

Sauti za Busara, the festival promoting African music in all its diversity

Sauti za Busara is a festival dedicated to African music. The festival is taking place each year beginning of February on the beautiful island of Zanzibar, located in the Indian Ocean, just a couple of miles away from the Tanzanian coast. Sauti za Busara is one of the best festivals to discover new sounds and unique artists from the continent. Starting in a couple of days, from February 7th till 10th 2019, it makes a good reason to get to know the values of this festival better. Jump in!

Surprisingly very few music festivals actually exist in East Africa. There are a lot of one day music events for example in Dar es Salaam and other cities but barely a few multi-days festivals. Among these festivals, there is Bayimba Festival in Kampala, Uganda; Zanzibar International Film Festival (ZIFF), Marahaba festival, Bagamoyo festival, all three in Tanzania; and of course Sauti za Busara.

THE reason why Sauti has become well-known in the region is the fact that the festival only hosts live music. "100% live" is its slogan. This might seem strange to other countries but in Tanzania it is unusual for people to go to concerts and see musicians playing live instruments on stage. Sauti za Busara's programming comprises a lot of traditional music as well as young urban contemporary talents. This way the festival is sure that young people are excited to come to the event, which is one of its priorities.

How it all began

Launched in 2003, Sauti za Busara was primarily dedicated to promote and appreciate the richness and the diversity of music from the East African region. Over the years the festival has grown and changed. Its focus is still on East African music but since a couple of years it has been showcasing more and more music from other regions of the continent and from the African diasporas also. Nowadays Sauti za Busara shows the diversity of African music. By doing so it builds respect for the diversity of African cultural identity. Since 2017, Africalia supports the festival by giving them the opportunity to invite artists and groups coming from the countries where the organisation is active, which is also a way to give these artists access to new markets. One thing is sure, promises Yusuf Mahmoud the director of Sauti za Busara: people coming to the festival will discover unique talents and sounds they have never heard before.

Originally from the UK, Yusuf lives and works in Zanzibar for 20 years now. The first time he went to the island was in 1998, to help coordinate during six months the first edition of the ZIFF as a volunteer. Yusuf stayed with ZIFF as director for music and performing arts and the six months became two, three, four, five years... until 2002. That year, he decided to leave ZIFF and set up a new festival focussing more on music. That's how Sauti za Busara started.

The first edition was about 80-90% local music. Today the balance is more 50-50%. "*We felt it was important also for East African musicians to have the opportunity to see and learn from other African musicians. We are now working on the 16th edition and I can see that this has had an impact on the standards and the quality of the Tanzanian performances.*" explains Yusuf. The level of performance, artistic quality, choreography of Tanzanian artists has improved and they are really prepared to perform on important international events, unlike in the early years of the festival.

Building capacities for the future

Besides music, Sauti za Busara is also concerned by job creation and training in order to build capacities.

Having interns and trainees is a real job: training and teaching requires dedication and commitment, and time which is in short supply for the small team of Sauti. Throughout the year, the team is limited by 3,5 people working on the festival. Organising training the entire year often had very little impact regarding the high demand it had on financial and human resources, to the extent that their ability to produce a world class international festival was even sometimes challenged. This is the reason why these last two years, they decided it was better to make as many events happen around the festival time, when there are thousands of people on the island. *“I think this was a wise decision in terms of how limited time and money resources is spent now. When we have interns, trainees we will now try to make them join us from October in a way that will be leading up to the festival, where they can get real and practical experience.”* confesses Yusuf. Most of the training done by Sauti za Busara is based on practical exercise rather than classroom theory. This way of doing is also more relevant for the young people they are working with because they don't necessarily have high education in the government system. *“If there was unlimited money, we would organise training events at different times of the year but with our limited budget, we have to make choices and keep it practical.”* adds Yusuf.

Skills reinforced are very diverse going from sound, lighting, stage management to festival production, press, marketing, promotion. The priority for Sauti is to host people from Tanzania or East Africa, who then may come back and grow with the festival. During the festival, the team reaches 150 people, almost all from Tanzania and a few others from Kenya or Zimbabwe. Most of them come back working year after year. Their confidence is growing, such as their ability to anticipate problems and to find solutions. This is something the director of Sauti za Busara is really proud of.

Capacity building is also something done in partnership with other festivals. For example, the Oslo World, a music festival in Norway, has been helping to train the lighting technicians by inviting technicians from Tanzania in Norway or by sending an expert from Norway to train the interns in Tanzania. Roskilde Festival in Denmark hosted several crew members of Sauti za Busara to give them tips and teach them on fields ranging from artist liaison, sound engineering to security. Yusuf testifies: *“The crew came back very inspired by what they saw and what they learned around audience safety issues, how crowds of people move and the importance of emergency exits.”* Another example is with the Harare International Festival of the Arts (HIFA) in Zimbabwe. A senior member of the team trains Sauti's technical crew and stage managers. The job she is doing is amazing because she is from a similar environment and understands the culture but also the challenges of making things work with limited resources. She is also more in the background and asks the crew what they think rather than telling them what to do. *“I think it's very valuable when we have these exchanges between festivals, especially when they are Africa to Africa, South – South because the similarities, opportunities and challenges are often not so far apart.”*

Connecting people

A lot of foreign professionals come to Sauti za Busara because they know they will find new styles of music that will be interesting to take to festivals and concerts, mostly in other parts of Africa or in Europe. The third element very important for Sauti is providing opportunities for these professionals to network and exchange knowledge with the locals.

Each afternoon during the festival, the platform called “Movers and Shakers” responds to this need. The activity takes place in an informal small space. It is only open to invited professionals: artists, managers, promoters, media, donors, sponsors and other people working in the field. Local artists are highly encouraged to participate too. However if someone is interested, the organisers will rarely refuse anyone admission.

The “Movers and Shakers” is a space where artists can meet other artists, managers meet promoters, etc. Each day also has a theme: music for change, women in music, meet the artists. The invited panelists are usually musicians. Good things always come out of these opportunities for people to meet each other, around topics related to the music and cultural industries.

Where other big events are organising many seminars, conferences, speed meetings, Sauti za Busara choose a different system, less formal. Many international professionals report to Yusuf that it’s actually more beneficial the way they are doing it in Zanzibar. Yusuf doesn’t really have an answer on why they are saying this but he guesses that maybe one reason is that they don’t have a lot of intellectual and academic speeches. “Movers and Shakers” can be characterised by less talking, more time dedicated for questions and answers and more opportunities to identify who is present in the audience. For example, specific moments are devoted just to break up, so people can have coffee and drinks. During these moments, the participants are really animated and excited, you see them exchanging business cards, flyers and CDs.

Maybe there are lessons to be learned here for other events. *“I think a lot of true networking happens over a coffee, a juice or a beer, in places where people are relaxed and interacting naturally rather than at formal conferences.”* Sauti za Busara is for sure united in music but also a festival connecting people.

by Audrey Brisack