

# Kalahari Encounters

Amsterdam-based Namibian Tales have a remarkable project making music with the San people of the Kalari, as **Ton Maas** finds out.

**E**ven if you manage to find a record store with a large selection of world music (not easy these days), chances are very small that they will have any recordings from Namibia. This relatively unknown African country has an unusual history, being one of few places in the world that were at one time colonised by Germany. Its original inhabitants, the San (who are often referred to as 'Bushmen'), share a similar fate with many other indigenous peoples, including the Aborigines of Australia, whose nomadic lifestyles and 'primitive' cultures have put them at the bottom of the social ladder. Very few recordings of traditional San music have ever been made and I know of only one previous cross-cultural collaboration involving the San: an album called *How Far Have We Come*, made in 1996 by the South African instrumentalist Pops Mohamed.

Enter Namibian Tales, an Amsterdam-based project co-founded by singer and guitarist Shishani Vranckx and percussionist Sjahin During. *Itaala*, their first CD, was

voted Best World Music Album Produced in the Netherlands last year. Shishani, who was born in Namibia from a Namibian mother and a Belgian father, grew up in the Netherlands, where she studied anthropology and music. During occasional visits to her mother, who still lives in Namibia, Shishani became fascinated with the San, the first inhabitants of a vast area that includes large parts of Namibia, but also South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Angola.

I meet Shishani and Sjahin During in the latter's home in Amsterdam and start the conversation by asking 29-year-old Shishani why it took her so long before she started exploring her Namibian roots. "It was difficult for me to get in touch with traditional music from Namibia. To begin with, very few recordings were ever made. And whenever I visited my mother's village, I couldn't really communicate with anyone else because I didn't speak Oshiwambo, the language of the Aawambo. It was easier for me to hang out with young musicians who spoke English, and they happened to be into urban styles like R&B, pop and jazz. So I

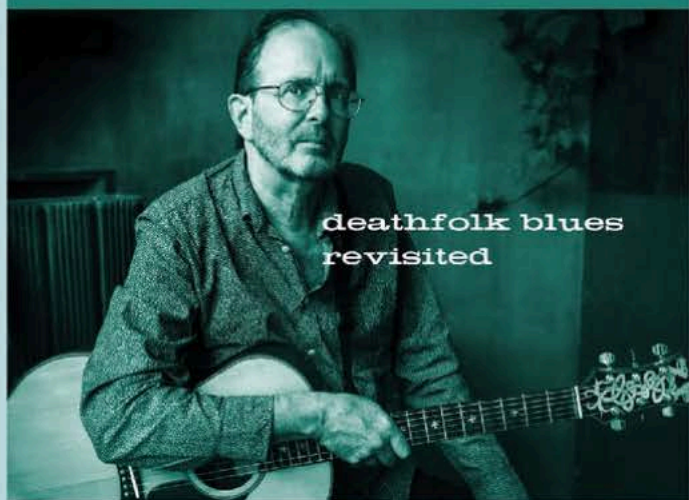
ended up doing the same. But when I met Sjahin, he persuaded me to take my heritage more seriously. Among other things I decided to learn Oshiwambo, to be able to sing some of the songs that ended up on our first album *Itaala*."

During interrupts: "And in the process of making that album we began to think about actually going to the Kalahari desert and work with local musicians."

In November of 2016 Shishani and During flew to Windhoek. From there they travelled deep into the Kalahari desert, looking for musicians they might be able to work with. "We had high hopes," says Shishani, "but we were realistic too. We simply had no idea what music we might come across, or if we would meet anybody interested at all. We had done a lot of research before taking off, but no one was able to tell us where we might find musicians. So we randomly picked a campsite near the town of Tsumkwe, to explore the area from there. And then by sheer luck we found the village of //Xao/oba [the slashes represent clicks], where our wildest dreams came true!"



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Debby, Sjahin and Shishani with the San women

**I**n //Xao/oba Shishani and Sjahin saw and heard traditional San music being performed live for the first time, and something magical occurred when they offered to play some of their own songs in return. "When we played a piece inspired by recordings of San music, they immediately responded, and before we knew it, the whole village was singing and dancing along with us."

During says that "Initially I was puzzled by their sense of rhythm and the cycles they clapped over the songs we played. When I first listened to their music, I was convinced it was primarily in six/eight. But when I started to play along, I found out things were much more complicated. After carefully analysing the recordings we made, I found that their rhythms are very often in odd meters such as five/eight, nine/eight, thirteen/eight and even seventeen/eight."

