



PLAYING FOR CHANGE

Overview

“The act of playing music with people of different cultures, religions, economics and politics is a powerful statement. It shows that we can find ways of working together and sharing our experiences with one another in a positive way. Music has the power to break down the walls between cultures, to raise the level of human understanding.”

~ Mark Johnson, founder, Playing for Change

Bill Moyers called it a remarkable example of “the simple yet transformative power of music... to touch something in each of us.” Variety acknowledged it as “a great showcase for just what incredible, thoroughly accessible popular music is being made worldwide.” **Playing for Change** (www.PlayingForChange.com) is an extraordinary effort to unite musicians and vocalists from diverse parts of the globe, while at the same time seeking to immerse audiences in a multimedia movement to inspire, connect and bring peace to the world through music.

Utilizing innovative mobile audio/video techniques, Playing for Change (PFC) records musicians outdoors in cities and townships worldwide. They’ve travelled from post-Katrina New Orleans to post-apartheid South Africa, from the remote beauty of the Himalayas to the religious diversity of Jerusalem. Their talents are captured in myriad environments: under the sun and beneath the streetlights... in public parks, plazas and promenades... in doorways, on cobblestone streets, amid hilly pueblos. Their performances are subsequently combined in allowing them to collaborate – albeit separated by hundreds, or even thousands, of miles.

BEGINNINGS

Playing for Change began a decade ago, the brainchild of Grammy-winning music producer and engineer Mark Johnson. “I was in a subway in New York on my way to work, and I heard these two monks playing music,” he recalls. “They were painted head to toe, all white, wearing robes. One was playing a nylon guitar, and the other was singing in a language I didn’t understand. There were about 200 people who stopped to watch, didn’t even get on the train. Some had tears in their eyes. And it occurred to me that here is a group of people that would normally run by each other, but instead they’re coming together. And it’s the music that brought them together.”

For ten years Johnson and his team traveled the globe, with a single-minded passion to record little-known musicians for what would become Playing for Change – its name evoking the coins

thrown to street musicians as well as the transformation their music inspires. They went to New Orleans shortly after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. “The city felt sad and desolate, yet the music never stopped,” says Johnson. “The street musicians and music in the clubs kept the city alive and gave it a sense of hope.” When they visited South Africa and witnessed its growing pains in the aftermath of apartheid, “we saw that people marching down streets singing in groups of thousands did more to effect positive change than any weapons ever could.”

FILMED PROJECTS

Initially focusing on Los Angeles, New Orleans and New York, in 2004 PFC made its first documentary, *Playing for Change: A Cinematic Discovery of Street Musicians*. More recently came the April 2008 premiere of its latest film, *Playing for Change: Peace Through Music*, at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York. In September 2008, the film won the Audience Award at the Woodstock Film Festival. Directed by Johnson and Jonathan Walls (*Automatic*), the documentary features over 100 musicians around the world, combining their distant voices into a powerful group of global songs.

For the film, PFC’s crew roamed across four continents for four years. An elderly guitar player in Santa Monica wails “Stand By Me,” and his performance serves as the guiding track for a multitude of others: New Orleans blues singers, harmonica, washboard and slide guitar players... an orchestral chamber group in Moscow... a pair of rocking guitarists in Venezuela... a ukulele on the streets of Rio de Janeiro... a saxophone in front of a graffiti-sprayed warehouse in Pisa, Italy... a drummer on a tenement balcony in the Congo mixing beats with a conga player in Barcelona, Spain.

There are also moving performances of traditional music: from the freedom fighters of South Africa playing songs that helped topple apartheid, to the Zuni of New Mexico performing ancient drum songs of religious devotion. Along the way, the musicians interviewed again and again present the idea that music is a tool to promote peace.

In addition to audience acclaim on the festival circuit, critical reviews of the film have been universally positive. “Wanting a movie to end so you can run out and buy the soundtrack may not seem like huge endorsement, but in this case, it is,” wrote Variety. “*Playing for Change: Peace Through Music*...is often so exhilarating, its...utopianism doesn’t seem so implausible... Significantly, a lot of the musicians are not seen playing in their own homelands – sometimes by choice, sometimes by the choices of others.”

