

News



Instrument maker Jamie Linwood who has designed a brand new xylophone for the Sudanese group

RANGO TO GO

The Cairo-based group Rango have commissioned a new, mystic, trance-inducing instrument – made in the English countryside

WORDS & PHOTOS SIMON BROUGHTON

The Egyptian Sudanese trance masters Rango (see #68) were one of our favourite groups last year. Anyone who saw them at WOMAD, or other live dates last summer, will know why. At the heart of the music is Hassan Bergamon on the eponymous *rango* – a traditional Sudanese xylophone brought into Egypt in the 19th century with immigrant workers and traditionally used for *zar* or healing ceremonies. The Rango band own two instruments – one in Cairo and the other now in the UK – and they are both antiques, possibly 190 years old. But after their spectacular show at WOMAD Abu Dhabi in April, one of their instruments, with its suspicious-looking gourd resonators dangling beneath the keys, was quarantined.

This, along with the fragility of the instruments, made Rango's manager Michael Whitewood think about getting a more travel-friendly rango made. "You can replace a *simsimiyya* or *tanbura*, but what can you do when the star of your show is stuck at an airport for a week?" says Whitewood. "We are heading out to Australia and New Zealand on tour, so I wanted something that could easily fit into a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* style packing case. These instruments are treasures, and it would be terrible if one of these surviving rangos got damaged."

So I find myself in the beautiful Cotswold house of Jamie Linwood – the man who is making the new rango. Linwood makes outdoor musical instruments for schools and children's

playgrounds and I'm astonished that here in the heart of rural England is someone with the practical skills, the acoustical science and the ethnomusicological knowledge to take on this challenging task.

Linwood used to play drums in a punk band and then got into African drumming. But what really interested him was African xylophones and he went to an evening class in woodwork



Top to bottom: the original Sudanese rango with its trademark, phallic-shaped gourds; tuning a key to exactly match the original note; the new rango, to be known as the 'rongo'

and an instrument making course at the London College of Furniture.

When you speak to the Rango musicians about their instruments and the Sudanese tradition, they are pretty vague on detail. All they know is that the rango comes from somewhere in southern Sudan. Linwood went out to investigate the *manza* – the traditional xylophone of the Azande people who had an important African empire from the 16th century until it was carved up by the colonial powers and incorporated into Congo (Belgium), Central African Republic (France) and Sudan (Britain).

The unique feature of the ten-key *manza* xylophone is its pentatonic scale with pairs of notes tuned an octave apart. It's played by two sticks in each hand playing the octaves simultaneously, giving a deep, trancey, rhythmic sound. In the *Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* the 'rongo' of Sudan is mentioned in the family of *manza* instruments. "They have pretty much disappeared now," explains Linwood, "because amongst the Azande they were used by court musicians for chiefs and kings to celebrate their power and for praise singing. That was discouraged by the colonial powers because it was a threat. But the instrument is still used further west amongst the Banda and Linda people where it is used for weddings and parties."

Linwood has carved the keys of the new rango out of lovely rose-coloured padauk wood. "It's the traditional wood used in this region for xylophones because it has such a glorious sound." With a 1970s stroboscopic tuner he's exactly matching the tuning of the original notes. When Hassan Bergamon was over on tour, Linwood lent him one of his other xylophones to try out, which met with approval. The new instrument has bamboo resonators because they are stronger and more suitable for touring and because the phallic Sudanese gourds are now virtually impossible to find.

It wasn't finished when I saw it, but I think the new rango, as it will be called, will be sonically streets ahead of the original. "We are planning an inauguration ceremony when the rango arrives here," says Zakaria Ibrahim from Cairo. "There are some special pieces which Hassan Bergamon knows for transferring the spirits from the old rango to the new one. We'll invite the old *zar* masters and there'll be a chicken sacrifice for the Sudani spirits as well as rice sweets for the Muslim spirits and whisky for the Christian spirits." That would be something to witness. ●

DATES Rango will be playing at WOMADelaide and WOMAD NZ in March