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African BALAFON Bridges Continents and Centuries at Bethany CRC



Above: Don Chavez and Randy Markham

Randy Markham brought an antique African balafon, that hadn't been played for almost one hundred years back to life with a beautiful rendition of "Amazing Grace" for the Gallup Bethany Congregation on Sunday January 27, 2008

Randy, a marimbist by training, found this instrument when he and a friend happened to stop at F & R Market, a secondhand store on Gallup's north side. "I first glanced to my left catching an obscure object high upon a shelf among an old "Model T" wheel, old team harnesses, and a pile of deer antlers," said Randy. "As I came closer I realized that it was a xylophone, in this case a balafon. The store owner, Don Chavez, brought a large staircase on wheels over so that I could climb way up to the shelf where the instrument was. I immediately examined the condition of the bars. They were much larger and in much better condition than appeared from ground level, with the bars still there, although no longer suspended above the frame as the leather ties had given way from old age. Some of the gourds were also giving way, with one missing. Otherwise it was in great condition!"

Don Chavez, who was present at the Bethany service to enjoy the balafon's rebirth, acquired the balafon in 1971 in Seattle, Washington from an art gallery dealing in Pacific Northwest arts and crafts that was going out of business. Chavez liked the look of the balafon, even though he had no idea what it was and made the only bid in the gallery's auction. The owner of the gallery identified it as African balafon circa 1900's, likely coming from Nigeria. Chavez said, "It has been in my possession for 36 years and now I think it is in its rightful place, in the possession of someone who really appreciates and loves what it is."

Randy set right to work to restore the balafon as he had restored marimbas before and knew exactly what would need to be done. Although it needed careful reconstruction and replacement of strings, Randy was grateful that the frame had been so carefully preserved. Soon it was ready to be played. Although Randy had been a concert marimbist, and played on just about every kind of mallet instrument he had still had never played on a real balafon! He used his own custom-made rosewood mallets wrapped with yarn for the first performance on Sunday at Bethany.

Tammy Iralu, a Bethany member who grew up with her missionary parents in Mali and Burkina traced the likely origin of the balafon to Mali. "In Bambara, the main language of Mali, 'bala' refers to the instrument itself, possibly related to the word 'bolen' (gourd), and 'fon' means to speak. In Bambara, when you clap you make your hands speak (I tege fo) and when you play your drums you make them speak."