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Byline: BY REBECCA SALOIS, 16, AND BRITANY LEWIS, 15 **Y-PRESS**

Rock band serves as witness for God

Christian teens formed Barefoot 'n' Sandals in New Palestine.

BY REBECCA SALOIS, 16, AND BRITANY LEWIS, 15 Y-PRESS

Barefoot 'n' Sandals is a rock group from New Palestine with Christian values.

Though band members -- Megan Stiffler, 17, Mike McCall, 17, Forrest Craig, 18, Adam Speicher, 17, and Chris Ballard, 17 -- don't fit the stereotypical rocker image, the musical influences are sound.

"Just because (we) don't fall into the temptations that most rockers do, that doesn't make it any less rock," Stiffler said.

While there long has been a youth band at Brookville Road Community Church, members have come and gone. These five band members clicked and play Sunday nights at the church and other times elsewhere. They also write many of their own songs. Recently, they made a CD, "The Stronger Side of Weakness."

Inspiration for band members comes from a variety of musical groups. Speicher prefers ska music, particularly the Aquabats. Stiffler listens to Christian musicians such as the Newsboys and Michelle Tumes. Ballard finds inspiration in punk rock music and is a fan of Sum 41 and Blink 182.

"After I joined Barefoot 'n' Sandals, I started getting into the heavier stuff, and then I started listening to more Christian music," Ballard said.

He said that unlike secular rock, Christian rock is uplifting. "It's a better use of your time, 'cause when you're in a secular band, you're talking about stuff like 'my girlfriend left me.' Everything is lame, you know. You're succumbing to everything, basically. And when you're in a Christian band, you're only succumbing to one thing, and that's to God."

To Craig, secular music is depressing because the focus is on self. "They sing about a lot of poor-me kind of stuff," he said.

Stiffler said Barefoot 'n' Sandals uses rock music mainly as a tool to spread the word of God. "Christian rock is just a way to take very good music that everyone listens to and figure out a way to give a good testimony and glorify God in the process," she said.

"It's a good way to witness to people," agreed Speicher. "It's a good way to use your God-given talents in a positive way."

Everyone in the band agrees that the most important part of their music is the lyrics, which they try to make relevant to people their own age by concentrating on such themes as forgiveness. They do try to vary their messages. However, "from the first day that we started, we kept on saying we don't want to mention Jesus in every single one of our songs," Ballard explained. "We said that over and over and over, and we still somehow do it."

They also try to tie their music to current events. Ballard said that he wrote "Carry the Cross" after seeing the movie "The Passion of the Christ," and "Lower Than Heaven" after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

While it is important to the members of Barefoot 'n' Sandals that the crowd enjoys their performance, they also make sure that the focus is on Christianity.

"The whole point of it being Christian is it's supposed to be different. We're supposed to be separated from the world, and if it looks exactly like the world, including the costumes and stuff like that, then we're ruining our whole point of it being Christian," Stiffler said.

Before going on stage, band members often say a prayer. They also pray as they play. Said Stiffler, "Usually I'm just thinking, 'Lord, I hope you're pleased with my music, and I hope that I'm giving you praise. And please, please help me do this right.'"

They also pray with the crowd during their performances. "It's a really good feeling to be able to be up there on stage playing and then see all these people . . . and just all of a sudden there they are right in front of you, kneeling and praying and crying," said McCall.

Those moments are the best part of performing, band members said. Ballard said one of his favorite concerts was at New Palestine High School, which he attends.

"About 20 minutes after we were off stage, we were signing shirts and stuff, and this girl pulled me aside. I guess the song 'Lower Than Heaven' really touched her, and she told me that she really appreciated what I was doing. She gave me a huge hug and told me that I really helped her out on some things that she was confused about."

Band members said performing brings them closer to God.

"You can just feel God's power moving, and it's so cool just to feel. I think God is pleased with us," Stiffler said. "I especially felt it when we were singing 'I Could Sing of Your Love Forever.' It was just like the song was ringing true at that particular moment."

Ballard also said he feels the presence of God when he performs. "When we're playing a super-emotional song on stage, you can feel the hair on your neck stand up and like every note is right and the song just works out and you know that God was there, telling you what chords to play. I think that's what's most rewarding for me," he said.

While band members have enjoyed playing and the recognition, they don't plan to make a living with their music. Already Stiffler and McCall have had to drop out of the band because of school and family commitments.

"We want to stay together, but we've got to start thinking of our careers," Ballard said.

