

## **Mighty Popo (Rwanda/Canada)**

You could say that the **Mighty Popo** is a Rwandan/Burundian refugee/survivor whose music is steeped in African tradition, but you'd hardly be getting at the whole story of one of Canada's greatest rising stars. You'd hardly be able to account for his effortless musicality as a **member of the 2004 Juno Award winning African Guitar Summit**, the kudos received for his genre-busting solo work, his **highlight performance at the Canadian edition of Bob Geldof's international Live 8 concerts** (one of the few chosen for EMI's Live 8 DVD) or his brilliant return to New Orleans for CBC Radio's Maple Leaf Mojo Meets New Orleans Gumbo benefit concert broadcast live across Canada.

En route to understanding Popo's musical and career achievements, one would do well to consider how Africa and Africans are often subjected to certain distortions in the public consciousness.

Recent history has made Rwanda and Burundi a kind of shorthand for violence, chaos and genocide. One might think that all music, dance, laughter, civility and joie de vivre in those countries had disappeared into a vortex of despair. Popo – a Rwandan born in a Burundian refugee community – is evidence to the contrary. He is a person of enormous charm, wit, resilience and, yes, joie de vivre.

The image of a hardscrabble existence eked out in isolation, despair and dislocation doesn't take into account the richness of lives lived before and even during exile, the communities formed within it and the strength of families that sustain themselves through it. In spite of hardship, Popo and his family made connections and friendships, found jobs, expressed ideas, pursued dreams, surrounded themselves with music and managed to live and be engaged in a larger world.

There is a strain of romanticism that glorifies »traditional« African music, defining it in restrictive terms, arguing for its »purity« in a curatorial manner and citing a musician's connection to tradition as a means of authentication and validation. In reality, African tradition – like any tradition – is a floating signifier, a tough concept to nail down, part of a continuum that constantly shape-shifts in subtle ways that stretch over many lifetimes and across many borders. But as much as Popo has inherited a love of the traditional music of Rwanda and Burundi, he also has a lifelong connection with rock and roll, blues, jazz, R&B, Reggae and folk traditions. His music reflects his immersion in a world culture which he has navigated with grace, sensitivity and an enormous sense of exploration and fun. It is enriched by many traditions. It is authentically his. It is validated by its own excellence.

Yes, the Mighty Popo is a Rwandan/Burundian refugee/survivor whose music is steeped in African tradition. He is also one terrific musician and someone to watch – in Canada and around the world.

**About *Gakondo*** (Canada/US Release Oct. 30th, 2010)

*Juno Award Nominee 2011 - Best World Music Album*

***Gakondo* means origins or tradition, and on this album, Popo has taken a journey to his Rwandan roots.** Three ancient musical expressions intertwine to create the sound of the country of a thousand hills. Long ago, *Intwatwa* songs of the Batwa people mixed with powerful rhythmic Bahutu soundscapes and Batutsi pastoral melodies to form one dynamic musical tradition.

Popo spent many months researching the origins and the intersection of these sounds, working with traditional musicians and learning about the rich poetry of the Royal Court or »Ibwami« and instruments like the *Inanga*, with its shallow bowl carved out of wood and a single gut string woven back and forth across it, creating nine or more strings.

In exploring this musical heritage, Popo turned over all kinds of aesthetic stones and found gems that he suspected were there all along. This album is a true tribute to ancient songs and poems that tell the story of an entire civilization.

On the title track »*Gakondo*,« Popo weaves Rwandan poetry, sounds and sensibilities into a song about his lineage – from his father and mother all the way up to the first ancestors, and back down to his wife and children. This is an »amateka y'imiryango,« or family history, revealing Popo's blood ties to the Abiru, the high priests of ancient Rwanda, and keepers of the dynastic codes.

On »*Kamananga*,« »*Impunga*,« »*Impangaza*,« »*Uw'ibuhoro*« and »*Nibarize*,« Popo emulates *Inanga* melodies on his guitar. »*Nibarize*« is sung in the ancient, now defunct Rwandan whispering style. Popo asks the custodians of Rwandan history to reveal the secrets of their art to him. »Why does the sound of the powerful *Inanga* still yield to the whisper of the artist?« he asks.

With »*Urugendo*,« »*Ngire Nte*,« »*Rwatsinda*« and »*Rwampunga*,« Popo revisits traditional songs of praise for the achievements of kings along with the timeless themes of love and loss.

**This is Mighty Popo's first acoustic album and also his first written solely in Kinyarwanda, Rwanda's only indigenous language.**

The solo numbers were recorded live in the studio with one microphone picking up both the vocal and the guitar. The rest of the album was recorded live in the studio with minimal overdubs on percussion; the bells were recorded straight from the footsteps of the dancer.