PFC FOUNDATION

Recording musicians in some of the poorest parts of the world inspired PFC to establish the Playing for Change Foundation, which aims to offer resources – including facilities, technology, musical instruments and education – to musicians and their communities. Set to open in January 2009 is the Foundation’s first project, the Playing for Change Ntonga Music School in South Africa. The Foundation is also working with South African poet Lesego Rampolokenga to build the Mehlo Arts Center in Johannesburg. Among its fundraising efforts benefiting the Foundation, PFC brought together eight of the musicians from *Playing for Change: Peace Through Music* to perform and record at the 2008 Tribeca Film Festival and, just this past November, held another benefit concert in Denver which raised close to \$150,000. Funds from this event were used to complete construction on the Playing for Change Ntonga Music School.

PFC TEAM

Mark Johnson

*Co-Founder & Director/Producer, Playing for Change
Chairman of the Board, Playing for Change Foundation*

Mark Johnson is a Grammy-winning producer/engineer and award-winning film director whose visionary concept a decade ago became the driving force behind Playing for Change. His work was recently spotlighted in a profile on the PBS series “Bill Moyers Journal.”

For the past decade he has worked with some of the most renowned producers in the music, film and television industries, and with such musical artists as Paul Simon, Jackson Browne, Rikki Lee Jones, Los Lobos and Henry Rollins. In 2005, Johnson earned a “Contemporary Blues Album of the Year” Grammy as producer/engineer of the Keb’ Mo album *Keep It Simple*.

Johnson parlayed his musical knowledge and technical skills in perfecting an innovative mobile technique for recording musicians around the world, and combining their performances, giving birth to the dream of Playing for Change. His first documentary film, *Playing for Change: A Cinematic Discovery of Street Musicians*, won honors at several European festivals, and his more recent project, *Playing for Change: Peace Through Music*, has garnered awards and critical praise at the Tribeca Film Festival, Maui Film Festival, San Francisco Black International Film Festival, Jerusalem Film Festival and New England’s Roxbury Film Festival, where it earned “Best Song” for “Stand by Me.”

Whitney Burditt

Executive Director, Playing for Change Foundation

A longtime advocate and participant in the arts, Whitney Burditt holds a Bachelor of Speech in Theater from Northwestern University, where she was a choreographer, dancer and actress. Post-graduate credits include choreography for the off-Broadway musical I Sing and the London production of Romeo and Juliet, which went on to tour war-ravaged Beirut, Lebanon.

Upon returning to the United States, Burditt moved to Los Angeles to pursue a film career and founded One Way Productions, a film production company dedicated to the creation of forward-thinking films that advocate positive social change. Shortly after meeting Mark Johnson, they became partners and set off to discover music on the streets and in the hearts of musicians worldwide. Upon the conclusion of *Playing for Change: Peace Through Music*, the team was inspired to form the Playing for Change Foundation, which aims to aid musicians and their communities featured in the PFC documentaries.

The PFC team also includes Jonathan Walls (Co-Director/Editor), Dave Bacon (Executive Producer), Joe Carnahan (Producer), Raan Williams (Producer), Jeremy Goulder (Producer), Joel Goulder (Producer), Kevin Krupitzer (Cinematographer/Producer), Doug Kenney (Co-Producer/ Consultant), Enzo Buono (Associate Producer), Francois Viguie (Associate Producer) and Ant Rich (Associate Producer).

For biographies and other information, please visit the website: www.PlayingForChange.com.

