

SPREADING HOPE AND MUSIC

Through music and a grassroots organization for girls,
ethnomusicology grad student Jennifer Kyker
is making things happen in Zimbabwe. By Cai Emmons





Our rattling silver Toyota makes a sharp right turn and careens to a stop on the dusty roadside near a fence constructed of old car parts. In front of us is a shabby warehouse-like building, built for male workers during apartheid, now housing entire families in single rooms. Across the street is the seething Mbare marketplace where we are headed.

"Look straight ahead," Jennifer Kyker tells me as we shoulder through the crowd, the only two white women in sight. Everyone ogles Kyker, a PhD candidate in ethnomusicology at Penn. Thirty years old, long-legged, blue-eyed, honey-haired, she moves with quick authority, utterly at home here in Zimbabwe.

Like Alice sliding down the rabbit hole we're finally delivered inside where, for the moment, we are pleasantly ignored. It is a vast, mobbed space, partly roofed, partly open-air, redolent of dust and body odor, everyone intent on the merchandise. Stalls arranged in long rows are spread with all manner of items: jeans, skirts, shoes, sunglasses, CDs, books, jewelry. In one section people rummage through a mountain of wrinkled clothing; other areas display cheap Chinese imports. It is part Goodwill, part Manhattan's Canal Street.

I try to keep pace with Kyker, who strides ahead of me, weaving past women carrying gigantic loads on their heads, babies cinched to their backs. We make our way to the rear of the market, where the indigenous products are sold: beads and scarves for religious ceremonies, decorative spears, stone snuff bottles, herbal remedies. Fewer people browse here—we have more room to move.

Kyker is looking at musical items: the finger organs called *mbira* that play a central role in traditional Zimbabwean music; *mateme*, the calabash—or plexiglass—bowl in which the *mbira* is placed to help the sound resonate; and hollowed gourds to make into *hosho*, the shakers that often accompany *mbira* music. She chats with each vendor, greeting them warmly in Shona—one of the principal languages of Zimbabwe—saying things that provoke laughter. One man sits next to a waist-high stack of roots, twigs, and variously colored powders. I try to ask him what

they are used for, but his English is minimal, and my Shona is nonexistent.

Soon our attention is drawn to the music streaming from a booth across the aisle. Kyker has picked up an *mbira* and begun to play with the stall owner; they concentrate deeply, their instruments producing a complex polyphony, resonant and meditative.

The *mbira*, a sacred instrument in Shona culture, is a medium for summoning ancestors and spirits. It is not easy to master. Kyker's Zimbabwean *mbira* teacher, Sekuru Chigamba, tells me that Kyker's command of the instrument is greatly enhanced by her deep knowledge of Shona.

"The music is like a language," says Maggie Donahue, an early music mentor of Kyker's and founder of Kutsinhira, an organization in Eugene, Oregon devoted to playing and preserving Zimbabwean music. "There's a subtlety of rhythm. There's a sensibility to the tonality up and down. She hears all that. When you get to engage with this music at its source in ceremonies and religious rituals, your mind stops—you're fully concentrated, you're fully aware, you're fully present, and this beautiful thing happens that is spiritual."

A small crowd has gathered. Everyone is aware that something unusual is taking place. Kyker, oblivious to the crowd, remains immersed in the music, and soon she begins to sing in Shona, her voice assertive, almost male-sounding.

After half an hour the music subsides, and Kyker chats with those who have gathered as if they are old friends. Everyone is riveted by this American woman who speaks Shona so fluently, who can enter this foreign marketplace so confidently, who picks up an indigenous instrument and plays it not only well, but with a feel for the instrument that Chigamba suggests is close to mastery.

"I often feel as if I'm a Zimbabwean stuck with an American passport," Kyker says.

Kyker's cross-cultural journey, inspired by music, began when she was 10. She heard a marimba band in her hometown of Eugene, and she was smitten.

"It is clear that this music affected her immediately, the way it does some people," says Donahue. "Sometimes they hear this music and they are so taken with it they have to get inside it. Even as a very

young person she knew how to move in the world. She heard the band, she found out we were teaching classes, and she got hooked up."

Over the next few years Kyker studied marimba, drumming, *hosho*, and Shona singing. She was lucky to live in a town with a strong community of musicians devoted to the study and preservation of Zimbabwean music. They are primarily white Americans, but they have made strong connections with Zimbabwean musicians who regularly visit the US to perform and teach.

Donahue recalls taking young Kyker to conferences and classes with adult musicians. "She'd be a little fly on the wall," says Donahue, "and she would learn 10 times as much as anyone else."

Jeff Muiderman was playing with a marimba band called Kudana when Kyker joined the group as a pre-teen.

