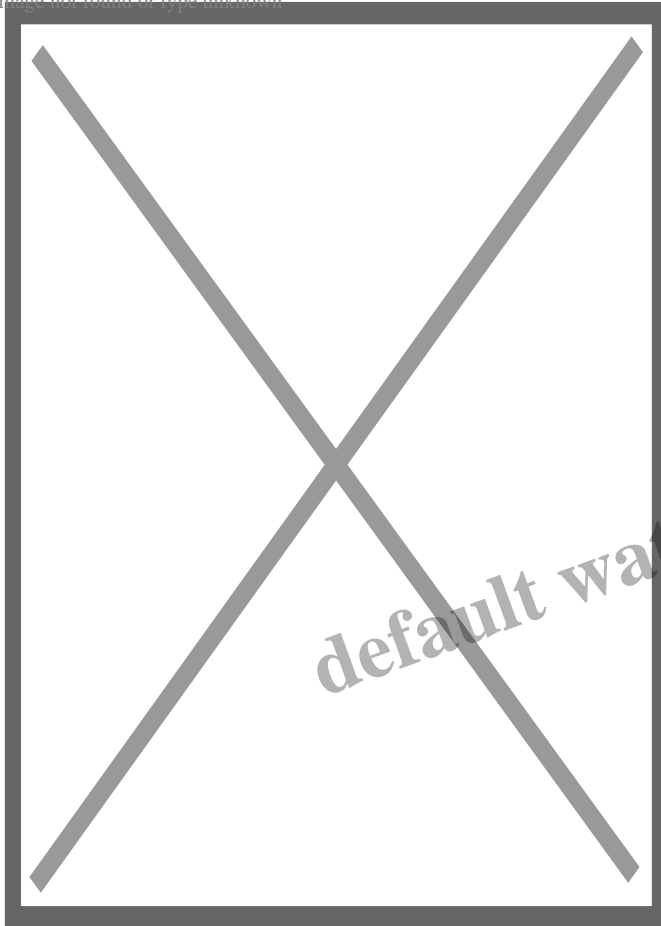


Out of Africa: Changing the world one guitar at a time

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A Canadian guitar maker initiated a trade school in Uganda that trains young people to make world class guitars.

Toto's classic 1981 song "Africa", 2020 COVID-19 version

So, the recent series of posts might give the impression that this site is focussed on artisan guitar makers using unusual woods to make high quality (=expensive) guitars. Certainly, I can readily be categorised as one of those privileged old white males who have the capacity to follow our dreams – and the financial independence to indulge these dreams by traveling the world visiting nice places, meeting great people and sometimes buying their instruments.

But part of this project is also recognising that the guitar is not, and never has been, just a rich man's instrument. The birth of the blues happened not with artisan guitars but with home-made instruments or cheap accessible guitars. And guitars can be agents of change in parts of the world where poverty is still rife. In future posts, I'll look at what the big guitar guys like Martin, Taylor and Gibson have done (or in some cases not done) to respond to social and environmental needs. Here, I'm going to focus on an

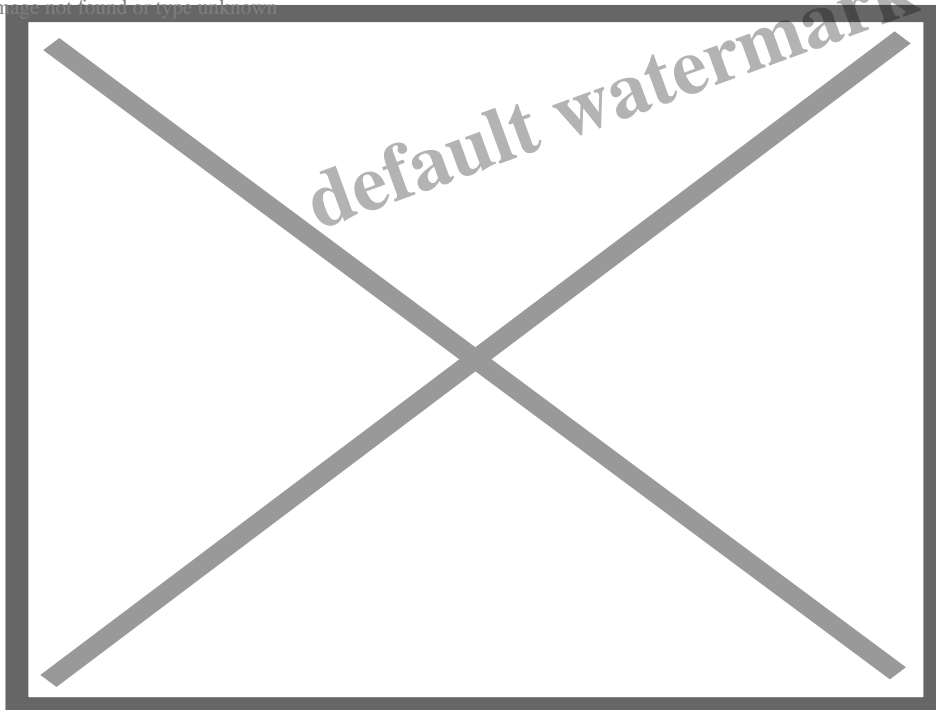
initiative that uses guitar making to bring skills and resources to a small town in Africa.

For most of the 20th century, most well-known guitar brands were built in North America, although well-established guitar building traditions continued in several European and Latin American countries or developed in places like Australia. Martin and Taylor both also opened up guitar factories in Mexico where cheaper labour costs resulted in guitars that could be sold for lower prices. For the same reason, many companies moved some of their production to countries in Asia such as China and Korea. And a range of brands popped that are solely based in Asia. Posts in guitar chat groups often betray an inherent belief that guitars built anywhere other than North America or Europe must be inferior – I'll explore this assertion and its validity or otherwise in a later post.

Guitars made in Africa?