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PLAYING FOR CHANGE HIGHLIGHTS

- Debuted #10 on Top 200 Billboard Chart 2009
- Over 100 million views on YouTube
- Over 400,000 units sold worldwide
- #1 on World Music Charts 2009
- 300,000+ subscribers to social networks
- AP Top Ten album of the year
- Successful 25 city US tour - Fall 2009, including sold out shows along the West Coast
- Closing Act on World Stage at Glastonbury--Summer 2009
- Opened Twilight Series 2009 at Santa Monica Pier to SOLD OUT++ crowd
- Performances on Tonight Show with Jay Leno and Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien
- Performed on Bonnie Hunt show
- Key Press - ABC World News Tonight, Today Show, Bill Moyers, Morning Edition - NPR, Rolling Stone, CNN, LA Times
- Documentary selected as part of the national PBS pledge drive in 2009 and resulted in one of the most successful campaigns in PBS' history
- Live CD/DVD highlighting the PFC Band journey - meeting each other for the first time, the 5 week bus tour throughout North America and culminating in a stadium concert before 6,500 people in Madrid, Spain due out **June 15, 2010**

CALGARY HERALD

Sounds of Change to be heard in Calgary

Global musical act makes a difference by embracing the power of song

By: Stephen Hunt

10/12/2010

Sometimes -- not very often, but sometimes -- it takes a mall to change the world.

At least, it was a mall where the people behind Playing for Change, who perform Wednesday night at McEwan Hall at the University of Calgary, had their aha moment that turned a small, idealistic project into a global movement that's changing things for the better.

The mall in question was Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade, an outdoor mall that's basically Stephen Avenue Walk if it were two blocks from the ocean and in the heart of Hollywood. What separates the Third Street Promenade from most malls is that one of its main attractions has always been the high calibre of buskers and street musicians performing for shoppers, who pay them by throwing some money in a guitar case or purchasing one of their CDs.

One of the finest was the late Roger Ridley, a gravel-throated, 50-something blues singer.

Five years ago, filmmaker Mark Johnson and his crew stumbled across Ridley singing Stand by Me on the Promenade.

In 2004, Johnson created Playing for Change, a project based on the power of music to make the world a better place. It involved travelling to distant locations around the world and filming various musicians, many of them buskers like Ridley, singing the same song.

And the moment Johnson heard Ridley singing Stand by Me, he knew he had his next tune. That, in turn, led to Johnson creating one of the most popular YouTube video clips of all-time: Ridley and various other Playing for Change musicians from around the world singing Stand by Me. The clip has received over 30 million hits.

As word about Playing for Change has spread, they've become something of a global phenomenon. They've been profiled in Rolling Stone, appeared on Conan, Leno and elsewhere. A 2009 CD landed in the Top 10. Some of the musicians who have become involved with the group include Bono, Keb 'Mo, and Grandpa Elliott.

It was also Stand by Me that provided the inspiration that brings the band to Calgary. Yvette Rasmussen, executive director for local homeless agency Inn From the Cold, discovered Playing for Change much the same way a lot of people did: As a YouTube link that landed in her e-mail one day, featuring that memorable performance of Stand by Me.

"I don't think I've ever heard anything in my life that was so inspiring," Rasmussen says. "There was something so very special and soulful about these folks and the music that I felt compelled to get involved."

This fall, Rasmussen believed her organization needed to shift its approach to raising funds to fight homelessness. Rather than rely upon a few large donors, she wanted to inspire the whole Calgary community to help fight family homelessness.

"Every kid that lives in this city is our responsibility," she says. "It's going to take a whole city getting in to end family homelessness to make it happen, so it's not about the one guy with a million dollars, it's about the million people with one dollar, one hour, one song that find something to wrap around that compels them to get involved ending homelessness."

The connection isn't that difficult to make. Nobody knows the streets quite as well as the homeless -- except maybe buskers, or ex-buskers, as it were.

"They're former street musicians, and they get it," Rasmussen says. "They want to make a difference because they've lived it, they've breathed it and they know what it takes to get people to step up and make up a difference. That was what motivated me."

One of those former street musicians is Congolese percussionist Mermans Kenkosenki. Kenkosenki grew up in Kinshasa, Congo, in a musically inclined family. His mom sang in the church choir and he lived in a house filled with music.

After graduating from school, Kenkosenki migrated to South Africa, where he was discovered by Johnson, who recruited him to join Playing for Change.

