

## A Tale of Three Cities

A tale of three loves; art, poetry and music

By Evans Milimo

A Zambian based in the Netherlands has set her sights on Lusaka for a visual arts exhibition and musical extravaganza sometime this year.

Wajipha Chongwe is a visual artist, poet and musician all rolled into one harmonious ensemble Wajipha told **Build Now** in an interview via Skype from her base in Amsterdam that she has a burning desire to exhibit her paintings and stage a musical performance in Lusaka.

Wajipha said art galleries in Lusaka exude a colourful and dynamic vibe compared to those in Europe, most of which carry a subdued atmosphere.

Wajipha is the daughter of prominent Zambian lawyer Roger Chongwe while her mother Gwenda is from Australia. She left Zambia for Australia when she was 18 but relocated to Amsterdam almost three years ago.

“The thing is, when you look at my work, it’s very colourful and living in the western world, there is a very different take on colour. You sort of see that people are not very comfortable with colour. And so it was nice to come back to Lusaka and just see colour everywhere,” said Wajipha of her recent visit to Lusaka which she undertook to “test the waters” on the art and music scene.

Though Wajipha has not exhibited in Lusaka before, she was taken in by what she saw. “Art is everywhere. From paintings to what women are wearing, what men are wearing. There is just art, music and life everywhere.”

In contrast Wajipha said most galleries in Europe and Australia were quiet and subdued. She has exhibited her paintings in Perth and Amsterdam where the response was far more encouraging than in the Western Australian city.

She said in Western Australia, there was still a stereotypical perception of what it means to be African. She recalled that ten years ago, her application to represent Zambia at a Commonwealth event that was held in Perth was rejected in preference to another application from someone who was considered more indigenous. Wajipha’s father was the first African to have entered the University of Western Australia in the early 60s and she was certain this distinction would swing the application in her favour but alas, it was not to be.

However, Wajipha said her relocation to Amsterdam has paid off because people there are multi-cultural and more receptive to others. “In Western Australia, I was banging my head around those stereotypes whereas in Amsterdam, what I found was more multi-cultural.”

Two years ago in Amsterdam, she was part of a project called “108 Amsterdammers” which highlighted the number of nationalities in the city that time. She said the project proved that Amsterdam was more multi-cultural than New York and its



through this dispensation that she freely represented Zambia in the programme without any scrutiny based on colour or any other superficial criteria.

“In Amsterdam, I don’t have to explain why I am Zambian whereas for 27 years (in Western Australia) I have been explaining to people why I am a Zambian,” Wajipha said.

Wajipha’s husband Freddy Poncin, echoed his wife’s sentiments and said being in Perth was a pigeon-holing experience in which an African had to look and sound African. “The world is becoming smaller. You don’t have to come from Japan to be a karate master. You don’t have to be an African or a black musician to play African music,” said Freddy.

He said although it was important for people to preserve their own culture, it was equally important to adopt to other cultures and see what they could offer. Freddy said people who



Although she prefers the public to interpret her art and get whatever emotions the paintings evoke, she sometimes explains the works to those who want to be guided or who want to have a conversation around the creative pieces.

Wajipha said the idea of having poetry with art was a stylistic device aimed at helping the public initiate their own construction of meaning behind the paintings.

*Below is an extract from one of Wajipha's poems...*

(Spirit- My voice was restricted, but my spirit not crushed. Many have tried to shut me and put me in a cask. Resurrected I am with a voice louder than before. My spirit still the same full of life and beyond...)

Gwenda, has had a long association with Zambian art and through this link, Wajipha grew up knowing artists such as the late great Henry Tayali. On the contemporary scene, Wajipha was full of praise for art students from the Evelyn Hone College who persevere with their craft despite inadequate tools of the trade.

She said the students' fighting spirit is a reaffirmation of her poems where she stresses that each one is responsible for their happiness or the outcome of the reality they crave. "We can create whatever we want. We have just forgotten, most of us have forgotten or we are being misinformed. We as Africans, we as Zambians are so powerful but the problem is we give our power away," Wajipha said with patriotic fervor.

On the music front, Mutima Band, which was formed in 2012 has two albums to date. Wajipha said the second album, "Hold Me Close", made the band feel they had arrived because they had created the music they really liked after almost one year in the studio.

"We spent at least a year just in the studio practicing. It took some time, it just didn't happen like that. It had strong rhythm section and we were happy we got to the sound we really wanted to create."

After listening to the five songs on the album, I refuse to disagree with Wajipha's assessment. The only "problem" with the album is that each successive song becomes your favourite because the music just gets better. There is a song called "Malasha Man" with a syncopation in which Freddy's off count tom tom rolling and merciless cymbal crushing leaves your finger stuck on the rewind button. Then there is the title track itself, "Home Me Close", a ballad which kills you softly as the layering of a hip-hoppish bass is softened by Freddy's rampant rimshot reminiscent of Eryka Badu's hit, Rimshot.

Anna Mwale's hit of yester year, Kabuku, receives a masterful reggae interpretation in affirmation of the band's virtuosity. "Mutima Watu" and "Missing You" are solid tracks which enhance the staying power of the album which closes with a dub mix of "Malasha Man". Just as Zambians feel proud of fellow citizens excelling abroad in football and indeed in other endeavors, Wajipha and Mutima Band are certainly raising our flag high overseas.

