

# Horns for Rhinos

by Amy Sanchez

As I often tell my horn students, you never know where one gig will lead. The gig I am about to share with you started with jazz in Africa, so you can trust that it's not a common tale.

In March of 2018, I had the incredible opportunity to travel to South Africa to perform at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival. Miguel Atwood-Ferguson's Suite for Ma Dukes incorporated one horn in the jazz orchestration of legendary hip-hop producer J Dilla's music. My first visit to the African continent, this time in Cape Town, and my solo excursion afterwards ignited a spark in me.

I always wanted to go on an African safari "someday," so being a travel "opportunist," after the jazz gig I ventured out to a beautiful yet rustic safari lodge in Greater Kruger National Park. As a solo woman traveler, truth be



Amy at the Cape Town Jazz Fest, Sept. 2018



Safari guide Willem Pietersen trying a horn

told, I didn't quite know what I was getting myself into or who I would meet. Since I had just come from the jazz festival in Cape Town, Willem Pietersen, my guide for the safari, was understandably curious about my varied experiences in music. In between breathtaking sightings of majestic giraffes, adorable baby elephants, and an admittedly nerve-wracking encounter with a

beautiful leopard (close enough to touch!), we discussed the different paths musicians often take to build a sustainable career. He was a wealth of knowledge about every plant, tree, insect, bird, and animal we came across. I assumed guiding was his main career goal, as he was highly educated and invested in our unpredictable wild surroundings, yet I learned that he too must diversify to be able to turn his passion into a profession. In music, diversification means gigging, teaching, and auditioning while



working multiple other jobs. For Willem, constructing a career in conservation means juggling several major projects while also working as a full time guide.

As we traveled along the busy landscape, I felt my



Nkombe Africa safari

connection to the awe-inspiring animals we were observing grow. With a now personal interest and perspective, I



inevitably asked more questions about issues of conservation. I learned that Willem and his brother Joe had a few other irons in the fire besides guiding, namely Nkombe Rhino, a non-profit they launched to protect rhinos from poaching.<sup>1</sup> During my visit, they were also producing and hosting a 13-episode television documentary highlighting conservation efforts throughout South Africa. The series, released last spring, is called *Veldhelde* ("Field Heroes" in Afrikaans). Needless to say, not your average side-jobs! After making such interesting new connections in Africa, I stayed in touch after I returned home and had no idea where this association would lead.

In early summer 2018, Willem put me in touch with his brother Joe, a well-known professional rugby player in South Africa. As luck would have it, Joe had recently accepted a contract with the San Diego Legion, a Major League Rugby team – in 2018 rugby became a professional sport in the US! He had signed on as captain of the team for their 2019 season. After learning more about what Joe's nonprofit is doing to protect rhinos, and the harsh realities of poaching in South Africa,<sup>2</sup> I decided I wanted to get involved. I immediately began to raise money for Nkombe's upcoming rhino dehorning project<sup>3</sup> and subsequently planned my next trip to Africa.

Through my fundraiser, I was able to raise almost \$3000 for Nkombe's dehorning project. The many friends who took an interest in this procedure inspired me, and when people asked questions, I had to find answers. As I'm sure many other horn players and musicians have found, one of the best ways to learn is to teach! The more I learned about the unwavering commitment and myriad efforts of the network of conservationists in Africa, the more I wanted to return to experience it in person. In addition to their ongoing dehorning project and sponsoring an Anti-Poaching Unit (APU),<sup>4</sup> Nkombe Rhino is invested in fostering conservation through tourism. Guests of Nkombe Africa are treated to customized safaris with eco-conscious, conservation-minded companies and guides, in addition to unique private conservation experiences for the trip of a lifetime.



Nkombe Anti-Poaching Unit Base Camp

Inspired by this deeper connection, I booked my second trip to Africa within six months through Nkombe Africa ([www.nkomberhino.org/travel](http://www.nkomberhino.org/travel)). I was hooked! Joe planned an incredible itinerary that surpassed our expectations and embodied the spirit of traveling with purpose. Our group for this week-long South African adventure in September 2018 included LA-based horn players Emily Reppun and Victor Pesavento (Vic works primarily as a music copyist/orchestrator for JoAnn Kane Music), and San Francisco-based horn player Alicia Mastromonaco. With a silly yet ironically fitting title, "The Horns for Rhinos Safari" was born.



