

MONICA AMBALAL – January 2016

Instructor With International Background Brings Awareness of World Music



Monica Ambalal grew up in Stockton, California, surrounded by music from around the world. Her French-Italian mother sang opera and her Indian-Ugandan father was a classical guitarist. She played the piano at age 6 and cello at age 17. “Every family celebration was filled with music,” she says. “My parents exposed me to everything from Mozart to Motown.”

Her passion for music followed her to college where she fell in love with the music program at her local community college, San Joaquin Delta, then went on to study jazz history at the University of New Orleans, get a master’s degree in musicology at Long Beach State, and begin working on her Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at UC Davis. Through her wide knowledge of music and her desire share it with others, she decided to pursue a teaching career at a community college.

“I appreciate the fact that many community college students haven’t made up their minds about what they want to do, and we are there to guide them and give them a springboard,” she says. “And I can appreciate first-generation students because I was one of them, the only one in my family to be born in the U.S.”

After adjunct teaching at several colleges, including Delta Joaquin, she was convinced to apply to teach full-time at Merritt College when she read its mission statement online. “When I saw the word ‘inclusion’ in the mission statement, I knew that was where I wanted to teach because it spoke to my educational concerns,” she says. “Everyone is on the same page and every student should have the same chance to succeed.”

Because many of the students are not musically aware, she makes sure to teach them all kinds of music, from blues and slave music to Elvis and Jimi Hendrix, and she passes out percussion instruments so they can all create rhythms together. She also takes them on field trips, like a recent one to the San Francisco Symphony.

“Many of these students have never been to a concert, and living so close to culture, I can give them those kinds of opportunities,” she says. “While they are in my class, I want to make sure they are aware of all kinds of music.”

—*Susan May*