Just the band line up in itself strikes the right note.

came from two different races must be encouraged to maintain the integrity of both identities rather than setting them off against each other.

Freddy, who leads the Mutima Band in which Wajipha sings, is himself of mixed origin with a Dutch father, an Indonesian mother and a Ghanaian ancestor whom he said ventured into Holland seven generations ago as one of the first house slaves who was taught different languages and also learnt how to play music, entertain and serve his masters.

After being baptized in the 1700s, the man was christened Christiaan Van der Vegt. Freddy said today, Christian has 1,200 descendants walking around Holland of which 1,000 do not know they are descended from a black African. "They are all white, they are all Dutch and they might even be right wing (conservative), slightly racist," Freddy said.

He said this story about his Ghanaian ancestor is about what people see and what people don't know. "The moral of the story is that looks are deceiving," he said. "At the end of the day, it is what you feel around people. Sometimes a white person can be more of an African while some Africans can also be like muzungus," Freddy said.

Wajipha said the cultural misrepresentation she endured cannot compromise who she is because as an artist and musician, her work is intuitive and comes from a meditative place with a spiritual meaning behind it.

Currently, Wajipha's paintings have been put together in book format. However, in her second book which was compiled in 2017, the artwork has been juxtaposed with poetry. There is no hierarchy in the sequencing of either the artwork or the poetry because both are done separately though they work well together.

“Steady” Freddy Poncin, the musical director also handles drums while Englishman Mike Goland plays piano. Mario Hovart from Croatia is the bassist, Italian Giuseppe Reina is on guitar and Australian Adam Monk is on percussion. Beaudeane Bruderlo on keys and Wajipha’s 24 year old son Masauso Chongwe on rhythm guitar. The band’s music is not very easy to pin down but Wajipha said it was a hybrid of all the influences brought by the members’ diversity. Masauso will in the near future have an added role in the band as he is currently in his final year of studying sound engineering. Their second child Milimo, 21, just finished a degree in creative writing and publishing while Chilani, 18, is finishing high school.

Freddy is very keen on collaborating with Zambian musicians and said the benefits of such jams were “omnidirectional”. He, however, advised against the propensity for computer generated sounds saying they cheapen production as all musicians sound the same without any personal texture.

To make the collaborations with Zambian musicians more participatory, Freddy and Wajipha are prepared to travel only as core members to be supported by a local backing band. The tale of three cities and three artistic loves only awaits being played out on Wajipha’s home soil.

Promoters and sponsors, hello. To Zambian music and art aficionados, Wajipha can be reached on <http://mutimaproductions.bandcamp.com>



## What are you .....

**Inspired by?** I’m inspired by life, passion and creativity.....

**Longing for?** I’m longing for a large studio so I can experiment and produce bigger works of art and more fabric.

**Loving most about Amsterdam?** I love living in Amsterdam because it brings me to a space of peace and therefore I’m able to work without interruption and constriction... I love the beauty of the city and multicultural diversity of the city...

**Decorating your home with?** My taste is extremely eclectic and I love to mix texture, colour and culture in my environment. My house is full of African textiles and objects. I have a lot of vintage pieces that I have found in second hand shops (opportunity shops) I love things that have a history, so I’d rather buy something old as opposed to something new! I pick up a lot of things that people throw out. I recently found a chandelier and my latest find are some antique dining chairs from the 40’s...

**Doing to stay healthy?** I used to work in the health and fitness industry so exercise has always played a crucial role in my life. As a result of a long-term knee injury and some health issues, I’m unable to run anymore, so I walk for an hour every day. I’m hoping to start taking a yoga class to add some variety to my exercise routine in the New Year.

**Doing to save the earth?** I stopped driving 3 years ago as my commitment and contribution to reducing my carbon imprint. I’m conscious about what I eat, what I wear and what products I use. Which means knowing, where, how and who made what ever you are consuming...

**Unable to live without?** I’m unable to live without love.

**What is your favorite piece of art in your home?** One of my original pastel drawings called Emerging... She was the first one in that particular style that I drew and really portrayed how I have always felt. The feeling that I’m standing behind something, looking through, observing, but not really being seen.

**Who is your all time favorite artist?** Henry Tayali, as my parents had some of his works, which I grew up with. Currently Lawrence Yombwe of Wayi Wayi Art Studio is my favorite. I was just given one of his early paintings, which my parents have had for over 20 years. Admittedly I have been asking for it for a long time and I guess I finally wore them down and they gave it to me! And coincidentally with out knowing that he had painted that painting I bought a print of his at a recent exhibition of his and also got to meet him, which was great!

**What’s the favorite of your own paintings?** My favorite object that I have is not an artwork but an antique table that I bought when I was 19 and just arrived in Western Australia. I still have it. It has survived living in many houses, 3 energetic children and now residing as my drawing board base in Amsterdam. The bizarre thing is the couple who owned the antique were originally Dutch....

**What is it that many people don’t know about you?** Many people don’t know that I am the daughter of a famous human rights lawyer....

**If you were a drink, what would it be?**

I’m not really sure how to answer this so I’m asking Freddy and he says ‘Like an Italian wine that keeps getting better and better with age...’