## Horns for Rhinos Safari with Nkombe Africa

For the first three days of our journey, we camped in the bush and shared the immersive experience of a walking safari. We stayed in comfortable canvas tents, ate delicious traditional meals cooked over the fire, and heard lions roaring near our camp throughout the night. The ground-rumbling sound was both chilling and exhilarating, as it interrupted the otherwise steady nighttime hum of the African bush, with only distant calls of unfamiliar animals. During the day, we covered a lot of ground on foot, tracking lions, elephants, and many other animals with our armed guide. It was a truly thrilling experience to track a lion's prints through the bush for hours and then finally catch a glimpse of the big cat as it ran away when we were spotted. In addition to the hiking, we took nightly game drives, as wild animals are more accustomed to the safari vehicles than humans on foot. This allows both safe viewing at night and more animal sightings over a wider area. It was such an incredible feeling to "live in the bush"—on ground level – one-to-one with these wild animals. Elephants greeted us at our final camp on the banks of a picturesque river while hippos and crocodiles occupied a waterhole only a short distance away. The nightly symphony of insects, frogs, and calling animals was broken at dawn with a beautiful chorus of African birds, seemingly singing to wake the sun.



*Walking safari with "Africa on Foot Safaris"*

We awoke to spend a day at the Nkombe Rhino Base Camp where we were able to meet the head of Nkombe's Anti-Poaching Unit (APU), Tim Parker. Tim has been in conservation for 30 years and gave us a personal tour of the camp, including the simple accommodations and training facilities for their APU rangers. We talked at length about their comprehensive efforts in anti-poaching, including education and legislative initiatives, and got to spend time with a wild rhino and orphaned calf. These were not rhinos accustomed to close human contact and feeding at a sanctuary, but rather, wild rhinos on the vast reserve that Nkombe operates on and protects. To see the passion of Tim and the others at Nkombe was truly inspiring; the tears in this tough, rugged man's eyes as he explained the realities of their fight against poaching made quite an impression. Being part of an APU is not easy work, but the team members at Nkombe Rhino are dedicated tirelessly to it – not just for the future of rhinos but for the balance of the ecosystem as a whole. If I had to choose one poignant reflection from our trip, it would be the incredible interconnection and careful balance that exists among the plants, animals, climate, and people in the ecosystem, and therefore the entire world. In



*Nkombe APU Base Camp group with rhinos*

the wild, this recognition is clear and direct; remove one element, and the balance is disrupted

For the last three days of our visit, we stayed in a more traditional lodge with a driving safari. All meals were cooked over the fire or bbq (\*proudly called a 'braai' in South Africa) by our Nkombe friends and guides. It was truly a family bonding experience as the African staff at the lodge invited us to sing and (attempt to) dance with them around the fire, which led to lots of laughter. Joe and the rest of Nkombe were excited to have four musicians as guests and had asked us to bring our instruments. In honor of our new friends, Vic arranged a horn quartet of the strikingly beautiful South African National Anthem, *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*, which seemed to bring instant goosebumps, tears of pride, and boisterous singing whenever we began to play it. Instead of traveling with four horns on this short trip to Africa, we brought one horn and multi-tracked each of our parts separately. Well versed in film-work and photography, Nkombe took on the extra adventure of filming a short music video of us while on game drive in the bush. Our drive on the last night proved to create the perfect climax for our trip.

A beloved tradition on safari, as the sun begins to set, the game drive takes a brief intermission from animal viewing at a picturesque spot to enjoy a cocktail and snack, watching the dusty red-orange African skies transition to the magical blue-grey of dusk. By the time everyone has enjoyed the camaraderie of this "sundowner" stop, night sounds and stars engulf you, and the rest of the game drive continues in the dark – in heightened



*Sundowner snacks with horn on game drive*

anticipation and awareness. On the final night, our guide Martin Meyer aptly chose Sunset Dam as the backdrop for the sundowner. A hippo, parked obstinately in the center of the pond, kept a curious eye on us the whole time. We brought the horn with us on this last drive so each of us could film short clips for the music video. Alicia was the last to play. While she played, as if on cue, three rhinos (including a baby!) came to drink at the water's edge on the other side of the pond. It was truly an awe-inspiring moment. We had assumed any animals nearby would have long been scared off by the foreign sound of the horn – as well as our laughter signifying the good times (and gin and tonics) being had! Still, these three rhinos joined us across the water, enjoying their own sundowner drink and observing our odd musical gathering. They can be seen only briefly on the video as Alicia plays, as light was getting scarce at the time. Africa brought all of us closer together that night, and for our Horns for Rhinos team, it even inspired an engagement between Vic and Emily!

We were there filming with the three partners of Nkombe Rhino, to record music to honor both their conservation efforts and pride in South Africa. The additional presence of these endangered animals was both humbling and inspiring. The convergence of music, nature, and the wild rhinos that joined us for our final sundowner was a shared experience we will always treasure. We left Sunset Dam that evening with full hearts. And the music Alicia played that brought the rhinos to the water? Strauss and Brahms – proving rhinos are horn players after all.



## Next Adventure for Horns for Rhinos

My connection with Nkombe Rhino has continued to grow and Joe and his family are in San Diego for the rugby season. In the spring of 2019, our horn quartet will expand to a brass ensemble to play the National Anthem for a San Diego Legion match. We will perform at half-time as well, to raise awareness about rhino poaching and benefit the non-profit organization of their team captain.