"She was this *wunderkind*," he remembers. "She was really talented and she picked things up very quickly."

Marilyn Kolodziejczyk remembers being new to the group and trying to learn the nuances of the singing: "Little Jennifer came along and explained things in a way that made sense to me. She was so much better than the adults in understanding and explaining things clearly. I said: 'You are my going to be my teacher.' She *was* my teacher."

By the time Kyker was 15, a sophomore in high school, she was determined to travel to Zimbabwe to study *mbira*. Her parents—who had traveled together around the world just after college and were acutely aware of how that experience had transformed them—were agreeable to their daughter's plan, as long as she raised the funds, made the arrangements herself, and convinced her school to grant her credit.

Catherine Heising, another member of the Shona music community in Eugene, interviewed Kyker before her departure: "I sensed an almost regal confidence in this young woman who had prepared for the sojourn by reading everything on Zimbabwe she could find, by learning conversational Shona, by earning \$500 towards her plane fare, and by making the arrangements with her host family in Harare."

Kyker now remembers that visit as a time when she was "doing whatever I

wanted to do.” While occasionally she attended seventh-grade classes with a Zimbabwean friend, Blantina, she spent much of her time learning African dance, studying *mbira*, traveling to rural areas, and participating in sacred ceremonies. Letters she wrote home capture some of the atmosphere of that visit.

More recently I’ve been to two ceremonies in the last two weeks, one *bira* [a Shona religious ceremony] in Ruwa, the real thing in the country ... In Ruwa we stayed up all night ... They killed a goat and roasted it, and my pleasure in eating it (they really know how to roast meat) was diminished only slightly by the goat skin sitting in the back of the kitchen. The Ruwa ceremony was unusual in that about twelve or fifteen people became possessed, where only three or four were supposed to. It was rather amazing. You must never look a possessed person in the eye.

Those months were pivotal for Kyker in cultivating friendships and solidifying her deep affinity for Zimbabwean culture.

“My relationships with people here are irreplaceable,” she says. “People in Zimbabwe invest in each other instead of in material objects.”

Kyker is acutely aware of the role music has played in developing and maintaining these relationships. During an interview in the 2008 documentary *Making Music, Building Bridges*, a film about the Kutsinhira community directed by Elaine Vradenburgh, Kyker says: “We interact through music on a very individual level, which I think gives us the chance to get to know each other without some of the boundaries of language, or the boundaries of color, or even gender.”

We are driving in her ailing car again at the same breakneck speed that I have come to accept as Kyker’s norm, despite the pedestrians with head loads, the wild *kombi* (taxi) drivers, despite potholes big enough to accommodate several watermelons. It is early evening and we are headed to downtown Harare (where Kyker lives in rented quarters in Emerald Hill, a relatively upscale section of town). It is the opening day of the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA), and we are returning to see our second performance of the day. This arts festival is a draw for music, dance, and

theater performers from all over Africa and Europe. Over six days we will see such varied offerings as a two-man *Hamlet* performed partly in Shona; Salif Keita from Mali (the closing act); several troupes performing indigenous Zimbabwean music and dance; and an abbreviated production of the opera *Tosca*.

Earlier in the day Kyker asked the parking attendants—flashing her aquamarine eyes and joking in Shona—to save us a space for the evening. She isn’t sure if they will have remembered, but when we drive up they recognize her immediately and move an orange cone near the entrance. They don’t expect money; it’s something they want to do for Kyker herself. By 2006, after multiple trips to Zimbabwe, the country had become not only Kyker’s spiritual home, but also the center of her professional life. She graduated from Mt. Holyoke College in 2002 with a double major in economics and French and matriculated in Penn’s doctoral program in ethnomusicology, where she works with Ethnomusicology Professor Carol Muller [“Music Lessons,” Nov/Dec 2006].

The subject of Kyker’s dissertation is the beloved and internationally known Zimbabwean musician Oliver Mtukudzi, affectionately known as *Tuku*. Guitarist, singer, songwriter, his music—performed in English, Shona, and Ndebele—draws heavily on the sounds of Shona music, including the

drum/dance styles called *jiti* and *katekwe*, blended with other traditions such as South African *mbaqanga* and American soul. In the US, Tuku’s most popular song is “Hear Me Lord,” covered by Bonnie Raitt in her 2002 album *Silver Lining*.

