

# The Path of Mbira: An Interview with Joel Laviolette

By John Lane

Austin-based musician and mbira/marimba builder Joel Laviolette is a man of rare vision and passion. It was in Taos, New Mexico in 1994 that Joel heard mbira for the first time. His life was instantly and irrevocably changed. The next day he drove to Santa Fe to purchase his first mbira and take a lesson from Dan Pauli, the maker of the instrument.

Despite a short detour as a jazz guitar student at the University of North Texas, Joel found the pull of mbira too strong to resist. His obsession was all-consuming. Soon he found himself spending upwards of ten hours a day playing mbira. After only a year at North Texas, he moved back to New Mexico to join the band Jaka (Dan Pauli's African-based marimba/mbira band). From 1996–98, Joel played guitar with Jaka and travelled around the U.S. and Canada, learning from any other mbira player he could find. By 1998, Joel realized that he needed to go to the source of mbira: Zimbabwe.

With high hopes and little money, his first venture to Zimbabwe lasted only four months. During that time, however, he was able to

meet and study with Newton Gwara, Sekuru Chigamba, Wiriranai Chigonga, and Garidzva Chigamba. He returned to the U.S. and worked furiously for a year, which allowed him to return to Zimbabwe in October of 1999. In the interim, Joel had refined his mbira style and intended to spend his time in Zimbabwe studying with Gwara.

After connecting with Gwara, Joel rented a stand in the high-density suburb of New Zengeza in Chitungwiza. There he built a house, which eventually came to be known as Mhumhi Studios. Joel and Gwara soon formed a band, the Nheravauya Mbira Group. The group was a hit in the ghetto bars of Chitungwiza and Chikwana, not only because of Gwara's genius on mbira and vocals, but because of the novelty of "Joel from America." Often, audience members would jump up on stage and look behind the gourd *deze* just to see if he was actually playing the instrument! To their amazement, he was, and he was performing at such a level of competence that spirit possessions were not uncommon at performances, even in the busy bars and nightclubs.

For the next year and a half Joel travelled constantly throughout Zimbabwe meeting musicians, playing ceremonies, and talking to musicians who were interested in recording. He recorded many groups and types of mbira including the ChiSanza, Munyonga, Nyunga-Nyunga, Njari, Don-gonda (njari neMakonde) mbira orchestra, Matepe, Nyanga (panpipes), and Mbira DzaVaNdau, as well as several of the players of Mbira DzaVaDzimu. The recordings from those years can be found on Joel's non-profit record label, Mhumhi Records, the proceeds from which go directly back to the musicians.

In 2001, Joel moved back to New Mexico and assumed his role as one of the guitar players in the band Wagogo, collaborating again with Dan Pauli. Joel and Dan formed

the group Common Thread and began working on original music in the spirit of traditional Zimbabwean music, which led to further exploration using Western instruments in a Zimbabwean style. Most importantly, however, Joel began to explore his own voice in music. During that time Common Thread toured constantly, playing many festivals around the U.S.

Since 2006, Joel has been based in Austin, Texas, where the music community has embraced him. He formed the Zimbabwean-style marimba/electonica band Rattletree Marimba and the traditional marimba group Kupira Marimba, and Joel crafted the instruments for both. Always pushing the boundaries with new technology, he also offers online music lessons to his growing international student base and recently returned from a lecture/workshop tour in Germany and Prague. From the very beginning of his journey with mbira, he had been experimenting and learning the craft of building mbiras and marimbas. He now spends most of his time performing, touring, building instruments, and teaching mbira and marimba. Joel is also a regular teacher at Zimfest, an international festival of Zimbabwean music and culture, has conducted workshops at PASIC, and has presented workshops and master classes at schools and universities throughout the U.S. and abroad. You can connect with Joel at his website: [www.rattletree.com](http://www.rattletree.com).