*Horn players with Joe for San Diego Legion Major League Rugby*



Our Horns for Rhinos movement will surely continue to evolve and expand. I received a lot of email support from brass players and composers who want to take part in benefit concerts to help raise money and awareness for Nkombe in Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, Washington DC, and more. If you would like to be involved in any way (writing/arranging music, performing, planning a concert, offering a venue, or just donating), please contact me at [nkombehorns@gmail.com](mailto:nkombehorns@gmail.com). In addition, if you're interested in taking a conservation-minded safari through Nkombe Africa in the future, please let me help you become personally connected!

Here are video links to the projects: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uzd9xRFoTQI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uzd9xRFoTQI) (Horns for Rhinos – Nkosi Sikelel 'iAfrika); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoigAjbDbZg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoigAjbDbZg) (Nkombe Rhino Dehorning Project)

## Women for Wildlife

Perhaps the best part of this wild story is that it is only the beginning. Upon my return from Africa, I discovered that I have a cousin (whom I had never met) who is the founder of the non-profit Women for Wildlife. She recently traveled through four countries in southern Africa on a 50-day all-female expedition titled "Rise of the Matriarch." We have now teamed up for possible future collaboration, as apparently wildlife conservation runs in the family!

Who knows where this may all lead – it's clear that one gig has led to a new passion for this horn player!

*Women for Wildlife's Jennifer Palmer with Amy*



*Horn and poached rhino skulls*

*Horns for Rhinos with Nkombe Rhino team: Martin Meyer, Tim Parker, Joe Pietersen. Photo by Gemma Thomas*



*APU base camp – a selfie with rhinos*



*Amy Sanchez maintains a diverse career in Los Angeles as a freelance musician and Lecturer of Horn at UCLA, a position she acquired in 2014. In addition to frequent work with the Pacific Symphony and performances with the San Francisco Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, and San Diego Symphony, Amy has performed with most of the major regional orchestras throughout California. She is Principal Horn with the International Chamber Orchestra of Puerto Rico and Second with the Fresno Philharmonic. An active studio musician, Amy can be heard on prominent films such as Incredibles 2, Coco, Star Wars-Rogue One, Moana, Star Trek Beyond, and Jurassic World, and has recorded on a diverse range of albums with Dave Matthews Band, Kendrick Lamar, Kamasi Washington, and Florence and the Machine. She performed at the Coachella Music Festival with Hans Zimmer (2017) and Kamasi Washington (2018), and at the 2018 Cape Town Jazz Festival in South Africa.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> If you're not familiar with the dire situation of rhino poaching, it's interesting to learn a few facts. The horn of a rhinoceros is made of keratin (the same found in our nails and hair), scientifically proven to have no medicinal value. Rhino horn is sold on the black market in China, Vietnam, and other East Asian countries. Its purported uses are everything from curing cancer to hangovers, from being an aphrodisiac to healing snakebites. Although it has long been an ingredient in traditional Chinese medicine, China has since banned its use, and traditional medicine now offers an alternative. Rhino horn has become an increasingly valuable commodity in Vietnam – worth more than gold or cocaine, it is known as a status symbol of wealth.

<sup>2</sup> Five species of rhino currently exist, yet all are endangered. 80% of the White Rhino population lives in South Africa, where Nkombe Rhino is based. Successful anti-poaching efforts have somewhat slowed the rate of poaching from its peak in 2014, but even at the current rate, rhinos may be extinct by 2025. Approximately three rhinos are killed for their horns every day. The gravity of this situation hits home when considering the fact that early, prehistoric ancestors of our rhinos were perissodactyls, roaming the planet over 50 million years ago during the Eocene period- and their rhino descendants will likely be gone in our lifetimes.

<sup>3</sup> Dehorning is a process all conservationists hate to have to do, but has proven to be a successful poaching deterrent. In order to protect the rhino from poaching, a dehorning team tranquilizes it from a helicopter, and under a veterinarian's care, the rhino is monitored and given oxygen. The horn is then trimmed as short as is safely possible, yet still allows re-growth. The process is just like trimming your fingernails and scientists believe it to be relatively harmless. The horn grows back within about two years, then the dehorning needs to happen again. Dehorning an entire population of rhinos in an area puts them on an even playing field, as they mostly use their horns in battles for dominance. The risk of these dehorned animals being poached is greatly reduced, yet it is not foolproof. Sadly, poachers will still kill a rhino even for the small amount of horn remaining.

<sup>4</sup> The best way forward in the war against poaching is a subject of much debate, but one critical element is the establishment of Anti-Poaching Units (APU). These highly trained rangers patrol game reserves on foot through the night. They often use a combination of traditional bush skills, combat training, and modern intelligence technologies to track down poachers and gather strict evidence to legally convict them. Nkombe Rhino trains and sponsors a very successful APU of their own.

*Amy at Sunset Dam*