“My research focuses on Mtukudzi’s musical expression of an indigenous concept called *hunhu*,” Kyker explains. “*Hunhu* is a word which describes morally appropriate human relations between individuals in a family, community, and nation. It expresses the idea that individual identity is built through human relationships. I am arguing that through Mtukudzi’s music we can see how *hunhu* provides a space for relational politics between people, encompassing a variety of important issues, such as the politics of gender, diaspora, inheritance law, and HIV/AIDS. My argument is that too much focus has been placed on the politics of state in Zimbabwe, and not enough attention has been paid to this sphere of ‘unofficial’ or relational politics, which is nevertheless an important arena in which issues of power are negotiated and worked through.”

Muller, Kyker’s thesis advisor, is impressed with her research approach.

“She has managed to establish a close working relationship with Oliver Mtukudzi, had access to his personal archives, and he has been willing to spend time talking with Jennifer,” says Muller. “And



Kyker and her Zimbabwean friend Blantina: “By the time we were 23 our circumstances were vastly different.”

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she has done an extraordinary amount of research on his audiences—in Zimbabwe, in the Zimbabwean diaspora, and the United States.” (Kyker’s academic work has always been strong. She graduated from Mt. Holyoke summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa; she earned a Joanne V. Creighton Summer Research Fellowship, a Fulbright in 2002, and a Fulbright Hayes Fellowship in 2008.)

While Mtukudzi does not sing openly against the Zimbabwean dictator, Robert Mugabe, much of his music addresses Zimbabwe’s need for change and hope, a passion Kyker shares. Zimbabwe’s crises have figured prominently in Kyker’s coming of age. The country’s problems are legion: the Mugabe dictatorship, rampant corruption, a daunting economic crisis (slightly improved since they began using US dollars in 2009), and an HIV/AIDS epidemic that has left far too many widows, widowers, and orphans. CARE reports that 20 percent of adults in the country are infected with HIV. Life expectancy is just 42, and lower for women affected by HIV/AIDS. Fifty-six percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. The country has more orphans due to AIDS than any country in the world.

Kyker has been in a position to witness up close the toll delivered by the extremity of the AIDS epidemic. The statistics hold within them the faces of her friends. A particularly pivotal moment occurred when, on returning to Zimbabwe after graduating from college, she visited her friend Blantina.

“We had had very similar expectations for the future, very similar hopes and dreams for our lives,” says Kyker. “But by the time we were 23 our circumstances were vastly different. I had gone on to finish college and was getting ready to pursue a graduate degree, and she had lost her parents and was unable to finish high school. That is when I decided that, with all of my social networks here in the US, I could probably do something to make a difference.”

Tariro is the Shona word for hope and the name of the nonprofit organization Kyker founded in 2003 (tariro.org). Its mission is to support keeping teenage orphaned girls in school—a project born, in part, from the understanding that higher education

leads to lower rates of HIV infection. While some of that involves paying school fees and buying uniforms and textbooks, Kyker is acutely aware that the girls need broad-based support to boost their confidence, expose them to greater options, and teach them how to present themselves so they can more easily negotiate class divides. As a result, Tariro holds weekly classes for the girls to learn indigenous music and dance, sponsors an English Club which hosts speakers, and sends the girls to an annual Empowerment Camp outside the city where they can collaborate with one another and learn life skills, including how to protect themselves against AIDS.

Kyker is always thinking about what might benefit the Tariro girls.

“She processes things so fast and takes in so much,” says Donahue, who served a two-year stint as Tariro’s US program director. “We can be focused on a particular issue, and I’m plodding along—and she just takes a breath and goes like a laser to the heart of the matter.”

During my two weeks in Zimbabwe, Kyker arranges for me to teach the girls in a writing workshop, and purchases tickets (out of her own pocket) for some of them to attend performances at HIFA. Her own experience at a women’s college has given her a keen understanding of the value of empowering women.

In the early days Kyker operated Tariro on a shoestring, getting most of the work done by herself and with the help of her mother, Pamela, who served as secretary and treasurer. Now Tariro supports more than 60 girls and has been incorporated as a nonprofit, with boards in Oregon and Zimbabwe. It is not an easy task that she has undertaken.

“If you really want to change outcomes, it takes a huge investment and time,” she says. “I don’t expect our girls can be self-sufficient in five years. There are a lot of structural barriers in the lives of these girls that make it difficult to change outcomes.”

These barriers are evident in the organization’s day-to-day work. I accompany Kyker and the Zimbabwean program director—Tafadzwa Muzhandu (Fadzi), who attended Mt. Holyoke with Kyker—on the drive from Harare to one of the rural townships for a meeting with several girls and their guardians. The girls

in this rural township of Epworth are not doing well in school; the purpose of the meeting is to discuss what can be done to improve the situation.