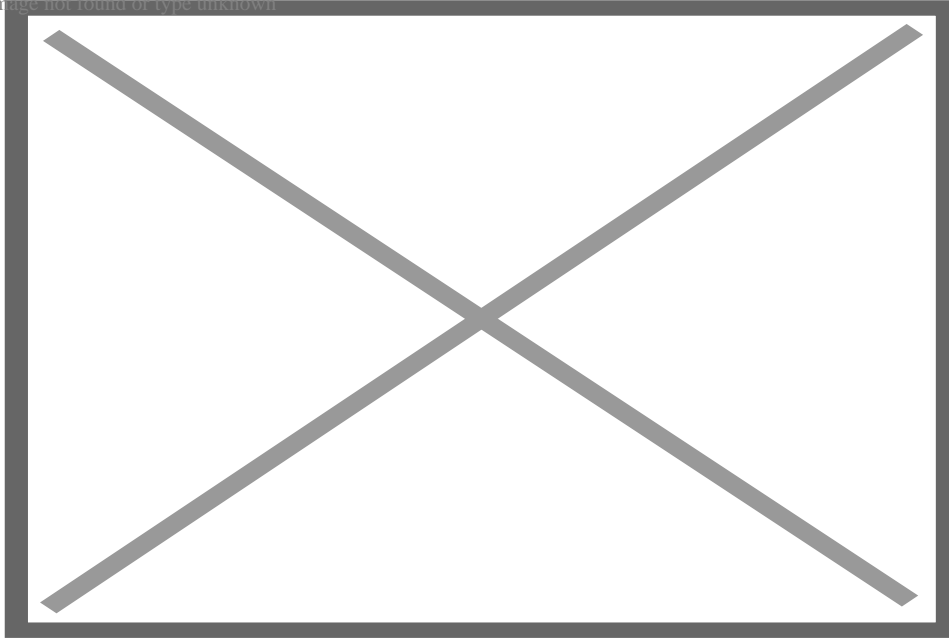
From this background, hearing about guitars being made in Africa initially sounds both surprising and unlikely. Africa certainly does not have a tradition of guitar building, although music is undoubtedly central to most African cultures. I've visited Africa on several occasions, often with the primary motivation of seeing Africa's amazing wildlife.

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On safari in Ngorongoro, Tanzania. Photography, like guitars, is a gear-freak's heaven.

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Wildebeest crossing the Mara River, Serengeti

Every biologist owes it to themselves to visit Africa at least once to experience an intact megafauna and to be places where you are not top of the food chain. But on every visit, the thing that perhaps impressed me the most was the way music is simply part of life's fabric.

And it needs to be remembered that African music crossed the ocean to the Americas during the dark history of the [slave trade](#). As Stephen Lewis points out in "[Musical Crossroads: African American Influence on American Music](#)": "People of African descent were among the earliest non-indigenous settlers of what would become the United States, and the rich African musical heritage that they carried with them was part of the foundation of a new American musical culture that mixed African traditions with those of Europe and the Americas." That quintessentially American instrument, the banjo, was most likely based on [West African lutes](#), and jazz and the blues had their roots in the songs and music of slaves in the American south.

South Africa has some excellent guitar makers. For instance, [Mark Maingard](#) is well-respected internationally, and has the motto "Making trees sing again" – [turning trees into music](#), according to a local press article – and Matthew Rice and Matthias Roux (who trained with Maingard) run [Casimi Guitars](#) with the motto "Changing the world one guitar at a time".

In other parts of Africa, however, guitar making is less obvious. And very few black Africans make guitars. Notable exceptions are the self-taught Congolese luthier, [Jean-Luther Misoko Nzalayala](#), who goes by the trade name of Socklo and has produced thousands of instruments in his workshop in the rundown Lemba district of Kinshasa, and [Frank Nyongona](#), in Cameroon.

Both these people make guitars with whatever materials are available and with limited tools, but have a ready market in the local area. Their working conditions are a far cry from those of guitar makers in North America and Europe and reflect an issue that plagues many parts of Africa to a greater or lesser extent – human poverty.

Live aid

Africa is a huge continent with many different countries that have vastly different natural resources, climates, cultures and histories. Hence, generalizing about anything in Africa is difficult. However, many generalisations have been and continue to be made. For decades, the dominant image of Africa has been that it is [poor and helpless](#).

Indeed, despite a wide range of natural resources, Africa is the [least wealthy continent per capita](#), in part due to geographic impediments, legacies of European colonization in Africa and the Cold War, undemocratic rule and poor policy.

Parts of Africa have been severely affected by severe famine, destructive wars and despotic leaders. Attention to the situation in Africa was perhaps brought to the attention of many people by the famine in Ethiopia in the mid 1980s, reporting of which led a bunch of music stars led by Bob Geldorf to join together to produce the “Band Aid” Christmas song, followed by the epic [Live Aid concerts](#) in 1985.

Do they know it's Christmas? 1984

Bob Geldorf played an important part in my life – not just because I was a big Boomtown Rats fan in my youth and saw them in concert several times. I first met my wife Gillian on a plane back to Australia in 1987, and one of the reasons we started chatting was that we were both reading Geldorf's autobiography “[Is that it?](#)” Thanks, Bob!

Band Aid and Live Aid aimed to raise funds to assist the aid programs underway to alleviate the dire situation in Ethiopia. They were spectacularly successful in raising funds, but also perhaps even more successful in raising awareness – an example of music being used to change the world for the better.

Dead aid

Not long after Live Aid, however, [questions started to be asked](#) about whether the funds raised were actually being used effectively and reaching those most in need. Allegations were made that funds were being diverted into other uses by the corrupt Ethiopian leadership, although the Live Aid organisers strongly disputed the allegations.

This highlighted an ongoing discussion on how best to provide aid to areas suffering from famine or other disasters – both in the short term to alleviate the immediate emergency and in the longer term to prevent such emergencies happening again. Aid comes from overseas government aid programs and from NGOs such as Oxfam, the Red Cross and so on who run concerted fundraising programs which aim to collect money from concerned individuals in developed countries and funnel it into worthwhile activities in Africa and elsewhere.

What type of aid, how it should be administered and dispensed, and whom should be targeted are all important considerations. For an individual who wants to do something to help, how can you decide what's best to support? And how do you know that your donation actually makes its way to the people or cause you are wanting to assist? A document by Worldvision asked the question: “[Does aid work?](#)” and outlined both the good and the bad issues relating to the effectiveness of aid. Books such as

William Easterley's 2007 "[White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good](#)" and Dambisa Moyo's 2010 "[DEAD AID: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa](#)" outlined the problems with government and other aid programs and looked for better ways to do things.