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Who we are

Y-Press is a nonprofit news organization with offices in The Indianapolis Star building. Stories are researched, reported and written by teams of young people ages 10 to 18. For more information, call (317) 444-2010 or send an e-mail to ypress@in.net.

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Political discussion: If you want to read more about this topic from a child's perspective, check out www.ypress.org. **Y-Press** also invites students' response to a poll question and wants your comments about student-written movie and book reviews.

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Byline: BY JOE MORGAN, 16, KEISHA MITCHELL, 16, AND MILAN PATEL, 15 **Y-PRESS**

Many Americans clueless about Africa

Four teenagers living in U.S. find students here carry false impressions.

BY JOE MORGAN, 16, KEISHA MITCHELL, 16, AND MILAN PATEL, 15 **Y-PRESS**

"I don't walk around naked. I have never had a spear in my hand, chasing lions."

So says Axelle Atchade, 18, a native of Benin and one of about 50,000 Africans who have immigrated to the United States each year since 2000. She has had to dispel a lot of misinformation that Americans have about her country.

There are close to 1 million African immigrants in the United States, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, nearly 40 million Americans, or 14 percent of the population, have ancestral ties to Africa.

Still, many Americans remain ignorant of their neighbors across the Atlantic.

In books such as "Heart of Darkness," by Joseph Conrad, which is required reading in many high schools, Africans are portrayed as savages, and Africa is seen as a "dark continent" made up of dusty villages, where children run around naked.

As more of Africa gets poured into the great American melting pot, Americans are re-examining these long-held stereotypes.

Y-Press recently invited Axelle and her brother, Sam, 13, who live in Muncie, and Mduduzi Matshazi, 17, and Rufaro Madzongwe, 17, natives of Zimbabwe now living in Indianapolis, to discuss their experiences with misconceptions about their cultures.

In addition, Pierre Atchade, father of Axelle and Sam and assistant professor of multicultural education at Ball State University, spoke about how Americans can become better informed.

With a population of 7 million, Benin is a relatively small country. Though rural areas of Benin remain less sophisticated, its larger cities such as the capital of Porto-Novo and Cotonou house hundreds of thousands of people and are as technologically advanced as most American cities, with high-rise buildings, steady electrical and phone service and indoor plumbing. They have grammar schools, secondary schools and universities.

"We have the Internet. We have cable TV, and we have clubs," Axelle said.

Sam said urban teens in Benin are much like urban teens in the United States. "They have CDs, and they mostly listen to American music," he said. "There aren't as many channels on TV. (But) they have a couple of music channels, and if you're really wealthy, you have MTV."

In some ways, Benin teens have fewer restrictions than their American counterparts. Said Sam, who was born in the U.S. after his parents moved here, "I'm 13, and it really isn't extraordinary to go to a club at 13 and just party until like 4 a.m."

Zimbabwe, situated in southern Africa, has 1 million people in its capital of Harare and 500,000 in Bulawayo. Both cities have skyscrapers, buildings with modern conveniences and a range of schools.

"I would say it's not that much different from America in the city aspects of it," Mduzuzi said, "but when you get to the rural areas, then it's basically kind of how they portray it on TV."

Zimbabwe teens are more modest and spiritual than American teens, Rufaro and Mduzuzi said. Many women cover their hair with scarves, and most do not wear pants or miniskirts. In addition, people are more formal and often greet each other by shaking hands.

Professor Atchade moved to the United States in 1989; his family came a few years later, and Mduzuzi and Rufaro came here in 1998. Yet they still deal with misconceptions. Chief among them is that Africans hunt for their food, wear few clothes and that wild animals roam everywhere.

The teens continue to run into attitudes that underestimate Africa's advancements. Axelle cited a girl on her cheerleading squad who seemed surprised that there are airports in Africa.

They run into ignorance, too, as some American students think Africa is a single country or "African" is a language.

Some stereotypes are harmless, and some are flattering. All of the teenagers have had people assume they can run fast and play soccer well.

"When I was on the track team, people just thought I could run just because I was from Africa," said Mduzuzi. "(They thought) that I could run long distances and all that stuff because I've been chased by lions and tigers."

Sam said when he was younger, kids assumed he could fight because of his experiences with wildlife (which didn't exist). Similarly, Rufaro said she was suspected of having spiritual powers because of her African heritage. "People are like, 'Oh, she's from Africa, she knows voodoo, so don't mess with her,'" she said.

While all four have been hurt at one time or another by these misconceptions, they have learned to take questions in stride.

It helps to remember their own misconceptions of the United States before they moved here.