**Lane:** *What drew you to mbira?*

**Laviolette:** I first heard the mbira at a hot springs outside of Taos, New Mexico in 1994. Up until that point, I had been focusing all my energy on guitar. The original music I had been writing at that point on the guitar were cyclical, multiple melody pieces. I was driving myself crazy spending hours each day trying to make these multiple melodies resolve in a way that the music in my head was going. Once I heard the mbira, I immediately knew that was the instrument I was meant to be playing. The music I had been trying to invent already existed. It was such a relief, because I realized all I needed to do was learn the music and not create it!

**Lane:** *How did you come to study with Newton Gwara?*

**Laviolette:** I heard a cassette of his playing a couple years before I first went to Zimbabwe. I was instantly attracted to his style



of playing. On my first trip to Zimbabwe, I made it a point to meet him, and I took only a couple of lessons. After that, I knew the way that he played was very much in line with the way I viewed the mbira, so I knew I wanted to learn more. I went back to Zimbabwe a year later, found Gwara, and told him that I wanted to be his student. He welcomed me. At the time he also had a dancer in his group named Owen Chiwanza. Owen talked to his parents and got permission for me to live with them in their house. There were four of us boys all sleeping on one bed head-to-toe. I did that for a few months and then I got permission to build a small one-room house behind the main house. That room came to be known as Mhumhi Studios, where I made many of the first field recordings. We had mbira lessons and rehearsals every day with Gwara and the rest of the group. Other musicians from the neighborhood began to use the house as a gathering place.

**Lane:** *How did you learn to make marimbas and mbiras?*

**Laviolette:** I started building my first mbira almost immediately after I purchased one from Dan Pauli in 1994. I read in *The Soul Of Mbira* by Paul Berliner that people played in many different tunings. I didn't have the money to buy another mbira at the time, so if I wanted other tunings, I would just have to build them. I began building mbiras that were in tunings of the cassettes I had so I could learn songs. I enjoy the process of building.

Once I got to Zimbabwe and we had Mhumhi Studios, the instruments began to be stored there. Gwara began building his mbira there, too. Some days, Owen and I would help build the instruments to learn more about the craft. Other days, we'd be building speaker boxes for the homemade P.A. we used for the night gigs.

Building marimbas came later for me out of a desire to put *matepe* music onto marimba. I had seen Dan Pauli, Peter Swing, and Gwara all build marimbas in different ways, so I had a pretty good idea by that point of how to build them. With Rattletree Marimba, I built most of the amplifiers and recording equipment, as well as the marimbas. We have also started to incorporate electronic elements using DIY MIDI triggering; we build-in pickups into each marimba key, so we can control external synths with the acoustic marimbas.

**Lane:** *Marimba obviously plays a large role in the music of Rattletree Marimba. How did you get started playing marimba?*

**Laviolette:** In 1996 I moved back to New Mexico and joined Jaka. At that time, it was an electric band with Dan Pauli, Peter

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Swing, David Schaldach, and me. David played drumset with one hand and marimba with the other, Dan played electric mbira, Peter played bass guitar, and I played electric guitar. But all three of those guys have a long history of playing Zimbabwean-style marimba music. They all came from the Pacific Northwest, where the Zimbabwean marimba music scene is pretty big. We then started adding more marimba players into the group, which was my first real exposure to it. I really wasn't “into” marimba for several years. To me, the mbira was all that mattered and everything else was just trying to keep up to this amazing instrument. Since then, I saw in Zimbabwe that people were tuning their marimbas to their mbiras instead of playing on Western-tuned instruments. Here in the U.S., the vast majority of the Zimbabwean-style marimba bands play in the key of C and may have an extra F-sharp so they can play in G. I see now that a big reason for my distaste was how equal temperament affected mbira music.

When I moved to Austin in 2006, I was getting more and more focused on the *matepe* mbira. A lot of the fingering on the *matepe* seemed like it would translate well to the marimba. Dan helped me first build a baritone and a soprano marimba that were exact note-for-note matches of the *matepe*—the baritone was the left hand and the soprano was the right hand.

Over time, we kept adding players and more and more notes to the marimbas. We have two sopranos that go well into the left-hand of the *matepe* and above the right hand, a baritone that is still an exact match of the *matepe* left hand, and a bass marimba that goes down five notes below the *matepe*.

