



## Njacko Backo

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**Njacko Backo** creates joyful African-influenced “world music” that instantly evokes images of sun-drenched music festivals, ecstatically-dancing crowds and the spirit of peace, love and social harmony. A master of the kalimba (thumb piano) of his native Cameroon, Njacko seamlessly blends the rhythms, melodies and vocal styles of his homeland with the most euphoric and blissful sounds from the world over.

From his early days as a marginalized youth in the village of Bazou, Njacko has risen above circumstance to become a living testament to the transformative power of music; an award-winning musician, a beloved musical educator; an evangelist for the idea that wealth is to be found in community, not in worldly possessions; and a generous philanthropist who, along with his wife Valery Woloshyn and their friends, has raised money to rebuild École St. Albert Le Grand in Bazou, Cameroon.

Born into a musical family in a village as rural and as untouched by modern technology as the one in the film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, Njacko, like all children there, was learning to build and play instruments by the age of three – by watching the adults do it. He and some friends had a group that performed around nearby villages. But when Njacko was just seven, his parents “divorced,” a scandalous act by the regional moral standards of the time. He was shunned by other children and neglected by his parents. He went to live with his grandmother, who encouraged his love of music introducing him to village elders who taught him to play the hand drum (toumkak), kalimba (thumb piano), and African harp (zaa koua).

Possessed with a passionate curiosity about the world beyond his village, Njacko left Cameroon at age 17 and began life as an itinerant musician in West Africa, immersing himself in the vibrant live music scene in the restaurants and clubs of Nigeria, Mali, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Ivory Coast and soaking up the influences of the entire region.

At 21, he travelled to Europe, France, Germany and The Netherlands, where he tapped into the small network of African musicians. In the 80s and 90s, he distinguished himself in that drum-centric milieu by focusing on what is now his signature instrument: the kalimba. He would go on to perform with bands such as Africa Salimata (of The National Ballet of Guinea), Ernest Cissé, Sosoba, and Vinjama, and choreographer for Mioso Mika of Surinam.

After nine years in France, Germany and the Netherlands – where he recorded his first two independent albums – Njacko immigrated to Canada, where he has carved out a multi-faceted career as a band-leader, dancer, story-teller, author, and educator.

In Canada, Njacko established his boundary-smashing global music ensemble, Kalimba Kalimba, in Montréal and moved it to Toronto in 1999. His band won the 1999 *Fiati Memorial Award* for Best Traditional Performance from the Toronto-based organization Music Africa. Njacko also won first prize in the 17th Annual *Billboard World Song Contest* for his song *Afrique Réveille Toi*, and his song *Mama Oh* received honourable mentions from both the 2006 *International Songwriting Competition* (world music category) and the 15th Annual *Billboard World Song Contest*. Njacko’s music integrates many special elements. The jubilant steel pan of calypso, the droning Sitar of South Asian ragas, and the soaring and contemplative Uilleann pipes of Irish music

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all make appearances on his album, *Ici bas rien n'est impossible (Here below, nothing is impossible)* which was nominated for a 2013 *Canadian Folk Music Award (World Group of the Year)*. Meditative flute, blistering saxophone, shimmering Wurlitzer, and rip-roaring fiddle parts are also woven into the album. The result is a veritable world party – a high-energy musical celebration of the interconnectedness of cultures.

Njacko created his new band, Njacko Backo and Kalimbas at Work, in 2014. As is always the case with Njacko, this group's performance style brings the audience to its feet. The musicians' positive and passionate performances inspire their audiences to feel joy and take pride in Canada's tremendous diversity. In a society too often divided, music like theirs reminds us of what we share, and unites us as a community. They effortlessly blur the line between audience and performers by warmly encouraging audience members to respond to the music through movement and voice. Audience members share a unique experience, as they are brought together in an uplifting celebration of music, unity, and life. Even the most reserved of audiences would find the charisma and talents of the performers hard to resist. Audience engagement and involvement becomes part of the event in a way that will leave even the most disparate group of attendees feeling unified, enlivened, and inspired by their engagement with the music.

Njacko has released twelve albums and performed at the Montreal Jazz Festival, the Louisiana Folk Festival (Lafayette, LA) and the Houston International Jazz Festival (Houston, TX), among countless other events. He has also composed music for films including *To Walk with Lions*, *Born Free*, and *Spirit in the Tree*.

As an educator, Njacko has released three instructional African drumming CDs and an instructional DVD. He has given guest lectures at York University, the University of Guelph and the University of Waterloo. He has taught music to young people through Club 2/3, the Haliburton School of the Arts, and the Royal Conservatory of Music, Mariposa in the Schools, and continues to teach through Inner City Angels. He's even written a children's book, *Baki and the Magic Egg*, and is working on a follow up entitled *The Lion Who Wanted to be Vegetarian!*

In addition, Njacko is a tireless performer of charity fundraising concerts, whose benefactors include he likes of Amnesty International, Foster Parents Plan, The Stephen Lewis Foundation, and The David Suzuki Foundation as well as countless grassroots community organizations.

When Njacko first left that tiny village in the 1970s, he believed the world was small enough that he would be able to swim to Europe from Senegal. Today, though he still has to travel by plane to Europe, his can take credit, at least figuratively, for bringing the countries of the world a lot closer together. His infectious joyful music and open-hearted performances will leave audience-members of all backgrounds dancing in a spirit of togetherness.

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