Jeffrey Sachs 2005 "[The End of Poverty](#)" highlighted one of the problems by presenting an analysis of US aid to Africa. In 2002 the U.S. gave US\$3 per sub-Saharan African. Taking out the parts for U.S. consultants and technical cooperation, food and other emergency aid, administrative costs and debt relief, the author estimates that aid per African came to just 6 cents. If the administrative overheads were the same for an NGO who collected donations from people, that would mean that for every dollar you donate, only 2 cents actually hits the ground.

Fortunately, organisations like [GiveWell](#) analyse the effectiveness of charities, and [Effective Altruism](#) and [Giving What We Can](#) also analyse what sort of charitable interventions have the biggest impact.

Duncan Africa: training Ugandan guitar makers

So, we seem to have meandered quite a long way from the topic of guitars... So, let's get back on track. [Jay Duncan](#) is a Canadian guitar builder who asked the question "What can I do that might help with the problem of poverty in Africa?". Having worked for over 10 years as an independent luthier and also for Larrivee Guitars, he founded the DuncanAfrica Society in 2005 and began teaching a small group of students in Uganda how to build guitars. From a small beginning, the enterprise grew into the [Suubi Trade School](#), founded in [Mpigi](#), a small town not far from the Ugandan capital, Kampala. [Uganda](#), like many African countries has had its share of ups and downs with a history of British colonialism, military coups and, of course, the infamous Idi Amin. It is ranked as one of the poorest nations in the world, and also has one of the most corrupt governments. [Lack of education](#) is seen as one of the main reasons for continuing poverty among Uganda's population.

There is an [old saying](#) that goes: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Teaching a person a trade from which they can earn a living is a more effective way of helping alleviate poverty in the long term. [DuncanAfrica Society's vision](#) was to fight poverty in Africa while bringing outstanding instruments into the world.

Students at the Trade School are taught how to make fine guitars, learning not only the manual skills but also mathematics, English and computing skills. The apprentices do virtually all the work on the guitars which are then shipped to Canada for dispatch to buyers. The process produces excellent guitars and plugs the Suubi Trade School into an international market, as well as bringing investment into the school that allows the provision of the kinds of tools that are unavailable to people like Jean-Luther Misoko Nzalayala and Frank Nyongona.

The apprentices are paid and hence have a sustainable income as well as learning skills that will help them into other employment. The aim is that DuncanAfrica will eventually be owned and operated by the local people of Uganda and the Canadian base will serve solely as a global distribution center.

A guitar made by Moses using Mugavu wood

I came across DuncanAfrica during my quest to find guitar builders who use alternative and/or local

woods. I got in touch with Jay Duncan to find out more and was deeply impressed by the DuncanAfrica story. Jay is a busy man and hard to pin down, but we communicated enough to negotiate the building of a guitar.

DuncanAfrica use a range of standard guitar woods like spruce, cedar, mahogany and East Indian Rosewood. But they also use wood from a local tree called, in Swahili, [Mugavu](#), described as having a tone somewhere between mahogany and koa.

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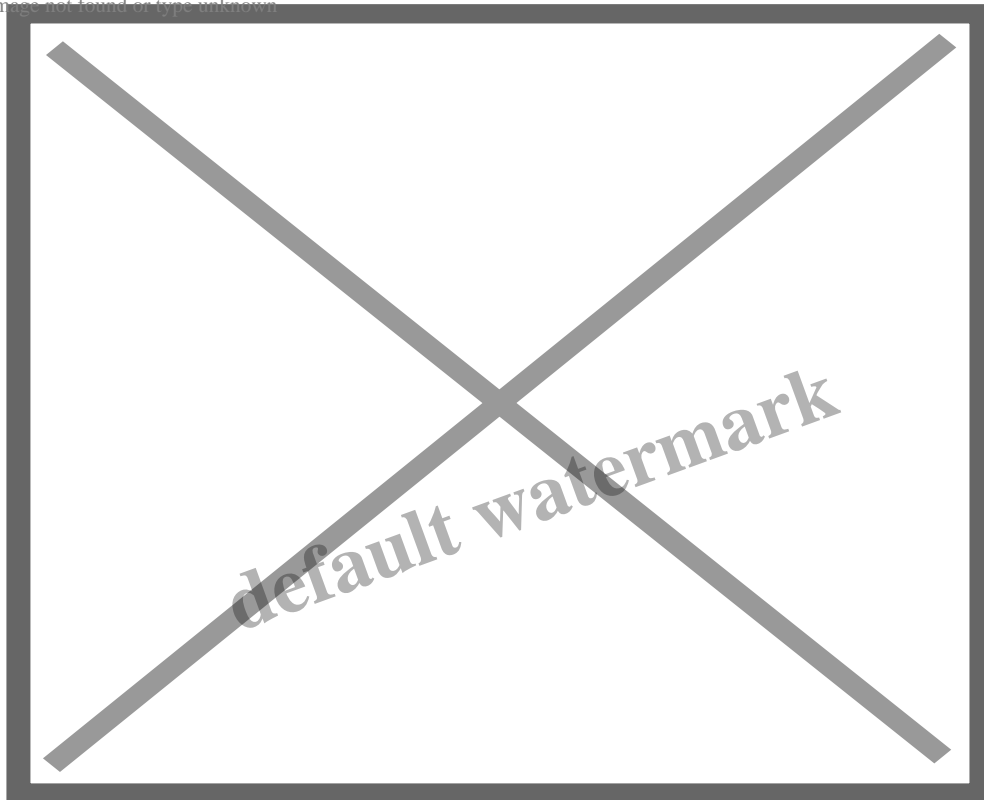
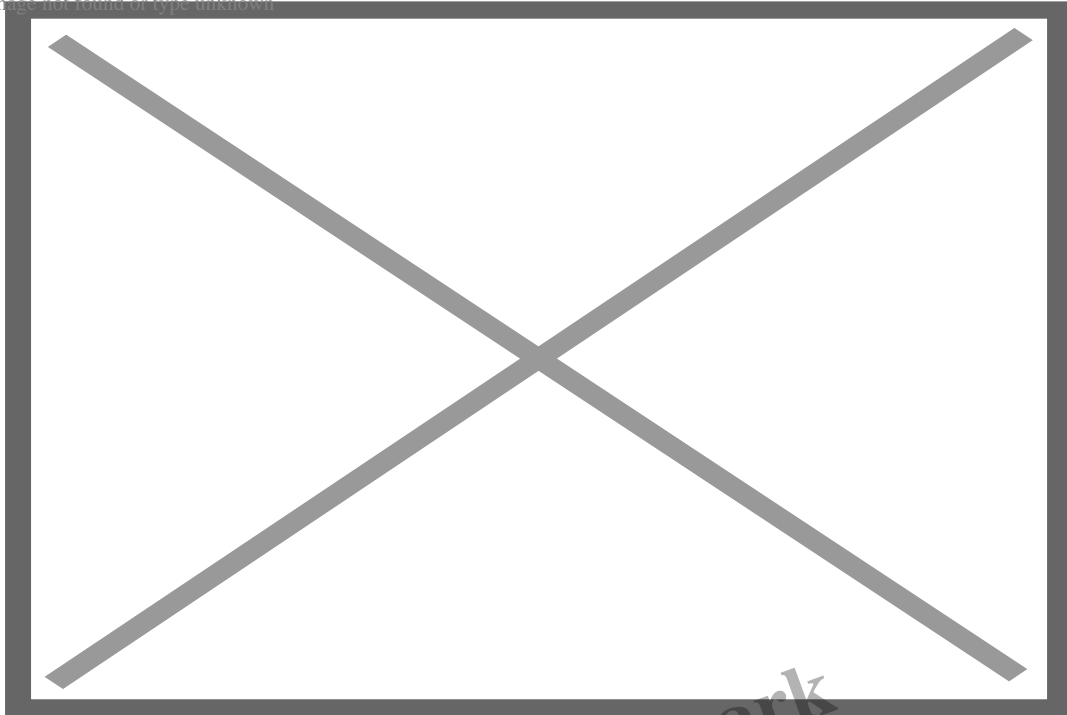