**Lane:** *What was the impetus behind using marimbas in your band instead of mbira?*

**Laviolette:** Marimba was just a way to play the mbira music louder and in more of a danceable format for audiences. In Zimbabwe, mbira music is recognized as dance music, but here in the U.S. it's harder to convey that. Dance is such an important component of this music. I want people listening to know that they should be dancing!

**Lane:** *What is your approach to performing the mbira as a solo instrument?*

**Laviolette:** If I am playing solo—only for

myself—it is a meditation. But in “gig” situations, it is fun and interesting to have the opportunity to expose people to beautiful music that they most likely have never heard. I'll often point out the different independent melodies that each finger is playing, building them up as I go. Then, I begin to sing the resultant melodies that I'm hearing. Depending on the musical ability of the audience, sometimes I'll ask them to sing lines as I create interlocking melodies.

**Lane:** *In addition to being an established performer, you've been establishing yourself as an educator and proponent of mbira. How do you approach teaching Western students? How does this differ from the way the mbira is traditionally taught or from the way you learned?*

**Laviolette:** There are many different approaches to teaching mbira. In Zimbabwe, I mainly learned by watching my teachers play slowly as they sat next to me, watching their hands or by recording them playing and spending hours with the cassettes—yes, cassettes back then!

Here, students often want the teacher to break the music down into phrases and/or play only one hand at a time. There are severe limitations to both of these approaches. So usually the way I teach complete beginners is to break things into phrases until they can play one or two songs. At that point, I move to the approach of me playing slowly as they play along with me until they know the song. I have found many students are afraid to make mistakes, so it is very difficult for them to play next to me while I am playing. I think that is an important thing for them to get over.

Playing mbira is a very physically demanding activity and requires strong mental conviction—mostly to overcome the pain involved with playing. Learning mbira is a journey that goes well beyond simply learning some songs.

**Lane:** *What's the best advice you can give to students interested in studying or practicing mbira?*

**Laviolette:** So often I have taught a song only to have students come back the next week feeling like they had mastered it and wanted to learn variations. In that situation, I will have them play the version they know, and I'll start singing some of the resultant mel-

ody lines they are already playing. They are often amazed at the melodies they were already playing but didn't know about or hear. You can only start to hear them by playing one version for many, many hours. So, my advice is for mbira players to take their time with the versions they already know. Students shouldn't be so concerned about learning lots of variations to a song, because usually there is a lot more depth yet to be discovered in what they are already playing.

**Lane:** *Who are the interesting/important mbira players in Zimbabwe today? In the U.S.? To whom should we be listening?*

**Laviolette:** I'm sure there are many great mbira players that I haven't yet heard, so don't take my list as the only authority. Obviously, I'd recommend listening to as much of my teacher, Newton Gwara, as possible, especially his solo work for his style. Forward Kwenda is one of the greatest living masters of the mbira. His ability to play outside the conventions of standard-length phrases—with multiple simultaneous melody lines!—is truly mind-numbing. Sekuru Chigamba, the late Sekuru Gora, Chaka Chawasarira... There are just so many great players who have unique and individual styles.

**Lane:** *In what ways, if at all, does the mbira music you play break with "traditional" approaches to the instrument or repertoire?*

**Laviolette:** The only real break is with instrumentation. But even in Zimbabwe they are doing this. Mbira music is not so much about the instrument. You can play mbira music on any instrument. What is important are the songs that are being played. As long as you don't change the pattern of the song, you can play the music on any instrument and remain traditional.

**Lane:** *How do you practice mbira?*

**Laviolette:** I just play as often as possible. To me, every time we play mbira, we have an opportunity to drop our worldly thoughts and sink into the depth of the music that is created. So to that end, I think mbira "practice" is much like yoga "practice." It is an ongoing relationship and dialog with your inner self.

**Lane:** *The instruments you play, including mbira, are very physically demanding—especially on the hands, in the case of mbira. What do you do to keep yourself fit and well?*

**Laviolette:** I do Ashtanga Yoga several times a week. It's a physically demanding type of yoga and keeps me strong. I believe physical exercise is extremely important in order for musicians to play their best. Very often I see musicians burn out and unable to keep up with the demands of playing or touring. If musicians want to make music through old

age, they need to be concerned with staying healthy.