We travel over dirt roads bordered by shrubs and tall grasses and the occasional tree. A little lost, we finally abandon the car at a crossroads and traverse the last stretch on foot, arriving at a compound of thatched huts where chickens roam freely and several of the girls and guardians have gathered. They greet us warmly, cupping their hands one over the other in the silent clap I have come to recognize as a common Zimbabwean greeting. The girls and their guardians—women with weathered faces and colorful head scarves—sit in the dust, but they unroll raffia mats for us, and two chairs appear magically. Muzhandu and I take the chairs while Kyker circulates among the girls, kidding in Shona. She encourages one of the girls, Sabine, to give me a tour, and Sabine obliges enthusiastically, ushering me from the dark hut where she sleeps to the cooking hut, the well, the garden, the latrine. There is no electricity here, no running water. The girls walk an hour to school each morning, and an hour home in the evening. Study time and quiet space are difficult to come by.

Eventually, with little urgency, Kyker and Muzhandu begin the meeting. Kyker asks the girls to introduce themselves to me in English, their second language. The first girl speaks softly, staring at the ground. Kyker interrupts, kidding but firm, telling the girl (in Shona) that she must speak up, maintain eye contact. They all laugh, but they take her chiding seriously, and they all try to follow her instruction. Coaching the girls to present themselves confidently is one of Kyker’s recurrent themes.

The girls’ adoration of Kyker is palpable. “Jennifer revitalized my life,” says Pauline, one of the first Tariro students, who is about to graduate from the University of Zimbabwe. “I would not be where I am without her.”

Pauline’s crooked glasses slide down her nose as she tells me her story: Her mother died of AIDS; her father abdicated responsibility for the family and had no money to pay her school fees; her brother disappeared, leaving Pauline alone to raise her younger sister, who is now also a Tariro student.

Lillian, shy but articulate, echoes that thought: “[Tariro] has encouraged us and given us hope. We’ve achieved already and we’ll achieve more in the future.”

Some of the girls call Kyker “Mom,” half in jest, half wistfully. Many of them have lost their mothers to AIDS, and even those who haven’t find that they can confide in her. Daphine, who has just completed her secondary schooling and is trying to figure out what comes next, says, “One thing about Jennifer is she understands us as girls and our development and the problems we go through. We can really talk to her. People don’t do that with their moms in Zimbabwe. She is the coolest mom ever.”

Kyker can talk to pretty much anyone with ease, from HIFA parking attendants, to timid adolescents in a developing country, to academic audiences in the US, to wealthy potential donors.

Her energy and keen intelligence merge in a charisma that is intensified by her strong, no-nonsense moral compass.

“I am not interested in what HIV means in terms of statistics,” she says, “but in what it means in terms of one child who has lost a parent.”

Today Kyker is in problem-solving mode. Why are the Epworth girls not performing well in school? She poses the question to the guardians, then the girls. Everyone has opinions, and Kyker listens respect-



fully. The girls are walking so far to school and back that they often arrive late for classes, and when winter comes they’ll have to return home in the dark. Studying is difficult under such circumstances. Still, Kyker does not let the girls off the hook; she chides them about not working hard enough, even as she is agreeing with the guardians that the girls need to be transferred to the government school closer to their neighborhood.

At the end of the meeting we distribute blouses donated by high-school students in the US (another effort Kyker has spearheaded), and everyone receives a piece of chocolate. As the guardians and I sit in amiable silence, unwrapping and chewing, Kyker positions herself among the girls, spreading her trademark laughter.

Perhaps the aspect of Tariro that is closest to Kyker’s heart is the music and

Kyker founded Tariro (which means *hope* in the Shona language) in 2003 to offer “health & hope for Zimbabwe’s orphans.” Gifts fund tuition, uniforms and other school supplies, and medical care in order to help make it possible for young women orphaned by AIDS to finish secondary school. Students also receive weekly instruction in indigenous Zimbabwean music and dance.



dance program. Each week the girls gather in an elementary-school classroom to learn indigenous Zimbabwean music and dance. They sing; play marimba, drums, and *hosho*; and learn the intricate steps of dances that are deeply-rooted in Shona culture. For three to four hours they sweat, laugh, and work in intense collaboration under the guidance of their teacher, Daniel Inasiyo, a former professional dancer.

"It gives them a space in which they can define their identities on their own terms," Kyker says. "It's a place where they're not defined by negatives—by being orphans, by sex abuse, by poverty. The music and dance makes them visible to those they might be invisible to." She has recorded the girls on a CD and hopes that they will get good enough to travel to the US to perform.

On the morning of my second visit to the class, Inasiyo has been coaching three dancers while the other girls have been practicing marimba, drums, and *hosho* outside. He gives the dancers a brief break, then gathers everyone to put their parts together. As soon as the music begins, Kyker leaps in to dance alongside the girls, her footwork impeccable, her enthusiasm irrepressible. She has studied and performed these dances herself, and she can tell you of their origins and meaning.

