

# Ampark Shares a Song with Kenya



*Kate Pastor, Riverdale Press  
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Some local students are involved in global free trade. Of music, that is.

On this side of the Atlantic, they use claves and recorders. Across it, they use animal bones, cups, and nails. Though they have never met, the students at Ampark Neighborhood School, PS 344, and kids from the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya, have gotten familiar with each other through letters and music. The program itself is a collaboration between Cross Cultural Thresholds, a school in Kenya and *S'Cool Sounds*, a music program founded by Nina Stern, who works with Josh Joffe, Ampark's music teacher.



First, kids from Ampark recorded themselves jamming to international songs found in Ms. Stern's music book titled *Recorders Without Borders*, and sent the results to Kenya, where students at the Drug Fighters School watched their performance on a gleaming white Macintosh computer inside a mud hut. Ampark students viewed a recording of the Kenyan students playing accompaniment, using some instruments they recognized, and other instruments the Kenyan students made with what was available to them. For claves, the kids in Kibera used animal bones. For percussion, they used cups and nails.

The Kenyan students then added some new tracks- traditional Kenyan beats Ampark students then learned and were rehearsing last week for recording to send back to Kenya with Ms. Stern this summer. Sitting in an auditorium at Ampark, various sections of the band took turns joining in. Shakers, claves, and two types of drums created the rhythm before recorders started to play the tune. Ms. Stern has even recorded Ampark students together with students from the Ethical Culture Fieldston School, where she also teaches a workshop.

Though the exchange gets more complex with each day, the program started "really by chance" said Ms. Stern, who comes to the school weekly to work with the Ampark students and is featured on Natalie Merchant's newest album, among her many other musical and educational accomplishments.

Cross Cultural Thresholds runs the Kibera School for 300 at-risk students, Ms. Stern said, some of them orphans, providing them with two meals a day as well as an education. By Sending the videos of their music back and forth, students across continents learn about people and lifestyles very different from their own. Sometimes they are struck by the similarities, as was Fiona Kearns, a third grader who was among those practicing last week.



"They actually were doing the same thing we were doing because we sent them a little video," she said, noting, however, that the Kenyan students arrived at their compositions differently, using instruments she had never seen before.



Other times, Ampark students are awed by the differences.

"They do this in, like, a hut that has mud on the inside and plaster on the walls and rows and rows of benches," said fourth-grader Sara Armstrong. "I think it's cool because we're helping them feel like they're loved. I want them to know that we care about them and stuff," she said.

In addition to the videos, classes in the school have exchanged letters with the Kenyan students, and Principal Elizabeth Lopez-Towey said she valued the opportunity for students to "do good work through the arts" and to learn more about their friends across the sea.

"There's no electricity in Kibera," she said she told them. "But I also wanted them to know that many of these children speak three languages."

Impressed by the program, Assemblyman Jeffrey Dinowitz recently secured a \$5,000 grant for Ampark's music program, and Ampark's students have been raising money through sales of their artwork to help the school in Kibera do the same.



"Our music and our art doesn't stay only in Ampark," Ms. Lopez-Towey said.

But fourth grader Jamzeed Jossain probably explained the program best.

"We play the same song," he said.