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Albizia coriaria. Photos: Ugandamarathon.com

Mugavu ([Albizia coriaria](#)) has a range that extends from West Africa through eastern, southern and parts of central Africa, and goes by many other names in different parts of its range. Unlike some of the trees discussed on this website, it is not a grand forest species that reaches great heights and girths. It is a pioneer species common in wooded grassland, woodland and thicket. Its absence in closed canopy rainforest is largely the result of its high light requirements.

[Its wood is used](#) for construction, flooring, staircases, furniture, mine props, and assorted other products. However, [the tree is also used](#) extensively for firewood, fodder for livestock and herbal medicines – truly a species of many uses. Although not listed as rare or endangered, there is a [local perception](#) that Mugavu is rare, probably because of local overexploitation.

The Mugavu used at DuncanAfrica is locally sourced and harvested specifically for use at the Trade School. One tree provides enough wood for 60 or more guitars. Mugavu can be used as for both tops and backs, and so I opted to go for this option of a guitar made completely from locally sourced wood.

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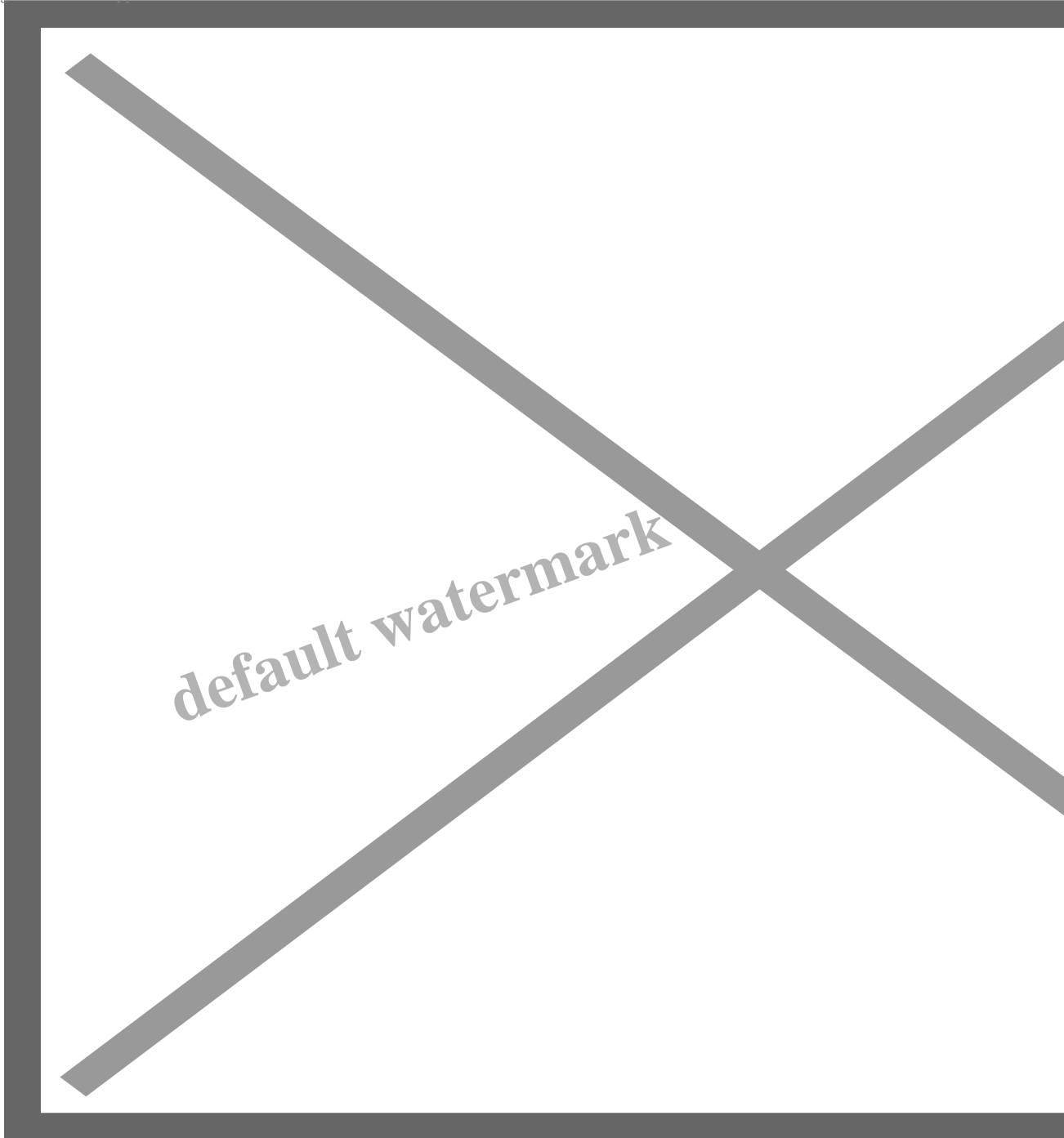
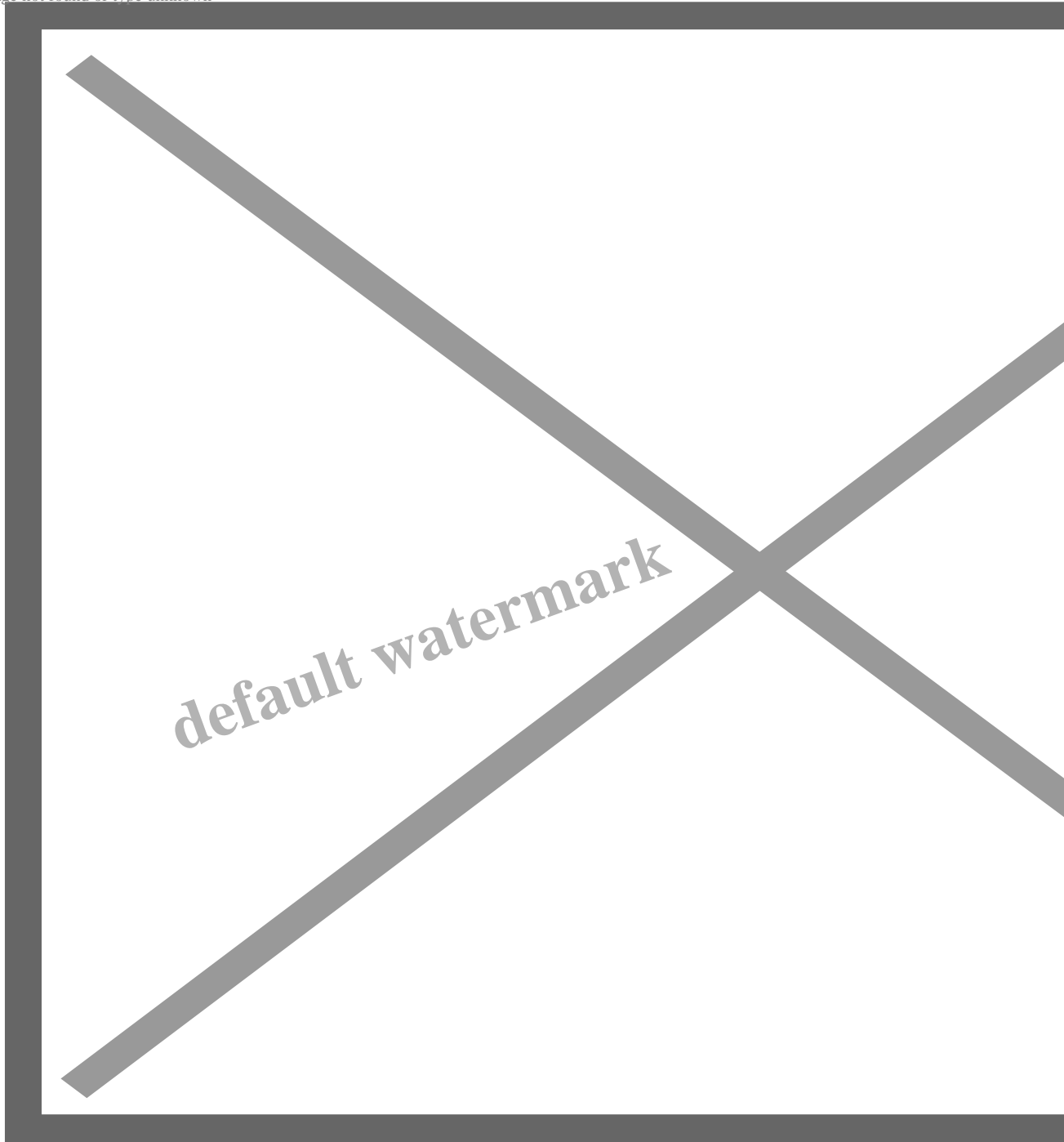