Later, I am surprised to learn that she wasn't always an avid dancer.

"As a young girl, she told the marimba group: 'I can't dance,'" recalls Donahue. "She refused. But somewhere along the way she decided she was going to. She took it on—and look at her."

In addition to having studied dance from several African countries (she recently traveled to Senegal to study West African dance), Kyker is an avid practitioner of *capoeira*, a demanding Afro-Brazilian art form that combines elements of martial arts, dance, and music.

In discussing Tariro's future, Kyker is clear that enlarging the program is not her most important goal; Tariro's relatively small size is what makes it possible to be responsive to the variety of needs that arise.

"As I've continued my work with Tariro, new needs continue to surface," she says. "That prompts our growth, but it is difficult for the growth to keep pace with the need. There's a lot of support I still need to mobilize in the US."

Empowering these girls often means providing them with opportunities that go beyond a strict definition of need, she adds. "To transform a life takes a lot more than your average organization that works on development can do. There's a time investment that is required. They need stability and dependability."

Kyker herself has seen her share of disruption and loss. In 2007 her mother, Pamela, was killed in a car accident. The loss was profound for Kyker and for Tariro. Pamela Kyker inculcated in both her children a strong commitment to service (Jennifer's brother, an MIT graduate, teaches math on an Indian reservation). While Kyker is loath to speak about the loss, she says it has given her a much deeper and more personal understanding of the sorrow the Tariro girls shoulder.

"This has not deterred her," says Muller. "She has published journal articles, transcribed her interview materials, and mapped out drafts of dissertation chapters. She is a remarkably focused and driven individual."

WE are sitting on the lawn at HIFA's main stage, listening to the Haitian singer Emeline Michel. I can almost feel the new current electrifying Kyker's mind. "What if the Tariro girls were to raise funds to send a Haitian girl to school?" she says, as soon as the concert is over. Imagine the sense of empowerment the girls would feel. But when Kyker runs the idea by Muzhandu, the older woman is firm—no, she has enough on her plate. If Kyker wants to put this plan into action she will have to do it herself.

"She's crazy," says Muzhandu later. "She wants to help everyone—which is good and bad. She has strong opinions about certain things, and someone needs to serve as a sounding board. I have to be able to tell her: *I can't do this.*"

Kyker does not like to hear *no*, so she and Muzhandu have had occasional run-ins. "She gets stressed because she wants to do everything," Muzhandu says. "If something goes wrong she thinks it's her fault." But mostly their working relationship is strong, and Muzhandu credits Kyker with teaching her a lot.

"I've learned from Jennifer to treat the girls like equals, address them like adults. I am able to tell them: 'If you get pregnant

I'm going to beat you up,'" says Muzhandu. She laughs and remembers back to when Tariro began. "Jennifer said: 'This needs to be done, I won't take no for an answer.'" This approach, she points out, is very American. "In Shona, we're very passive. Jennifer says *I want.*"

In her former bandmate Jeff Muiderman's view, Kyker would be a wonderful music producer, among other things. She brought together a number of well-known Zimbabwean musicians on an album called *Zimbabwe Today*; she has made a field recording of one of the few remaining players of the *chipendani*, a mouth bow; and she has recorded the music-making of the Tariro girls, in addition to the CDs she has recorded with eminent *mbira* player Musekiwa Chingodza.

"She's in relation with this music," Muiderman says. "She's fostering it. She's part of it. She's helping keep it alive. Her creative abilities are just boundless."

Kyker herself plans to keep all her projects in motion: directing Tariro, completing her dissertation, and continuing to explore and preserve Zimbabwean music and dance traditions. She understands that these endeavors fuel and nurture one another, are part of an integrated whole.

The opening night of HIFA coincides with a full moon. It is balmy and clear, a hint of fall in the breeze. We gather in a small open-air venue to hear a Zimbabwean group led by Mawungira eNharira. Not long after the music begins, Kyker heads to a small area in front of the stage to dance. The musicians recognize her and pull her onto the stage. They drape her in the red and black scarf, a *retso*, that speaks to her connection with the spirit world and is used to announce and encourage a person's talent.

She remains on stage for several numbers, dancing and playing *hosho*.

As luck would have it, Tafadzwa Guramatunhu, son of Zimbabwe's premier eye surgeon, is in the audience, and the next day he recognizes Kyker. They strike up a conversation, and Guramatunhu expresses keen interest in supporting Tariro. Once again it is music that provides the bridge. ♦

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