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Ladysmith Black Mambazo Bring Zest to Zellerbach Hall

By [Bryan Gerhart](#)

Contributing Writer

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A great live performance is the well-known "secret ingredient" in the recipe for an outstanding music group. It logically follows that strong "stage presence" is the key to said performance. Now, I'm no cook, and I'm certainly not a mathematician, but what this adds up to is simple: Ladysmith Black Mambazo are phenomenal.

Now, this pseudo-scientific trail of reasoning might seem as laughably obvious as Zoolander's "moisture is the essence of wetness" observation, but it's necessary. Believe it or not, Lady what? Black who? aren't a household name for everyone.

Treating the group like that obscure new band your buddy keeps telling you to listen to would be going about things all wrong. After all, this is a group with 13 Grammy nominations, 48 active years and a starring role on a little album called Graceland under its belt.

As the eight members of the group hopped and waved their way onto the Zellerbach Hall stage Thursday night, unanimous smiles stretched across the faces of the audience members. Without saying a word, the men each took a spot behind the row of seven microphone stands lined up on the bare stage. Leaving room for the group's leader, Joseph Shabalala, in front, they began to sing. When they left the stage two hours later, the smiles still hadn't faded.

The group's enthusiasm was contagious. There wasn't a doubt in anyone's minds that these men love what they do. Without the aid of instrumentation, their voices sculpted soundscapes that floated and bounced with the singers themselves.

And boy did Ladysmith bounce.

With moves that would make Jagger jealous and high kicks that would give the Rockettes a run for their money, the group is equally athletic as they are musically talented. At times they channeled the likes of Elvis and Chuck Berry; at other times it was as if the Temptations had dropped out of the music business and joined their church choir. Near the end of the show they even invited audience members on stage to join them in dancing, and despite the volunteers' enthusiastic attempts, it was clear that Ladysmith Black Mambazo had the superior skills.

Accompanied by only tongue clicks, snaps and hand whistles, they sang a few of the songs in English, but the vast majority were in the group's native language. Maybe I should've dusted off my Zulu-to-English dictionary, but the message of the group was so universal that the language didn't create the barrier one might expect. "Our mission," Shabalala stated after their opening song, "is to spread our culture. To spread love, peace and harmony."