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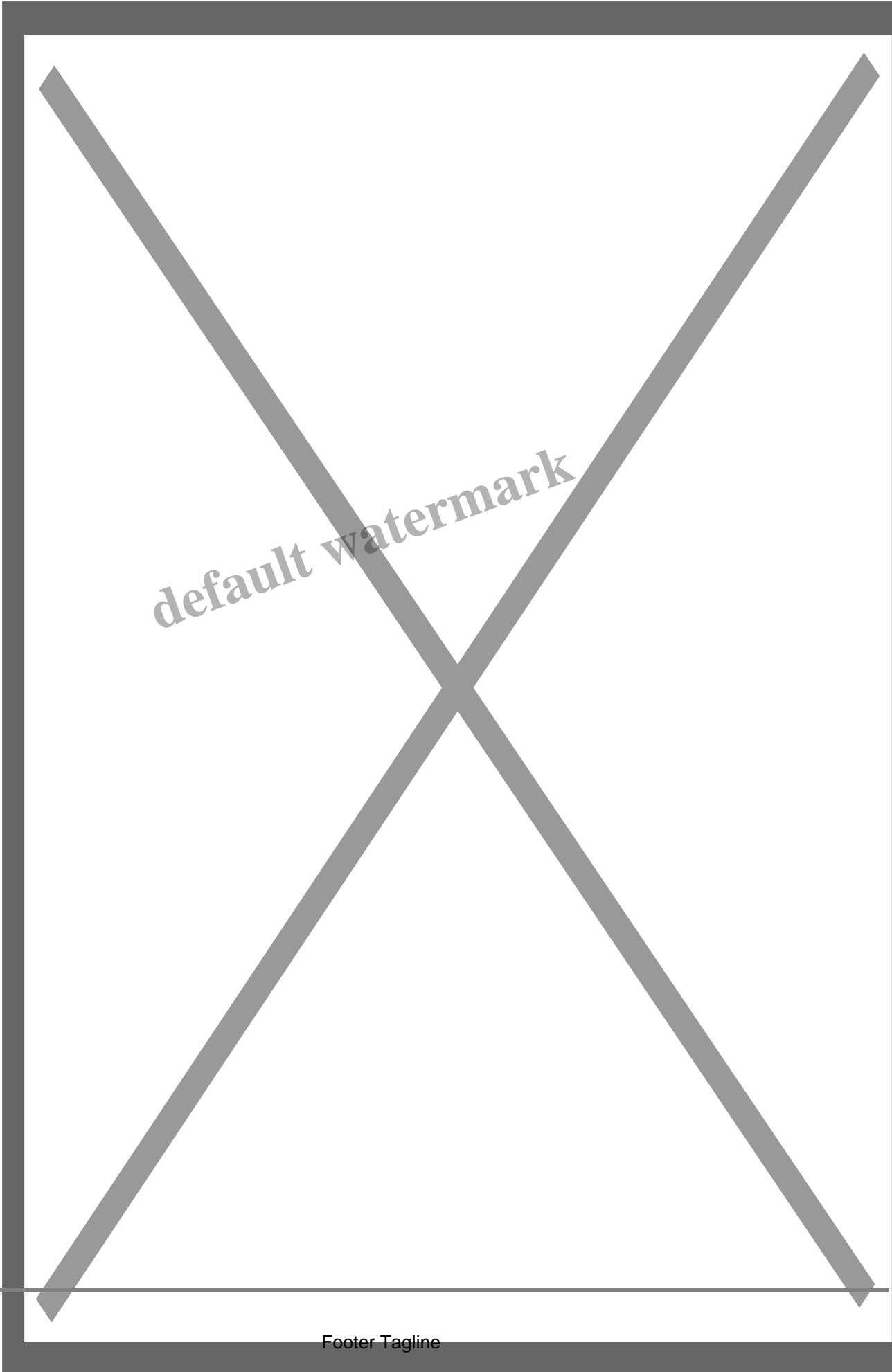


Mugavu timber destined for the Suubi Trade School. Photos: [DuncanAfrica](#)

I did not manage to visit Uganda, but Jay sent me photos from Mpigi of my guitar under construction. It was built by Moses, and the result was not just an amazing guitar built in a small town in Uganda from local wood – but also a step towards to building sustainable livelihoods in that small town.