"America isn't as great as it is portrayed," Mduzuzi said. "The image that has been put onto Africans about America is the whole American dream, where everybody has a nice house, nice car, family, all that kind of stuff. I'll admit that I also had that same image before I actually moved here. But when you move here, you'll see low-income families."

Professor Atchade says media rarely focus on the variety of lifestyles in any country.

"Within the United States, the economic development is not uniform," he said. "There are areas that are well-developed, and areas that are not developed. But when it comes to Africa, the only places they show are where we have underdevelopment and where we have poverty. That portrayal does not help anybody out."

For black American youth, negative images of Africa can lead them to distance themselves from their heritage, Atchade said.

"When they show African-Americans those images, in fact they are not exploiting us, we Africans," he said. "They are exploiting (African-Americans). They are saying, 'You decide to be African-Americans, and this is where you are coming from. That's what you are.' "

Atchade believes these depictions could be damaging to Caucasian youth as well. While black American youth might feel a kinship to rural Africans because they share the same ethnicity, images of emaciated babies and AIDS-stricken villages might cause Caucasian youth to develop elitist feelings and prevent them from traveling to other countries and associating with people of different cultures.

As an educator who received most of his education in Benin, Atchade recognizes that the place to correct misconceptions about Africa is in the classroom. "Everything is focused on America. That's OK, but they need to open up. Something was happening before America, and people need to know that."

The teens agree, citing the outdated texts in the U.S.

Sam said he was disappointed when he saw a new seventh-grade social studies book last year.

"On the cover of the book is a girl like barely dressed, carrying a jug of water on top of her head," he said. "Nobody wanted to read what was actually in the books; they just looked at the pictures and stuff. And people would be like, 'Is that your sister?' "

While Professor Atchade says teachers should try to balance biased or outdated material with current information, he also says students should try to educate themselves by reading books by writers from all over the world.

The teens encouraged Americans to travel to better understand other cultures.

But just reaching out to a new student can lead to new awareness, too. While the teens say questions about Africa have become more thoughtful as they and their peers have become more mature, Axelle said some students can't seem to venture out of their own worlds.

"There was this new student in my school last year, and he was from Africa, too. He used to sit by himself all the time at lunch. So one day I went and I sat with him."

Afterward, she said, other classmates seemed surprised that she didn't know the new student before the lunchroom meeting.

"And they're like, 'Oh, I thought maybe you remembered him from Africa or something.' "

ASSISTANT EDITOR: Brian Reissaus, 19.

Economic issues are prime concerns for two African countries

Benin

Sam and Axelle Atchade came with their family from Benin, a country about the size of Pennsylvania on the west coast of Africa.

Originally a French colony, Benin became a major port for the slave trade. Benin remained under French authority until 1960, when it went through militarist and communist governments before turning to representative government in 1989. Despite having a relatively young government, Benin remains active in the United Nations, as well as several other international organizations.

Benin's economy remains mostly dependent on subsistence agriculture, but its attempts to take a more active role in world trade have been hurt by Nigerian bans on Beninese imports because of border disputes. However, its leaders hope to build up the economy through tourism and foreign investment.

The capital of Benin is Porto-Novo. The national language is French, although Fon and Yoruba remain dominant in the South, and tribal languages remain in the North. Benin is relatively unknown in American classrooms, although its neighboring democracy, Togo, became the subject of American outrage last year when its dying president tried to leave his position to his son.

Zimbabwe

Mduduzi Matshazi and Rufaro Madzongwe are from Zimbabwe, a troubled nation in southern Africa. Slightly larger than Montana, Zimbabwe was a British colony named Rhodesia until it declared independence in 1980 and became a parliamentary democracy. English remains the official language, although Shona and Sindebele, the language of the Ndebele people, also are recognized.

Robert Mugabe became the nation's first elected prime minister and has been the nation's chief leader ever since, although he was accused of voting irregularities in 2002. With its landlocked tropical climate that is prone to drought, Zimbabwe has little land suitable for farming. Soil erosion and poor mining practices have damaged the land further. Under British rule, white settlers set about making farms productive and profitable, but in 2000 Mugabe instituted a land redistribution campaign in which white farmers would have to relinquish their lands to native Zimbabweans. This caused white farmers to refuse to plant crops, causing widespread shortages and crippling the economy.

The country's 1998-2002 involvement in the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo caused further economic troubles. AIDS also is a problem for the country, with about 25 percent of adults estimated to be HIV positive.

A bright spot for Zimbabweans is its educational status -- more than 90 percent of citizens age 15 and older are literate.

Source: CIA -- The World Factbook