In a way, the only difference between Kenkosenki, bluesman Ridley and someone like local singer-songwriter Ben Rose, who is basically the busker-in-residence on Stephen Avenue, is which street they happen to be standing on while they sing.

"We started Playing for Change," Kenkosenki says, "for everybody who comes to the restaurant and gets out in the street and gives you some change from what they spent in the restaurant or whatever. That's what we were living for (on).

"This is playing really for change. And when I say playing for change, I mean changing the world, making the world a better place."

One of those ways is through the Playing for Change Foundation, which has set about building music schools around the world. The foundation has already built schools in a South African township, in Ghana, Mali and Nepal. (\$1 from each ticket purchased on this tour goes to the foundation).

Each school provides musical training to children ranging in age from five to 17 -- including Kenkosenki's nine-year-old son, who is named after reggae legend Peter Tosh.

"That's the reincarnation, because Peter Tosh is kind of my hero," Kenkosenki says.

Of course, there are a few quirks when your band features members from the Congo, Senegal, United States, Holland, Italy, France, South Africa, Ghana, Israel, Puerto Rico and India.

How do musicians from so many different cultural backgrounds manage to communicate with one another?

When asked, Kenkosenki smiles over the phone. At least, it sounds like a smile.

"If we cannot speak English," he says, "then we speak music."

The Salt Lake Tribune

Playing For Change Saturday in Park City

By: David Burger
10/7/2010

On Saturday, the Park City Performing Arts Foundation kicks off its 2010-11 season with a group of street musicians who have played for change.

But this time they are a band, Playing for Change. They're hoping to bring people together, one venue at a time.

The 10-piece band of street musicians — hailing from seven countries — was organized by Grammy-winning music producer and engineer Mark Johnson.

In November 2008, Johnson posted a short YouTube video of street musicians from all over the world performing the classic 1961 King-Leiber-Stoller ballad "Stand by Me." The video was unique in that Johnson recorded the musicians individually, and then layered the performances together, creating a crescendo of uplifting music that in some ways also demonstrated the innate unity of people.

For a decade previously, Johnson and his team traveled the Earth to record little-known street musicians to film a documentary that would eventually establish the Playing for Change Foundation. The group aims to offer resources — including facilities, technology, musical instruments and education — to musicians and their communities.

Johnson also had another goal that he claims is more important. "I want [audiences] to think that we're going to make it as a human race," he said in a Tribune interview.

Johnson released his first documentary, "Playing for Change: A Cinematic Discovery of Street Musicians," while his second, "Playing for Change: Peace Throughout Music," premiered in 2008 at the Tribeca Film Festival. Later that year, the film won the Audience Award at the Woodstock Film Festival.

He was inspired to launch the project one day when he was traveling the New York City subway and saw two monks, one playing a nylon guitar and the other singing in a language that wasn't English. More than 200 people gathered around the monks, with some people tearing up and missing their trains. It occurred to Johnson that music can bring people into harmony with one another.

Some of the street musicians who participated in the original videos taken from the documentaries will be in Park City for the concert. They include Clarence Bekker, from the Netherlands; Jason Tamba, from Congo; Mohammed Alidu, from Ghana; Peter Bunetta, from Los Angeles; Reggie McBride, from Detroit; Titi Tsira, from South Africa; and Grandpa Elliott, from New Orleans.

Anyone who has seen Playing for Change's "Stand by Me" video will recognize Elliott, the second musician featured in the video. Come to think of it, anyone who has visited the French Quarter in the past few decades might recognize Elliott, who has been a fixture in Jackson Square. "Grandpa is the spiritual leader, and he leads [the band] with conviction," Johnson said.

Elliott considers himself "blessed" to be involved in the project. "I was in the right place at the right time," he said of meeting Johnson and allowing Johnson to record him.

The gray-bearded musician said he immediately recognized what Johnson was trying to do, since he has felt connections with people for years while playing for change on the street. "Every time I feel sick, I go to the French Quarter," Elliott said. "The tourists heal me. They do something for me, and I do something for them."

