

The Sound of World Music

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TANZANIA—The tropical island of Zanzibar, formerly an Arab slaving port and now home to the aging, labyrinthine city of Stonetown, survived a close brush with World Music last weekend when it hosted its fifth annual [Sauti za Busara](#) (Sounds of Wisdom) festival.

Well-tailored musicians and wrinkled hippies, travelers and tourists, muslims and rastas, black Zanzibarians and pink Europeans — for four days, thousands of us squeezed between the ramparts of Stonetown's Old Fort to nod and shake and whistle at a continental assortment of musicians.

Years ago, the Old Fort was the spot where captured slaves were once herded for inspection, then auctioned off and hustled onto dhows across the seas from Arabia to Alabama. (Miniature relics of those same dhows now hustle tourists off to sandbars and coral reefs.) Their new lives consisted of toiling in cotton fields, but we all know the real work took place in the alleyways, abandoned staircases and ghetto hovels where no master cared to tread or listen. In those hideaway places, expatriated Africans concocted the sounds — of wisdom? of freedom? of plain old feelin' good? — that would eventually become blues and jazz, rap and hip-hop, hard-talking stuff that made for easy listening. If they left their motherland as slaves, one has to ask: who's the master now?

No wonder their descendants, more than those of any other continent, are accused of fomenting that canned revolution of coffee-shop soundtracks known as World Music. What a title, what a box of a category not even fit for an old shoe...World Music? A pimper's paradise for CD marketers if there ever was one. The term calls to mind hypnotic hymns sung in a language no listener dares understand, complemented by instruments we can't pronounce, a somnambulant sound orchestrated to offset the uplifting effect of too much caffeine (which also comes from Africa).

The show in Stone Town gave the lie to any such phrase as World Music. For how could you box in, say, [Afrodynamix](#), a group that blended Austrian oompa (bass supplied by tuba), with Senegalese jazz and American hip-hop? The eight piece ensemble came out of nowhere on Saturday night, three days into the festival, blowing minds (this one, at least) with smooth lyrics and raucous trombones, melodious rapping, and a closing beat-box session in which one member traded his mic for a giant sea shell. We'll forgive them the uninspired band name.

We'll also forgive the BBC for trying to pigeon-hole the likes of [Bassekou Kouyate & Ngoni BA](#) with a prize for World Music Album of the year in [2007](#). Why be vague? Bassekou is from Mali. His ngoni is a traditional lute with about seven hundred years of history inside it, every moment of which Bassekou coaxed out and compressed into a half-hour set that started deceptively slow, then rose to a frenetic pitch in which his fingertips became indistinguishable

from the strings they plucked. It's true that Bassekou and his bandmates came draped in traditional attire, thick layers of Malian cotton (presumably picked by free men) dyed a rich brown by crushed leaves, just as you might see on the cover of a CD rack in Starbucks — but why not? We all wear suits to big meetings.

Later, near the end of Sunday night, [Nigerian Afrobeat Academy](#)'s Ade Bantu would stand in front of the crowd in a two-piece purple body suit and berate those Africans in the crowd who wore American-style business outfits. "That's not African," he cried, "and if you don't agree with me, then you need to learn your history." Wait a moment, Mr. Bantu, which history do you mean? Ranting on, this time about the important role language plays in keeping a culture alive, he swooned: "Tanzania, you have set an amazing example by holding on to your native language of Swahili. Don't ever let it go." Never mind that Tanzania's first president, [Julius Nyerere](#), deliberately quashed the many languages that were in fact native to Tanzania by way of forging national unity in a newly independent Tanzania.

But forgive this funky ignoramus! Bantu's music was great, however misinformed his politics may have been. He rapped like a mad man and sang like a lark; he was a terrific dancer too. He had the whole crowd bumping, and his mixed European-African ensemble mirrored the crowd's demographic hodgepodge, a cultural who-gives-a-damn potpourri.

With some forty acts to accommodate, not many people got more than half an hour in the limelight. Rarely enough, but it would have to do. Sauti za Busara was a musical buffet whose maitre-d' refused to let the guests overeat on any particular dish.

And speaking of dishes, let's not forget the street market behind the Old Fort. Between sets, we snuck away and wandered the narrow, twisting alleyways of Stonetown in search of octopus, tuna, squid, barracuda, crab, red snapper and more, all skewered and waiting for the barbecue. Fez-wearing fishermen spread their tentacled catch on wooden tables, the displays lit orange by oil lamps and stalked by dozens of street cats that rubbed our ankles and sprang into our laps if we let them.

But back to the concert, where too many fine acts to mention came on, one after another: Bring the Noise, ten countries worth of hip-hop with a classic east/west Africa rap battle half way through; [Nako2Nako](#), an all-Tanzanian sensation (hip-hop once again) who I'd later bump into while searching for the afterparty in a silent Stonetown alleyway, discovering in the process that they were soft-spoken and humble despite their recent outrageous success; Kenya's Unasi, another genre-bending funk compilation of singers, guitarists, drummers and rappers who deserve special mention for bringing half a dozen of the crowd's most beautiful women on stage and letting those girls upstage them by shaking their seemingly triple-jointed booty.

From time to time through these and other acts, you could spot a regal figure sitting tall in the VIP section. Decked head to toe in a sea of rich fabric, her face partly hidden by the intricate embroidery of a Tanzanian kanga, she smoked luxuriously and sat facing sideways to the stage — whether out of disdain or in order to hear better was difficult to say. [Bi Kidude](#), ninety-some years old (no one knows exactly and she's not talking), has been singing taarab music since the twenties. World War II, the Beatles, half the ozone layer and colonial Africa have come and gone, but Bi still stands when she sings.

She came out shortly after dark on Sunday night, wearing a shimmering gown the color of mother of pearl. There aren't many teeth left in Kidude's mouth. Her face is haughty, lined with the secrets of ages, and for a good ten minutes she stood and listened with us to the violins, ouds and guitars that comprise the haunting backdrop to traditional taarab music. A bongo drumbeat provided the second half of the genre, defined as a mixture of Arab and African melody. At last, she lent her voice to the ensemble, a throaty, slightly scratchy, yet firm and far-reaching reed that stretched out over the crowd and most of the island for a few spell-binding moments of musical royalty.

The whole crowd sat through her performance – that way, everyone could see. The high stone walls around us stood to attention, and the ghosts of a thousand slaves mingled with our imaginations. Kidude swayed, and sang, and finally stepped off the stage. When she disappeared from sight, we rose slowly and, with the greatest reluctance, fought our way back to the twenty-first century.