



Notes From An African Piano: A Songwriter's Story

My name is Andrew Ssali Kisumba and my wife, Sarah, and I lead Cedar Church, Birmingham. I have also been involved in leading worship for many years and enjoy writing songs. I was born in Uganda, East Africa, a land of wonder including ivory tusked elephants and exotic trees like ebony. Some events that happen in life are everyday troubles, but others, like my Dad's death, hit you like an elephant colliding with an unsuspecting tree.

Arnold Spero Bisase wrote about this in his book, 'Guardian Angel: The Beginning', whilst in exile.

True enough, every loss took a bit of our spirit and hopes with it. But the worst loss was that of life itself, and at this time, I learned of the tragic death of another dear friend and ex-partner, Professor David Kisumba. His untimely death, it was alleged, was planned by people in uniform motivated by greed for power. But hindsight tells me that he too was another victim of our silent enemy within. His car was intercepted on Golf Course Road just off Kitante Road, Kampala and rammed so hard the impact drove the steering wheel into his chest, crushing his entire ribcage and rupturing his heart and lungs, He never stood a ghost of a chance. The heavy military vehicle that rammed his car was hardly damaged, and the perpetrators were never prosecuted. To my knowledge this humble, decent orthopaedic specialist never had any known enemies. So, his death was a further mark of the senseless loss of life in our chequered history.¹

When my Dad had his fateful accident two days before Christmas, 1979, there was a piano in the back of the combi van he was driving. When you think of Africa you think of elephants and trees like I mentioned, not pianos. And my sister and I were talking recently about how random it was for a family to have an item like that. It was bought from a white middle class family who had taught at the university in Kampala and were leaving for good. None of my family had ever shown any real interest in music other than the fact that my Dad was in a male voice choir, and we believe they even made a record! My dad never made it to our new home that night, but the piano miraculously did, and my sister says I drove her nuts every holiday with it, though my grandmother, Jajja Naume on my mum's side of the family, who moved in with us after Dad's death appreciated hearing its notes.

That piano, which must be at least 60 years old, is made with real ebony and ivory keys. Hopefully the ivory, which is now illegal to trade, was humanely harvested from an elephant already dead.

Ebony is a dark brown to jet black wood that is prized for its colour, hardness and density. The wood is prized for making piano keys as well as oboes, clarinets and even bagpipes. Ebony trees are found in East Africa and its wood is the most expensive in the whole of Africa. Ebony trees are also found in India and Sri Lanka, but the African ebony is considered the finest. Such trees are found in solitary existence, and it takes an ebony tree between 60 and 200 years to mature into a harvestable commodity, reaching a maximum height of about 9 m (30 feet) with a diameter of about one foot.

My grandmother, just mentioned, was born on Valentine's Day 1916. So, over the course of her 106 years, it is incredible to think that it is possible that those raw materials would have had to have been transported from Africa to Europe, then fashioned into an upright piano and shipped back to Uganda where a little African boy would learn to practise notes, scales and the art of songwriting.

¹ Arnold Spero Bisase, Guardian Angel: The Beginning, (United States, AuthorHouse, 2012), 264-265

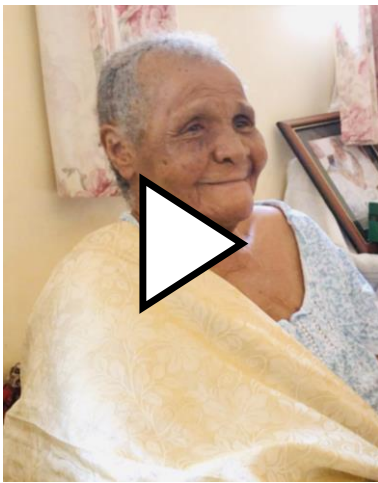


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Your Love Lifts Me Up, a song with a typically African call and response motif, was birthed in the U.K. It now combines the orchestral traditions of Western Classical music with the instrumentation of modern popular music in a fun and accessible way. The finished song made its way back to the ears and heart of my grandmother, who also saw and approved of the teaser video a week before she drew her final breath.

The Cultural Festival for the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham was launched in March 2022.

Amongst many other projects, this included the BSL Community Chorus 'Your Love Lifts Me Up'.



March 2022 was also the month of my Grandma's funeral celebration in Uganda. This was attended by family and friends including Her Royal Highness The Nnabagereka Sylvia Nagginda, The Queen Consort of Kabaka Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II, King of Buganda. The British Sign Language (BSL) Chorus creation enlisted over 150 people including Watoto Children's Choir also from Uganda. It became the soundtrack for her exit from the service as it featured a new introduction crafted by two great granddaughters who used to perform special shows for her when they were 4 and 2 years old.

In that sense it has gone full circle and will hopefully continue the great tradition that music and singing have in drawing people and families together. By creating new experiences, all communities can take uplifting notes and draw joy and encouragement from the bittersweet moments of life.

Andrew S. Kisumba

Songwriter

BSL Community Chorus 'Your Love Lifts Me Up'

March 2022