

Genre-blending Africa→West Percussion Trio to perform at Baldwin Wallace on Friday

by Jarrett Hoffman



“In reality — in the wild — musics interact,” said Josh Ryan of Africa→West Percussion Trio. “Sometimes we play folkloric music, sometimes we play what sounds like experimental concert music, and sometimes we play a mix of the two. That’s just the reality of being a 21st-century person and percussionist, and it’s really

fun.”

On Friday, February 16 at 7:00 pm at Baldwin Wallace Conservatory’s Gamble Auditorium, the [Africa→West Percussion Trio](#) (Ryan Korb and brothers Jamie and Josh Ryan) will present a program of original works and arrangements, with influences ranging from Ghanaian and Cuban music to jazz, classical, and pop. The group is a longtime ensemble-in-residence at BW, and their fourth CD, *Loud Fossil*, was released in 2016.

We spoke with Josh Ryan, who’s also a busy member of the BW faculty: he teaches percussion, directs the percussion ensemble, and chairs the woodwinds-brass-percussion department. He had just finished teaching a make-up lesson when he picked up the phone, beginning by telling me about Africa→West’s origins at Lawrence University in Wisconsin, where all three members went to school.

It was there that Josh’s interest in the folkloric music of Africa was sparked. “A great teacher of ours named Dane Richeson went on sabbatical and took a trip to Ghana,” Josh said. “I was a junior when he came back and showed us some of the music he played, and it just blew my mind. The rhythms, textures, and melodies were quite literally beyond imagination, and here I was, struggling with rhythm on a simple, linear scale.”



Entering their 19th year together, Josh calls both Jamie and Ryan brothers now, with a strong connection and total honesty in rehearsals. “One of the great things about our Trio is that *anybody* can say *anything* to *anyone* at *any time*. There is absolutely no groupthink where people avoid a controversial topic in order to support a weak hypothesis — basically an “Emperor’s New Clothes” situation. We do not have that problem. We’re all free to try ideas, and if somebody says, ‘Josh, that idea *stinks*,’ it’s all good. It’s OK to bring bad news, and we all laugh about it.”

Their open communication also fosters patience when working together on a composition. “What we know as a group is that you can’t come in with everything perfect,” Josh said. “You have to let your guard down and say, ‘I have this amount done, can we do something with it?’ It’s very synergistic that way.”

That approach comes with an inside joke for Africa→West, thanks to a 1986 [skit](#) on *Saturday Night Live*. “Dana Carvey plays this rock star who goes to his record company and doesn’t have anything done,” Josh recounted. “He makes up a song on the spot about this lady buying groceries and chopping broccoli. So we say, ‘It’s time to chop some broccoli on this piece,’ meaning we have a small idea, and we need to be patient with each other and flesh it out.”

On Friday, the group had planned to perform a new work, *Myth of the Metals*, but that piece had to be put aside after the death of Josh’s and Jamie’s mother. “She had cancer,

and it really accelerated last semester,” Josh said. “I spent a lot of time driving back to southern Wisconsin. Composing was about the last thing on my mind.”

Africa→West’s catalog of roughly 40 original works and arrangements left a lot to draw on. One of the group’s choices was *Lobi Variations*, a four-movement work with quite a few stories behind it. The title comes from Ghanaian musician Kakraba Lobi, who taught the Trio’s own teacher Valerie Naranjo. Lobi was a master of the *gyil* (pronounced *JEE-lee*, a West African ancestor of the marimba), and the group had the opportunity to meet him when he toured the U.S. in 2007, shortly before his death.

Josh called Kakraba Lobi the world’s best *gyil* player, the John Coltrane of the *gyil*, and the Yoda of West African music. “He lived and breathed the instrument — just a brilliant person who could do anything that you could imagine with two hands. He spoke five languages, he made instruments — he was a genius. Our teacher is a genius too, and she studied with *him*.”

Lobi Variations also draws on one of Josh’s favorite bands: the first movement includes a quote from *Shambelle*, by The Police’s guitarist Andy Summers. “That band is the best thing that ever happened to my ear, aside from Afro-centric music,” he said. “And to borrow the term from their last record, a ‘synchronicity’ type of event happened to us around 2007. They had that amazing reunion tour, which I had been pining away for since the mid-‘80s — I was there at the dress rehearsal in Vancouver. Also around that time, we had the brief glimpse of Kakraba Lobi before he passed away. And just after we were finishing this piece, our grandparents started passing away. All of that came together at once — synchronicity, you might say — and left me feeling inspired and empty at the same time.”

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