

DJ Kampire, an essential figure of the music scene in Uganda and East Africa

Africalia's road has been crossing the one of Kampire Bahana a couple of times these last years like at E.A.S.T. (East African Soul Train) or more recently during Nyege Nyege. This young woman is very active on the cultural scene as a DJ, an artist and a writer. Based in Kampala, Uganda, DJ Kampire is today an essential figure of her country. On top of this, she is also now playing on the international music scene: in Africa, in Europe and in a couple of days she will also be playing in Asia. Her presence in Brussels, where she performed at the famous French event *Les Nuits Sonores* on September 29th, 2018 at BOZAR, was a perfect time to meet her and get to know her better: what drove her to become a DJ, her music influences, her projects today and for the future. Please clear the stage for DJ Kampire!

According to you, how did the cultural and artistic scene evolved in Uganda these last years?

In the ten or so years I have been involved in the scene, I can say it is definitely growing which is great. It is also diversifying: there are more artists and organisers, more weird happenings. Nowadays we are getting a bit more of the less mainstream things - strange art exhibitions, underground music, cultural exchanges with underground artists - which feed the Ugandan scene. I think this is important for the growth of any cultural industry because it means that there is more opportunity, more competition. This forces everyone to get better at their craft rather than just being known because it's the first time you've done something. If a country really wants to see its industry grow, it needs to create opportunities so people can perfect their craft over time. It's good to see more people doing so and that organisations like Nyege Nyege and 32° EAST - which are artists-owned organisations - exist to support Ugandan talent.

What drove you to become a DJ?

It was actually unintentional. I met many artists going to electronic music parties in Kampala and I got exposed to a lot of music. At the same time, I was always the person at the parties who liked to control the playlist. I got involved helping some friends organise the first Nyege Nyege festival in 2015 and Derek Debru - who is the cofounder of the music festival, taking place in Jinja, Uganda - suggested that I come and play at one of the parties, even though if at that time I couldn't mix. I took my playlists, played some tunes and people enjoyed it so much that I have been doing it ever since. Playing more just forced me to get better at it and little by little I learned how to mix.

Can you please tell us more about your music influences?

I found that I'm influenced by a lot of music that my dad used to play when I was a kid. He listened to a lot of Congolese music like Soukous, songs featuring Lingala guitars and Coupé-Décalé, a popular music style in Ivory Coast. I'm also attracted to electronic music which is inspired by our past, tribute to our musical heritage as a continent. Basically, I'm interested in anything with African influence you can play on the dancefloor.

Is it a challenge to be a DJ in Uganda?

There are challenges to take up in any job. The music industry is generally not that big in Uganda. It's difficult to find gigs or getting paid. I don't think the Ugandan market really supports professional DJ's at this point and it's a challenge when you think in terms of equipment, sound checks, etc. But as I have been travelling a lot these last months, I think that being a DJ is a challenge everywhere. You have to create your own audience and a lot of DJ's become party promoters in order to create their audience and a market for themselves. So it's definitely not an easy career path but people do it because they are passionate about it.

Do you think being a DJ is more challenging for women than for men?

I think there is probably more barriers hindering the accessibility for women to become a DJ just because there are only a few women DJ's. When you don't see yourself on a career path, it doesn't seem possible. But being a woman can also be a benefit. I have the impression that people pay me more attention and give me more of a chance because I am a woman. When people see me playing they might stay around a little longer because they will say "Look it's a woman. I have never seen a woman play before, let me check it out for a sec". There is a growing number of women DJ's in Kampala so I'm sure that this issue of representation is going to change quickly.

What would be your best advice for younger woman DJ's starting out?

I guess I would say don't be scared (*Laughter*). One other barrier for women to enter is that we expect to be perfect immediately. We place this expectation on ourselves making it more difficult for us to take action. Boys are allowed to try and fail, to suck at something in the beginning and get better, which is necessary to be good at anything, whereas girls are a bit more fearful of not being perfect the first time round.

When I play a lot of women come back to me and say "I always wanted to be a DJ". And I tell them "Why don't you just do it? Do it for fun and you never know what will happen." So I would definitely say "Girls don't be afraid!"

What projects are you working on today?

Right now, I'm on my second tour so that's keeping me very busy. We have also finished the fourth edition of the Nyege Nyege festival where I DJed and helped out a little bit, like organising the photography schedules and other small jobs like that. Nowadays, I'm trying to be less involved in the administrative work and logistics of the festival and just to enjoy it a bit more, get to talk to people, etc.

Nyege Nyege is not just a festival. There are also two labels: Nyege Nyege Tapes and Hakuna Ku lala which is a digital label. Just travelling the world with the Nyege Nyege Tapes name and trying to carry the flag and promote the music, network, meet people... is really keeping me busy.

What are your dreams for the future?

I have learnt this year not to limit my dreams and even to allow things beyond my imagination to happen to me. For example mixing at Sonar. I never even imagine I would play for so many thousands of people. I'm playing in Lisbon with DJs from the label Enchufada and more and more often with artists who have led me to African electronic music like ten, fifteen years ago. So dreams I didn't even know I had are coming true. But I think that next year I probably would like to focus on deepening my DJ practice, learning a bit more of making music edits, remixes and productions and last but not least just continue to promote East African music.

Do you think of living somewhere else?

Sometimes, yes I do. Living in Uganda can be quite frustrating in your day to day life, like the road is not functioning, bureaucracy is not working, being taxed on our social media, hearing the news about people being beaten and arrested for political activities, the ill-treatment of women... All these facts can be frustrating and create a lot of unnecessary stress but I really can't imagine living away from the African continent. It's good to leave so you can come back and appreciate your home.

Interview by Audrey Brisack