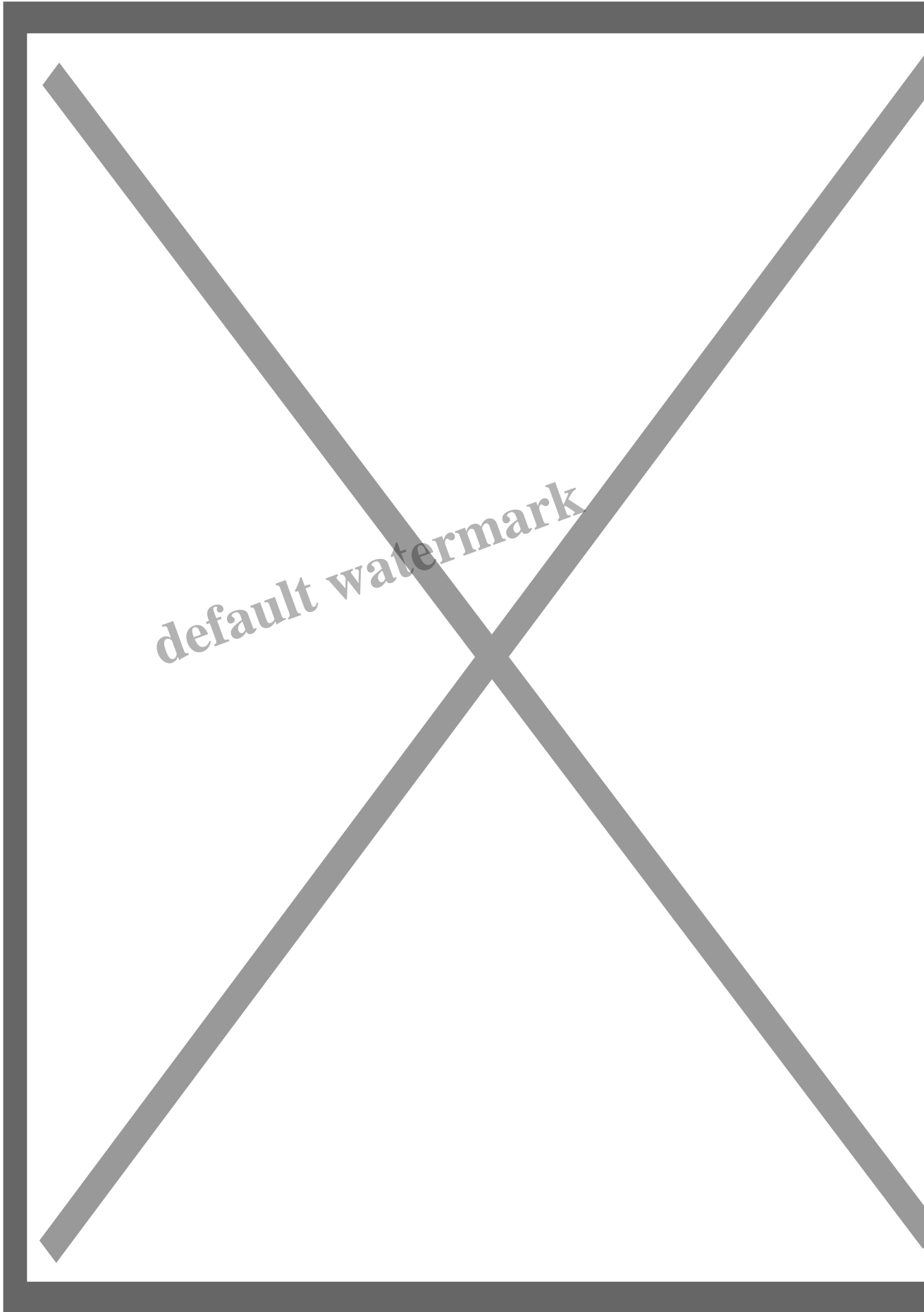
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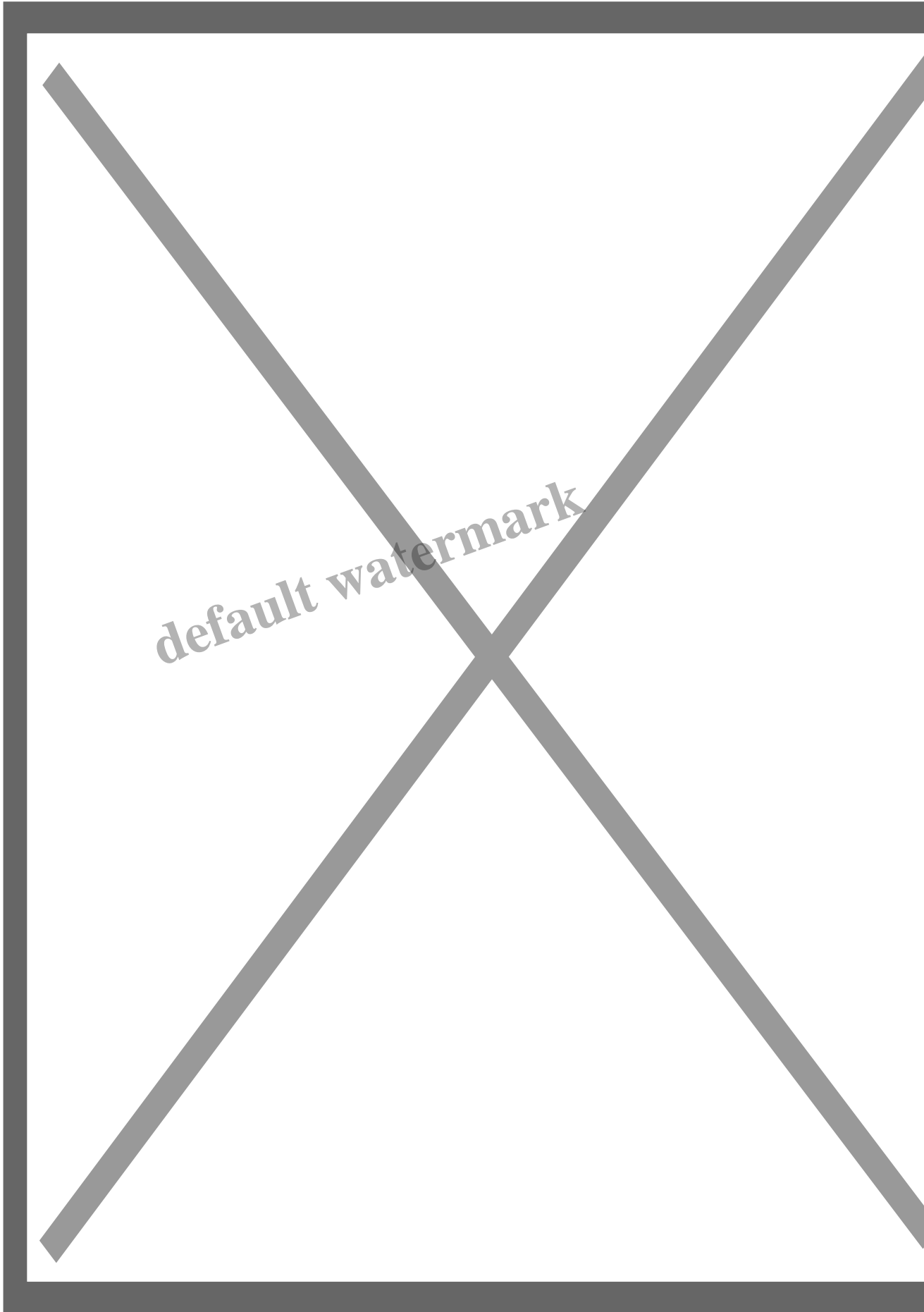
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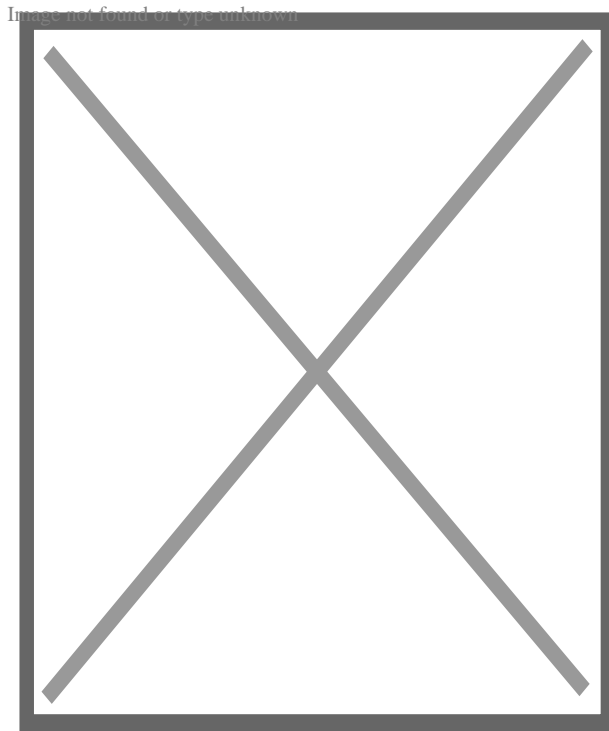


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Moses and the Pearl guitar. Photos: [DuncanAfrica](#)



From Uganda to Western Australia

So what?

OK, so I bought a guitar made by a guy in Africa. It helped employ that guy, and I got a great guitar with a good story. So, it's fair to ask whether this is a good way to help the situation in Africa when there are many other avenues for supporting aid organisations doing good stuff on a much grander scale. Of course, this needn't be an "either/or" question. And it's not the difference between Band Aid raising relief funds for an immediate crisis and more strategic investments in developing future capacity within Africa.

DuncanAfrica is providing a local solution using education and training to improve the lot of small groups of disadvantaged people in a small town in Uganda. In the video "The life of a guitar", it's described as a model of how aid can work effectively to produce long-term change.