Besides "Stand by Me," the band's repertoire includes inspirational songs, such as Bob Marley's "One Love," Peter Gabriel's "Biko," Tracy Chapman's "Talking 'Bout a Revolution" and Bob Dylan and U2's "Love Rescue Me."

One thing is for sure: Don't worry about the street musicians running out of songs to play.

Los Angeles Times

One note at a time, they try to make a difference

Playing for Change is proving that street musicians can have a global influence.

November 13, 2009|Geoff Boucher

In this digital era of distraction and celebrity, how long could the sound of simple sidewalk music possibly echo? The answer, it turns out, is five years and counting.

Tonight, nine street musicians from across the globe will play at Club Nokia under the banner of Playing for Change, a name that winks at their busker background and declares their mission of making the world a better place through melody.

That's a dangerously earnest goal in this ironic age, but Playing for Change, one of the surprising stories in 2009 pop culture, has made bold optimism its backbeat.

"The hope is to connect people that might ordinarily never come together," said Playing for Change creator Mark Johnson. "Regardless of divisions all over the world in religion, the politics, cultural view, economic status . . . music has proven that it can bring us together."

What exactly is Playing for Change? It's getting trickier to answer that question. At the start, it was a documentary effort -- the features "Playing for Change: A Cinematic Discovery of Street Music" and "Playing for Change: Peace Through Music" mined messages of cultural uplift in the lives and work of musicians who might perform on pavements, train platforms and dirt paths. But the brand has morphed into a number of enterprises.

In April, Hear Music's two-disc "Playing for Change: Songs Around the World" debuted in the Top 10 of the Billboard album sales chart and got a second wind in August when the "Peace Through Music" documentary began airing on PBS stations. There's also the nonprofit Playing for Change Foundation, which this year opened a music school in the Gugulethu Township of South Africa and built two more in Tintale Village, Nepal, and Tamale, Ghana.

And there's a for-profit music label that this month released "Sugar Sweet," an album by New Orleans bluesman Grandpa Elliott, one of the breakouts from the now-celebrated confederacy of buskers.

Elliott is one of the 37 musicians featured in the most persistent success of Playing for Change -- the music video for an especially evocative rendition of the Ben E. King hit "Stand by Me," which has been viewed more than 30 million times on YouTube and other Internet video hubs.

Elliott will be at Club Nokia performing along with Playing for Change compatriots Titi Tsira of South Africa, Mohammed Alidu of Ghana, Peter Bunetta of Los Angeles and Clarence Bekker of the Netherlands, in addition to special guests Ziggy Marley and Toots Hibbert.

The night will be hosted by Johnson and Norman Lear, a signature figure in the history of American television and a mentor to Johnson in the unexpected odyssey of Playing for Change.

Lear's Concord Music Group is a partner in the Playing for Change music label, but as he sat sipping juice with Johnson at a recent brunch, it was clear that the pair's friendship goes beyond a business venture.

"What Mark has looked for is the magic that binds us, the power of music and emotion that it allows at a deep and honest level," Lear said.

He praised Johnson's approach; the Playing for Change ethos is to capture streetside performances in New Orleans, the Himalayas, Jerusalem and other locales and edit them together, allowing vagabond souls to collaborate across vast distances. "You cannot watch these moments," Lear said, "and not feel them."

Johnson began the endeavor by chance. Working as an engineer at a recording studio in New York, he found himself mesmerized one day by a performance that was nowhere near a microphone.

"There were two monks painted all in white, both wearing robes, one playing a nylon guitar and the other singing in a language that I didn't understand and that I'm sure most of the other people there didn't understand," Johnson said. "What I witnessed was that everybody stopped and listened. They didn't get on the train. Their jaws were dropping, some were crying; I was fascinated that anything could bring all these people together, people that usually rushed by."

Johnson said in shows on this tour he's seen an emotional reaction from audiences that is different from the ovations given established stars. He added: "Just like with 'Stand by Me,' you start with one voice, one player, and when you're done, if you did it right, the whole world is singing along."

