

Niwel Tsumbu is on a new wave

Don O'Mahony talks to Niwel Tsumbu ahead of the release of his album Song of The Nations

ALMOST two and a half years since the Congolese musician Niwel Tsumbu released his debut album proper, *Uh! Nzela Molayi (Oh, It's A Long Way)*, as part of the Niwel Tsumbu Duo, he is about to release the follow-up, *Song of The Nations*.

As gaps between albums go, that would seem about average. However, it masks Tsumbu's voracious appetite for music-making and collaboration.

Within a couple of years of arriving in Cork, several groups fixed themselves around the charismatic guitarist: Motema, Jazzmu, Kimia, Sumu; each one showcasing a different aspect of his extraordinary talent. In the last couple of years, he has played with composer Micheál Ó Suilleabháin, Cameroon bass virtuoso Richard Bono, created The Clear Sky Ensemble with the help of a grant from Cork City Council, found time to be part of Cork soul boy Brian Deady's group and was involved in a Dublin-based 12-piece gospel choir called The Biatch.

"That was a really great thing," he smiles. "I was kind of sad because I couldn't take it around. I didn't have the time to do it but we did some gigs with them and it was really great. We played some of my songs, which I arranged differently for the vocals. I hope I'll do that again because we only did about 15 but the gigs were really good."

It comes as no surprise to see that the Duo has expanded to include an international cast of musicians. Joining Eamon Cagney on drums are Hungarian bassist Peter Erdei, German violinist Kathryn Döhner and Italian clarinetist Clinio Cucuzza.

"The great thing I think for me is just playing and meeting people all along," he says modestly. "I still keep meeting people."

Ask Niwel where this ability to adapt to so many different styles comes from and he'll shrug his shoulders. He's just happy to be living in a time of broad musical opportunity. "I think it's fortunate we have access to lots of different music," he says. "It's never really been a problem for me. I don't mix things it's just what I do. I've been influenced by those things and they come out that way. I like to bounce off ideas. I like people to push me. I like to be challenged as well. It's really just bouncing off ideas."

As musical barriers continue to fall, there's no doubt these are interesting times to be around.

"That's it," he agrees. "Everyday I travel, I go somewhere, I meet someone new. I just go, 'Woah'. I hope I have more time. I hope the day had a hundred hours so I could do more stuff."

As he becomes more in-demand and becomes increasingly feted around the country

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does he ever feel tempted to move to Dublin.

"I really like Cork. Every time I go to Dublin," he starts to laugh, "Dubliners always say, 'what are you doing in Cork? How did you end up there?' So they're always asking me to move to Dublin, but I like going there. I like Cork because the vibe is great. It just suits me. The only thing that won't keep me here would be the weather." He laughs heartily at this, still unused to the weather.

While discussing the starting point for the new album, he reveals how inseparable he is from

his guitar. "A lot of the songs are just songs I usually play at home," he explains. "I didn't really perform them before they were just songs that I was singing at home at night time, you know, sitting with the guitar, just playing. So then I decided I wanted to do those songs but very different to the album I did before because they're very much more lyrical."

Most of the album was recorded in his house but is there still room for the Led Zeppelin-esque flourishes he elicited from his acoustic guitar on the first album?

"There's still some of that," he assures, "but it's more folk. My way of African folk."

I draw his attention to the album's cover, which features a checkerboard of reds, yellows and purples.

"A guy said the cover looks new rave. New rave," he repeats incredulously. "I don't even know what Nu Rave is."

He's keenly looking forward to their Cork date at The Pavilion. It's the final gig on the current string of dates and Tsumbu feels the band will be in tip-top condition.

"That gig I'm planning on re-

cording as a live album," he reveals, "so people should come and give us good vibes."

There are sure to be plenty chanting "Ochacha", a word Niwel made up that means good vibes. He'll be looking for plenty of ochacha.

"We've been playing a while and it's just getting better all the time," he insists. "We'll be rocking."

Expect to have your mind blown, just don't expect new rave.

Niwel Tsumbu plays The Pavilion, Carey's Lane, on Sunday, April 19.