**Lane:** *Mbira music is composed of varying layers/patterns of melodic lines. Can you talk about your conception of hearing the music?*

**Laviolette:** From a mathematical standpoint, the music can be broken down into 48 pulses. Westerners usually break that down into a 12/8 rhythm with four phrases of 12 pulses each, subdivided into triplets. I first learned the music here in the West, so that was the only way I heard the music for many years. Eventually, I started hearing some mbira players subdividing those 48 pulses other ways: six groups of eight, two groups of 24, three groups of 16, etc. These subdivisions are all valid and can all be superimposed on each other; each melody in a different "feel" and "swing" depending on their phrasing.

**Lane:** *How do the the circuitous or circular forms of beginnings/endings in mbira melodies compare to the ever important "one" of Western music?*

**Laviolette:** There may be different definitions of the "one" out there, so first I should clarify what I mean by "the one." To me "the one" is the common place that everyone playing will agree is the starting place of the music. Even if players aren't playing on "one," they know where they are in relation to it. With mbira music this gets turned on its head, because multiple melodies can all be independent of each other and can follow their own phrasing. Then, it follows that each melody would have its own "one." The *feel* of a melody is not at the mercy of a common "one." Each melody can have its own important starting point.

I like to use the analogy of a clock: Imagine the cycle of mbira music is the face of the clock. All the melodies must agree on what time it is, so that they are correctly playing within the cycle of the music, i.e., 12:00 is always 12:00 for every melody. But let's say one melody starts work at 5:00. When the cycle comes around to 5:00, that time is very important to that one melody. However, another melody has its lunch break at 1:30, so 1:30 is the important time for it. These would all be the different "ones," or the different starting point of each melody. So, in fact, instead of mbira music not having any "one," it has an infinite number of "ones" depending on the need of the specific melodies being played. Remember that each mbira player is playing several melodies at once, so breaking down this concept is essential to mbira music.

**Lane:** *Can you talk a little about the life of being a full-time gigging musician? What skills do you feel are most important to being successful as an independent artist?*

**Laviolette:** This topic could be a whole book! I think one of the things that musicians seem to have the hardest time with is staying organized and on task. When you are working for yourself, there are limitless opportunities to become distracted and led astray from your path. I think it's very important to set goals and be constantly checking in with those goals. There are many tools to help with that, and people need to find the ones that work best for them. I actually created a software program ([www.monkey-calendar.com](http://www.monkey-calendar.com)) because I couldn't find a tool that worked for me.

Also—we've touched on it once, but it is worth repeating—take care of your body. It is the thing that lets you do what you love. I don't exercise because I like to—though it makes me feel great. I exercise specifically because I have seen that I can play better and longer when I'm in shape. As a bandleader, these are things that I look for in prospective band members.

Above all, we need to remember that all the people we are working with in this industry chose to be in this business because they love music. It's hard because our egos get in the way, but it's important to be nice and know that we are all working to create better friendships and relationships over time. It's not about getting a gig next month; it's about building lasting relationships with others in this industry.

**Lane:** *What advice do you have for young musicians?*

**Laviolette:** If you know in your heart what you love to do, then DO IT. That is where you will find your strength to be the best in the world at what you do. Do not try to be other people; they will always be better at being themselves than you will be. Be yourself and no one can do it better.

**John Lane** is an artist whose creative work and collaborations extend through percussion to poetry/spoken-word, and theater. As a performer, he has appeared on stages throughout the Americas, Australia, and Japan. John is the Director of Percussion Studies at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Tex. John has several ongoing collaborations with the chamber group Pulsus, writer Ann McCutchan, poet Todd Boss, and percussionist Allen Otte, and he has composed music for choreographer/dancer Hilary Bryan and granite sculptor Jesús Moroles. He received a Doctor of Musical Arts degree in Percussion Performance from the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and holds degrees from the University of North Texas and Stephen F. Austin State University. PN



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