May 28, 2009

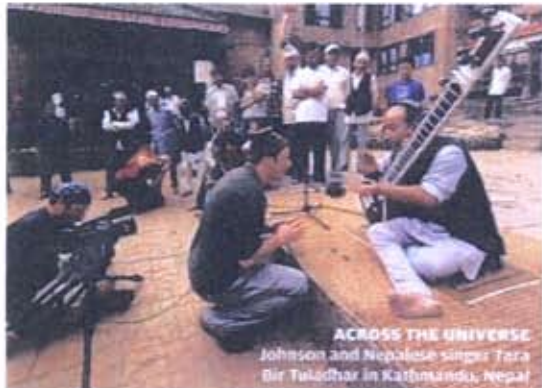


CHART WATCH

Street Musicians Score Top 10 Hit

Cross-cultural disc of buskers, world musicians is unlikely chart success.

By Andy Green

Uniting a blind New Orleans soul singer, an Irish children's choir and Tibetan monks, *Playing For Change* is the unlikeliest hit album of the year. Debuting at Number 10 in early May, the CD features a mix of street performers and musicians from around the planet—and Bono and Mann Chao—playing 10 covers, including Sam Cooke's "A Change Is Gonna Come," Peter Gabriel's "Biko" and Bob Marley's "One Love." "Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to ever have a Top 10 album," says Clarence Bekker, a Dutch busker who has sung on the streets of Barcelona for eight years and plays on a cover of "Stand by Me." "It's a dream come true."

The disc, which is featured prominently in Starbucks stores, is the brainchild of L.A. recording engineer Mark Johnson, who spent four years traveling the world filming and recording the artists. Inspiration came in 2005, when Johnson stumbled upon street performer Roger Ridley singing a rendition of "Stand by Me" near the Santa Monica Pier. "I told him I'd love to record his performance and take it around the world, with other people adding to his track," Johnson recalls. "He looked at me like I was crazy."

Traveling with lightweight digital gear, Johnson visited 12 countries seeking out local talent. Each track edits together disparate artists—sometimes taped thousands of miles apart—into cross-cultural mash-ups. "Stand by Me" combines 37 musicians, including Native American drummers, a Russian cellist and a South African choir, into a seamless track. A YouTube video of the recording process, posted in November, has already drawn more than 10 million views. "The focal point of most records is a single person or band," Johnson says. "The focal point of these songs is the human race."

TV producer Norman Lear heard about *Playing For Change* after a documentary about Johnson's project screened at 2008's Tribeca Film Festival. "It clicked with me instantly," says Lear, who released the CD through his Concord Music Group. Lear also showed the film to Bono, who added vocals to a version of Marley's "War." The film will be shown on PBS and released on DVD later this year.

A tour is in the works, as are future recordings by more street musicians. "We have to keep going," says Johnson. "Watching people from the world sing together makes our differences seem so small and makes it feel like we'll persevere as a human race." -RS



Diverse Musicians 'Change' Their Tunes For Peace

By: Edna Gundersen

02/18/2009

Further proving that music is the universal language, more than 100 musicians across the planet are entwining talents to promote world peace.

Playing for Change — Songs Around the World, a 10-tune CD/seven-track DVD due April 28 on Hear Music, captures mixes of known artists and street musicians from locales as far-flung as Nepal, the Himalayas and the Palestinian territories.

Grammy-winning engineer Mark Johnson spent a decade seeking and sequencing montages, including footage of the late Bob Marley on his *War/No More Trouble* updated with U2's Bono and players from the Congo, Israel, India, Ireland, South Africa, the USA, Zimbabwe and Ghana.

A video of *Stand By Me*, with U.S. buskers Roger Ridley and Grandpa Elliott spliced into a single performance with musicians from the Netherlands, Russia, Spain, Venezuela, France and Brazil, has drawn 7 million YouTube viewers (also at playingforchange.com).

Others tackle Marley's *One Love*, U2/Bob Dylan's *Love Rescue Me*, Peter Gabriel's *Biko* and Tracy Chapman's *Talkin' Bout a Revolution*. Some musicians will join a brief tour starting March 20 at South by Southwest in Austin.