

Celebrating Afrifest

By Chris Riemenschneider, Star Tribune

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From the patio of the Cedar Cultural Center, Nathan White looked up at the Riverside Plaza housing towers that loom over the West Bank in Minneapolis. A smile as big as the Nile crossed his face as he talked about the confluence of his past and this weekend, when he tries to pull off the first-ever Afrifest in his old neighborhood.

"I used to live up there on the 27th floor, after my mom moved here," said White, whose family immigrated from Liberia and landed on the West Bank in 1993.

"It's very symbolic having Afrifest here. This is where the new immigrant populations come, whether it's Liberians and West Africans 15 years ago or Somalians today. It's the heart of the African community."

White hopes that heart beats faster and louder during Afrifest than it ever has before. An events planner and promoter, he dreamed up the idea after attending Chicago's successful African Festival of the Arts. "I came home saying, 'We have even more Africans here than in Chicago, so why can't we do it?'"

Afrifest's inaugural year includes a Saturday night concert at the Cedar, an all-day outdoor festival Sunday at neighboring Currie Park, plus a closing-night party Monday with South African reggae legend Lucky Dube at First Avenue.

First and foremost, Afrifest is meant to be simply a great party. But it has more relevant intentions, too. It's a rare chance for the various (and sometimes splintered) African immigrant communities to come together, and for their children to get a taste of the culture.

"My kids are all 100 percent American, and I'm proud of that, but I want them to know their roots, too," said Edna Stevens Talton, another Liberian immigrant whose dance company, Universal Dance Destiny, performs Sunday.

Afrifest is also meant to be a showcase for native Minnesotans, especially the ones who only know Africa from movies like "Blood Diamond," or from the fleeting moments when CNN squeezes in a report from there between Paris Hilton updates.

"Most Americans only see Africa through war, famine and stereotypes," said Kristel Porter, a Jamaican American who sings in the reggae-fied Jarija Band [also performing Sunday]. "Minnesotans especially need to be more open to [African] culture. It's part of their community now."

At the crossroads

Afrifest's co-founding partner, Rachel Joyce, is an ideal person to show Minnesotans how to get acclimated to African culture. Where White is coming to the event as an immigrant, Joyce was just another Midwest girl listening to punk rock in her late teens when she got her mind blown listening to a record by Nigerian music legend Fela Kuti.

"I didn't understand it, but I knew I had to find out more," said Joyce, who went on to travel in Africa and earn a degree in international relations.

Now a publicist for the Walker Art Center, a club DJ and co-host of KFAI-FM's "Shake and Bake Show," Joyce sees Afrifest as an update of the West Bank's last great outdoor bash, Cedar Fest. Where Cedar Fest represented the neighborhood's history as a haven for the Minneapolis blues and folk scene, Afrifest is more reflective of the here and now.

"The hippies don't rule the West Bank anymore," said Joyce. "It's the crossroads of so many different African communities. Holding it there was key, I think."

Currently, Somalians and Ethiopians are most prevalent among the African immigrants on the West Bank (also called the Cedar-Riverside area). Out of respect for the Muslim beliefs of those populations, Afrifest organizers decided to not sell alcohol at the festival.

Minnesota is behind only California in the number of East African immigrants such as Somalians, according to U.S. census data. Somalis numbered about 26,000 for the last census in 2000, while the state's overall African immigrant population grew sevenfold over the previous decade.

"Africans like Minnesota because of its social and economic opportunities -- not because of its weather," said Joseph Mbele, a St. Olaf College professor from Tanzania who is putting together a historical and cultural exhibit for Afrifest.

Mbele believes Afrifest is "a long overdue" opportunity to begin uniting Africa's diverse races, religions and cultures here in Minnesota.

"We have a lot more in common than we have that's different. We share the experiences of colonization, of slavery, of discrimination. But we also all come from a continent with rich histories and traditions."

From the mouth of a professor to the mouth of a rapper: Liberian-born hip-hop performer Blade Brown took Mbele's hope for unity one step further, suggesting that Afrifest could even set an example in Africa.

"Africans living in America are beacons for the Africans living in Africa," said Brown, whose real name is Kelvin Vaye. "If we show them that we can come together here in America, they'll follow the example."

Brown, 26, might be the most perfect performer for Afrifest. He has lived in the United States since age 9 and seems as Americanized as any other kid who grew up listening to Nas and the Wu-Tang Clan. But the Afrocentric, reggaeton-ish songs posted on his MySpace page (Myspace.com/BladeBrownMusic) clearly show he hasn't turned his back

on his roots.

"African-Americans can look at an event like this the way that Irish Americans look at St. Patrick's Day," he said.

Brown represents just one niche of the Afrifest music lineup. Other performers range from New York-based East African R&B singer Miriam Chemmoss to the Ethiopian soul group Wegegta to local reggae stars Ras Kwame and Innocent & Les Exodus.

Afrifest got lucky nabbing a performance by Lucky Dube, who's even more famous throughout Africa than he is among American reggae fans. He was landed by former First Avenue manager Steve McClellan, a longtime African music supporter whose nonprofit music org DEMO booked Afrifest's Cedar lineup.

"In the early '80s, we would book King Sunny Ade and some of the big touring African bands, and there were hardly any Africans living here," McClellan said. "Obviously, things have changed."

Thinking back to the Chicago event that inspired Afrifest, White said, "What I liked is that there were so many different races there -- not just Africans, not just whites, but Mexicans, Asians -- and they were all dancing together and having so much fun."

Music has a way of doing that, no matter the continent.

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