too. A big shipment is due in town in September.

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one beer in the province: Sing Tao. They had no other choices, she said.

Armed with that research and determined to start importing beer, she started seeking a supplier. She narrowed the field to a few varieties and contacted potential suppliers. Guangzhou Zhujiang Beer Group Co., which makes the beer Zhujiang, was interested in exporting to Canada.

Zhao flew to the Chinese province of Canton to meet with Zhujiang officials, taste their beer and discuss export logistics.

Back in Canada, she met Liquor Distribution Branch officials in April 2004. LDB managers considered Zhao's pitch to sell Zhujiang in B.C. and they told her that they were interested in buying the product. She got that good news just as the Brewery, Winery and Distillery Workers Union strike that disrupted Labatt's and Molson's beer production was ending.

Undaunted, Zhao spent about \$12,000 ordering a container filled with about 26,000 bottles of Zhujiang. She sold half to the LDB, which resold the beer within two weeks. The LDB immediately ordered 4,800 more bottles and sales have remained strong, she said.

"I'm not going to start bringing in any more brands in right away," Zhao said. "It's like a new baby. I've got to take care of this one brand first. It's not established yet and I'm the exclusive agent for all of Canada."

Zhao has now sold four container loads of the beer and pocketed about a 25-per-cent markup, she said.

She has also met provincial liquor authorities in other provinces.

As of November 2004, her beer was slated to be in Alberta's liquor stores any day, she said. And she is hoping to have the beer on shelves in Quebec and Ontario early next year.

Rollergirl.ca owner Lisa Suggitt offers another example of the benefits of studying before launching a business. She said that if she hadn't completed Toward Excellence's program, her business selling roller skates would either be deep in red ink or a part-time hobby.

She ditched her idea to open a storefront retail operation selling an extensive range of roller skates after teachers encouraged her to consider where her customers were located, how difficult it would be for them to order her products and how much it would cost to lease real estate.

Suggitt opted to create an e-commerce

Web site and as of November 2004, expected 2004 revenue to reach \$100,000.

"I couldn't have made it without the program," Suggitt said. "They taught me everything I know about business as well as being there to help me overcome challenges along the way. They teach the basics, but more importantly, they instill confidence. That's what you need to get out and make it in the world. You need to believe in yourself."

Suggitt considered other self-employment programs but when she met Toward Excellence's president, Donna McFadden, the two immediately clicked, she said.

"I liked Lisa's idea to have customers trace their foot outline and then guaran-

"... they instill confidence.

That's what you need to get out and make it in the world"

tee that the skates they've ordered will fit," said Tim Clark, who was a judge at the 2004 Inspiration Entrepreneur of the Year awards where Suggitt won an overall prize for the best new venture from a grad of one of B.C.'s self-employment programs.

Continuing education

Clark is chief operating officer at the real estate development company V1500 Holdings Ltd. and has operated four different small business during the past 18 years. She believes even experienced small business owners should take continuing education courses to keep up to speed on different aspects of running a business.

Clark is enrolled in the the Sauder School of Business's managing entrepreneurial growth certificate program and has completed six seminars so far.

Perry Atwal, the Sauder School's executive director of executive education, said two of the program's most popular courses are financial statement analysis for the non-accountant and fundamentals of finance and accounting for non-financial managers.

Those courses and others such as one that teaches how to develop a strategic plan target skill shortages, he said.

"In each seminar, students have time to speak individually with instructors and among themselves," he said. "Many of the