



Where Cultures Meet : An Evening with Bramaya in Austin

“Music is Happiness”

Abou shared this simple truth with me right before performing. It lingered as I listened, taking in the sight of a crowd whose smiles were as vivid as the music itself. This is the magic of Bramaya.

Bramaya—founded and led by Master Percussionist, Aboubacar Sylla—brings the sound of Guinea to the music capital of Texas, uniting cultures through the universal language of sound. The Dance and Drum Ensemble merges the rich traditions of West Africa with contemporary energy, sharing its music,

dance, and culture with audiences across the United States and around the world. The group, named after Abou's father's village in Guinea, began as a weekly Sunday meeting and evolved into a dynamic ensemble, performing at festivals, cultural events, and private functions.

The group delivered an immersive performance at Batch Craft Beer & Kolaches on April 22. Chairs were gathered around a stage which contained an assortment of traditional West African instruments—balafon, djembe, krin, and doundouns. Initially, the space felt practical and unassuming—just instruments resting on a platform, quietly poised to do what they always do: make music. And yes—the instruments certainly fulfilled their utilitarian role, producing beautiful melodies. But as the night unfolded, it became clear that their purpose went beyond mere sound creation.

Consider the krin—for example—the instrument is an African log drum originally from the Guinea Forest region, sound is produced as playing sticks strike the log, causing it to vibrate. Abou played two distinct rhythms on the instrument: one fast and excited, the other slow and somber. He explained that in West African villages, instrument calls—that is, melodies alone, without the aid of spoken words—are used as a means of communicating pieces of information to other villagers and, in some cases, to neighboring villages as well. The two songs exemplified this non-verbal communication—one celebrated the birth of new life, the other mourning death.

Surely, the idea that music communicates deeper meanings isn't unfamiliar to us in the West. Yet, the way it functions in West African cultures is far more intricate, embedded within the fabric of community life. The distinction between our forms of musical expression and theirs lies not only in the sounds but in the intention and connection that music facilitates. In our Western, individualistic society, we tend to experience music in a highly personal way. A slow, somber melody, for instance, speaks to our own personal experiences with sadness, causing us to internalize the rhythm as a reflection of our emotions. However, in West African collectivist traditions, music serves not only as an expression of personal emotion but as a communal message, articulating the particular reasons behind the sadness rather than just conveying a generalized feeling. In this sense, melodies in our society primarily serve to entertain, whereas in West Africa, they play a vital

role in the community—facilitating the sharing of knowledge and creating a deeper connection between music and culture. To that effect, instruments—such as the krin—are elevated beyond mere tools for creating pleasing melodies; they become essential to the functioning of the community.

Watching the performance, it became unmistakably clear that West African music is centered on its role in reinforcing community ties. If there were any doubt about this notion, Abou's description of Bramaya as a family made it unmistakably clear: the group is not just a band, but a community in itself—bound by the common goal of bringing people together through music. Based on the crowd's lively response—from toe-tapping to full-body swaying—it's safe to say that they more than met the mark. With every beat, traditional West African rhythms created an atmosphere where human connection felt palpable. It was as though the music itself was a conversation, spoken in a language we all understood despite our differences. The crowd became more than just an audience; they were participants in the music. One by one, we stood, tracing the dancers' steps—not perfectly, but joyfully. In that moment, it didn't matter who you were, who you knew, or whether you could dance. What mattered was the shared rhythm.

After the music quieted down and the members of the ensemble left the stage, people expressed their gratitude and admiration—not just with applause, but with hugs, conversations and lingering smiles that suggested something meaningful had taken place. There was a shared sense of warmth in the room, as if the performance had dissolved the usual boundaries between performer and audience, stranger and friend. Inspired by this air of connection and openness, I approached Imani Aanu—a co-founder of RE-CLAIM! (Revolving Evolution of Culture Loving African Americans In Motion) and member of Bramaya—and asked how she would describe Bramaya's mission. She described Bramaya as a living bridge between Austin and Africa, one built from the rhythms of drums, the movements of dancers, and the echoes of ancestral memory.

After watching Bramaya perform, the truth of that mission revealed itself with undeniable clarity. This was more than a performance—it was a dialogue across generations and geographies, a celebration of cultural resilience. Each rhythm with a purpose, each dance step with a lineage. In a world that often

feels fragmented, the rhythms of West Africa reminded us that connection doesn't always need words—sometimes, a drumbeat is enough.