

CHASE

FEATURE

Rhythms and beats from Africa to Rotherham...

Tongesayi Gumbo's story is an incredible one, but it is likely you will not have heard it. ROAR's Amy Forde chats with the man that brought the rhythm from Zimbabwe to Rotherham

It is most likely you will have heard of Tongesayi Gumbo already because he has been bringing his joyous enthusiasm for sharing the rhythms and beats from his own culture to Rotherham communities for over a decade.

Regularly performing with talented musicians and dancers in the Diversity Festival at the Rotherham Show, he brought a whole afternoon of African performances to last year's event.

I asked Tonge about his relationship to Rotherham and found out that ROAR's very own founding member and chair, Steve Rogers, talent spotted him in 2004, inviting him to be one of the world artists for the Colourscape project in 2004.

Curious to know how a boy born in a township in Zimbabwe, where

music and dancing is a part of everyday life, gets to be in Sheffield running workshops for the Children's Festival where Steve found him, I ask about how those opportunities came about.

Tonge's father was a boxer and he encouraged his son as a child to take up karate lessons. Because there was little in the way of activity and entertainment for the village, the karate teacher decided to set up a theatre company where the karate class drummers could expand their performing experience.

This idea widened out the experiences for Tonge and other young people who had no opportunity to go to school and could not read and write but who could dance and sing to find out about all aspects of the performing arts, including behind the scenes functions.

Being a little competitive also drove Tonge to push himself to compete in local street dance competitions, becoming the best self-taught youngest choreographer in South African dance while still a teenager.

It was around this time that foreign charity aid was looking for noteworthy projects to support, and Tonge's village was building a community centre to provide a place for the young people to continue with their performing arts. NORAD (Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation), seeing the talents of Tonge's dance troupe, not only supported the construction of the cultural centre but took them back to Norway to perform.

This started a career from the age of 16 travelling to represent traditional African cultures that continues to this day.

Shortly after Prince Charles visited the cultural centre in Zimbabwe, the British Council, on behalf of the



Queen, invited Tonge to perform at the opening of a festival in Dartford in 1998 as part of the legacy of the Africa '95 project to support contemporary African art. Over 38 different African countries sent choreographers to Zimbabwe to collaborate and create a showcase.

Tonge then came to the UK and ran eight weeks of workshops with local African British people to bring a taste of Africa here.

It was in Dartford that John Taylor saw the performance and through an organisation based in Sheffield, Simunye, invited Tonge to work with people of colour who had been born in the UK to teach them African culture through dance and music.

This led to Pauline Eveleigh commissioning school workshops for the Children's Festival.

So we have come full circle and Tonge is in Rotherham indirectly by Royal approval!

Realising that here in Yorkshire the pace of life is more relaxed than his time spent in New York, and seeing a demand for his work in schools meaning he could make a living, Tonge chose to stay here, lurking on

the border between Rotherham and Sheffield. He is now a Yorkshire Zimbabwean!

Working with young people is where Tonge's heart lies, providing real opportunities to experience traditional cultures with context, to explore their own expression and, most importantly, reach their potential and have fun at the same time.

Having met Situle Moyo through workshops for Rotherham Carnival, Tonge was increasingly pulled into Rotherham to expand the drumming rhythms for Rotherham African Drums (RAD) and work with ex-offenders and other local charities. He has become an agent for African artists in the region, bringing quality and range to the Diversity Festival and Black History Month events.

Recognising an opportunity to bring authentic African culture to an eager audience, with Situle Tonge started the group Young Minds.

Now people have the opportunity to learn traditional African drum rhythms, dance moves and sing in a choir as Young Minds is starting a series of family-based workshops in



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Rotherham on Saturdays. The drumming with Tonge will be traditional African rhythms. The dancing is accompanied by live drummers. The tutor is Fatou Sallah who is travelling in from Bradford and can provide the history and context for each of the dances she will be teaching.

The choir brings people together with one voice, and I am assured a lot of singing takes place in South Africa.

The sessions are aimed at families, so no prior skill is required and all abilities will be able to take part. Participants can bring their own culture to the session and share different interpretations of the rhythms and dance steps. Rotherham can have its own cultures represented and celebrated, showcased and performed for wider audiences.

If that wasn't enough, Tonge is also setting up a talk show to bring inspirational speakers to young people, filmed for broadcast across social media platforms. The guests can be from any profession or

sector, to help young people find a path in life that fulfils them.

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Unsurprisingly, much of this work is delivered through volunteer time and, as with all great causes, help is needed. Art needs spaces for people to come together. It needs people and organisations offering support to help projects grow and become sustainable. Donations of musical instruments, sound equipment and computers are sought, and if anyone can teach the performing arts and can offer some time then Tonge wants to hear from them. Contact him on 07507 933930.

The drumming sessions take place on Saturdays from 2pm to 3.30pm at 11 Corporation Street, Rotherham (opposite Wilko's).