Shishani nods in agreement and adds: "It's the same with their vocal harmonies. After returning home I spent days listening to the same song over and over again, just to figure out where the melody is. There are no lead voices in San music. They always sing together in harmony and it is almost impossible to figure out who is singing what note, even if you observe them closely."

From day one, Shishani and Sjahin were struck by the grandmothers of this small community, who seemed to be in charge of the activities. After a day of listening and sharing music, they asked if they could meet some of them the next day to find out more about their music. Four of them seemed to be particularly close to each other and played a leading role in the community: N!ae Komtsa, the informal leader of the group, Baqu Kha//an, and the two sisters Seg//ae N!ani and //Ao N!ani. These four women were the ones they ended up working with as well.

Sjahin and Shishani did travel to other villages in the area, but found none where the musical tradition of the San was as strong and as much alive as in //Xao/oba. So they had been extremely fortunate indeed, but to create something new and viable from the raw material they gathered was yet another matter. "For me the main challenge was to get to the point of being able to create freely from the material we had," explains Shishani. "I knew that whatever I came up with, would always be 'an interpretation of' San music, so I focused on trying to let the music speak in a way that felt genuine. And from there I started translating melodies into guitar lines and riffs, adding melodies and bass lines to their harmonies, as well as bridges, interludes, and so on."

This provided a foundation for the compositions which she and During worked on in the months that followed. Sjahin found ways to decipher the rhythmic patterns of the San, creating new subdivisions, adding breaks and percussive solos. Together with Debby Korf-macher (Namibian Tales' kora and mbira player) Shishani worked hard trying to understand their melodies, timbre, and especially their sense of phrasing. With a sigh she adds: "Even now, the timing of some of the melodies is still a mystery to us. It took us a long time to familiarise ourselves with their songs, in order to be able to create vocal parts and choruses that would make sense to them. Bence Huszar's cello gave us additional colours with which to paint new musical landscapes, allowing these old songs to travel beyond the desert into worlds more familiar to us. We got together, sometimes daily, for weeks on end trying out ideas, fine-tuning, searching for new musical spaces. We now had echoes from all over the world resonating to songs from the Kalahari."

... way up north!

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**T**hen the time came for them to return to //Xao/oba, to present the grandmothers with the new material. This was the moment of truth, and they were really nervous. After all, what if the women didn't like what they heard? "We arrived in the village after dark, so all we could see were small fires burning. As we walked toward them, children began singing some of the songs they had learned from us back in November. It was as if we were being welcomed home – a truly moving experience. "Hulle soek vir die vrou mense" (they are looking for the women) someone shouted in Afrikaans. A group of children then led us to the grandmothers. We were all very excited and couldn't wait to start rehearsing together the next day!"

Sjahn elaborates on some of the technical aspects of the enterprise. "Setting up our sound system was an event in itself. We had brought along a generator to power the mixing table, amps and speakers, and built a stage, next to some huge cactuses. The whole village stood by, witnessing the event. We knew we had to practise with amplification and placed it exactly as we would be later on stage, so the grandmothers would more or less know what to expect. The bewilderment on their faces when they heard their own voices being amplified for the first time, was a sight to see! First we presented the songs we had created, explaining the structures and trying out different things together. To our amazement the grandmothers very quickly caught on. With one notable exception", he adds with a grin. "Even though they handle the most complex rhythms with ease, the concept of increasing or reducing the tempo is completely alien to them. They got very confused whenever we tried that."

After ten days of rehearsing old and new songs, the time had come to put their labour to the test. For this try-out they went to Tsumkwe, the nearby town, and set up a stage near the gas station. "The whole town gathered around us when we played," recounts Shishani. "The excitement was almost tangible. Imagine seeing these women singing their traditional songs together with a band from Europe! They loved it. If everyone from //Xao/oba could have come with us, they surely would have. But we simply didn't have enough cars. We drove to Tsumkwe with seven or eight kids squeezed in the back seat. This was their moment too. Every day the same kids showed up, as if they too were part of the project. And after ten days of hard work we took off to Namibia's capital city, to play the two concerts that were meant to be the culmination of the whole process."

"We returned to Windhoek in three cars: the film crew, the Namibian Tales convoy, and, in the third car, the San women. When we arrived at the Warehouse Theatre, we were received like celebrities – a rare experience for the San grandmothers, who are usually treated with contempt by other Namibians. Our sound engineer, Chris Weeda, had just arrived from Amsterdam and was waiting for us there, so we didn't have to worry about the quality of the recording. One more round of hard work was ahead of us: getting all the necessary equipment ready for the live recording, doing sound-checks and getting prepared mentally for the next day. Because that day all of us would finally be on stage together!"

Namibian Tales *Kalahari Encounters* (Mundus Productions, 2017)

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