The life of a guitar: the broader impact of a DuncanAfrica guitar

I was reminded of when, as a young ecologist, I used to go around talking to groups of farmers in Australia about ecological issues and what they could do to improve conservation outcomes in farming landscapes. Back then in the 1980s, it could be a pretty disheartening process, because often the audience was unreceptive and it was clear that virtually none of them were interested. After one particularly bad session, I was sitting in the pub with an older colleague grumbling that what we were doing was really not making any difference to anything. My colleague smiled and said “Remember the girl and the starfish”, and he told me a story that I have since repeated to students and others many times

The girl and the starfish

A young girl was walking along a beach upon which thousands of starfish had been washed up during a terrible storm. When she came to each starfish, she would pick it up, and throw it back into the ocean. People watched her with amusement.

She had been doing this for some time when a man approached her and said, “Little girl, why are you doing this? Look at this beach! You can’t save all these starfish. You can’t begin to make a difference!”

The girl seemed crushed, suddenly deflated. But after a few moments, she bent down, picked up another starfish, and hurled it as far as she could into the ocean. Then she looked up at the man and replied,

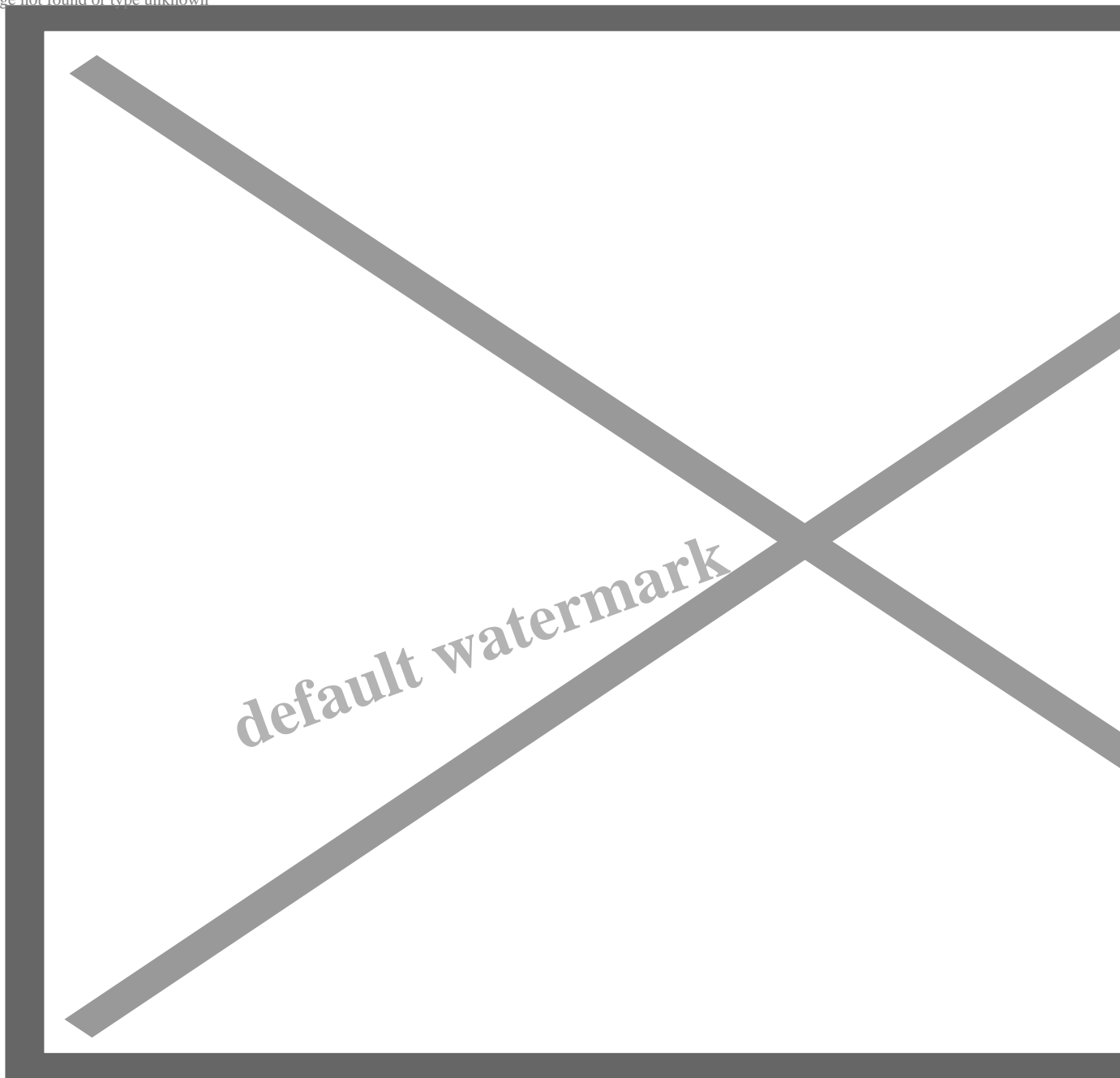
“Well, I made a difference for that one!”

From: Thestarfishchange.org adapted from “The Star Thrower” from THE UNEXPECTED UNIVERSE by Loren Eiseley. Copyright © 1968 by Loren Eiseley and renewed 1996 by John A. Eichman, III.

When I first heard the story, that was where it ended. Since then, I’ve found versions that add the “What next?” Most have the message that, if the little girl continued to throw starfish back into the ocean, she could save dozens or hundreds. If the man decided to join in, they could double the number saved. But if other people on the beach saw what they were doing and joined in, thousands could be saved – and if more people came, maybe hundreds of thousands could be saved. The point of the story is that one person can make a difference, no matter how small. But one person’s actions can also be catalytic and cause a much bigger change that has dramatic effects.

In the case of my talks to farmers, if I got even one farmer to think about the issues and maybe consider doing something differently, then that was a win. And if that farmer then chatted to his neighbours about it and they started agitating for change, then things could really get rolling. There are many, many people who do things simply to make a difference in some way. Think of all the tireless efforts of our healthcare workers during the pandemic – and even without the pandemic, their efforts save lives or change them for the better. Building guitars in Mpigi is a small but significant step in the right direction, and who knows, it might be a catalyst for a brighter future both locally and across Africa.

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Suubi Trade School. Photo: [DuncanAfrica](#)

Under African Skies – Paul Simon and Miriam Makeba, 1987

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Date Created

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