

Sauti za Busara ZANZIBAR

East African and Swahili music get a chance to shine at a festival in the Indian Ocean. **Simon Broughton** reports

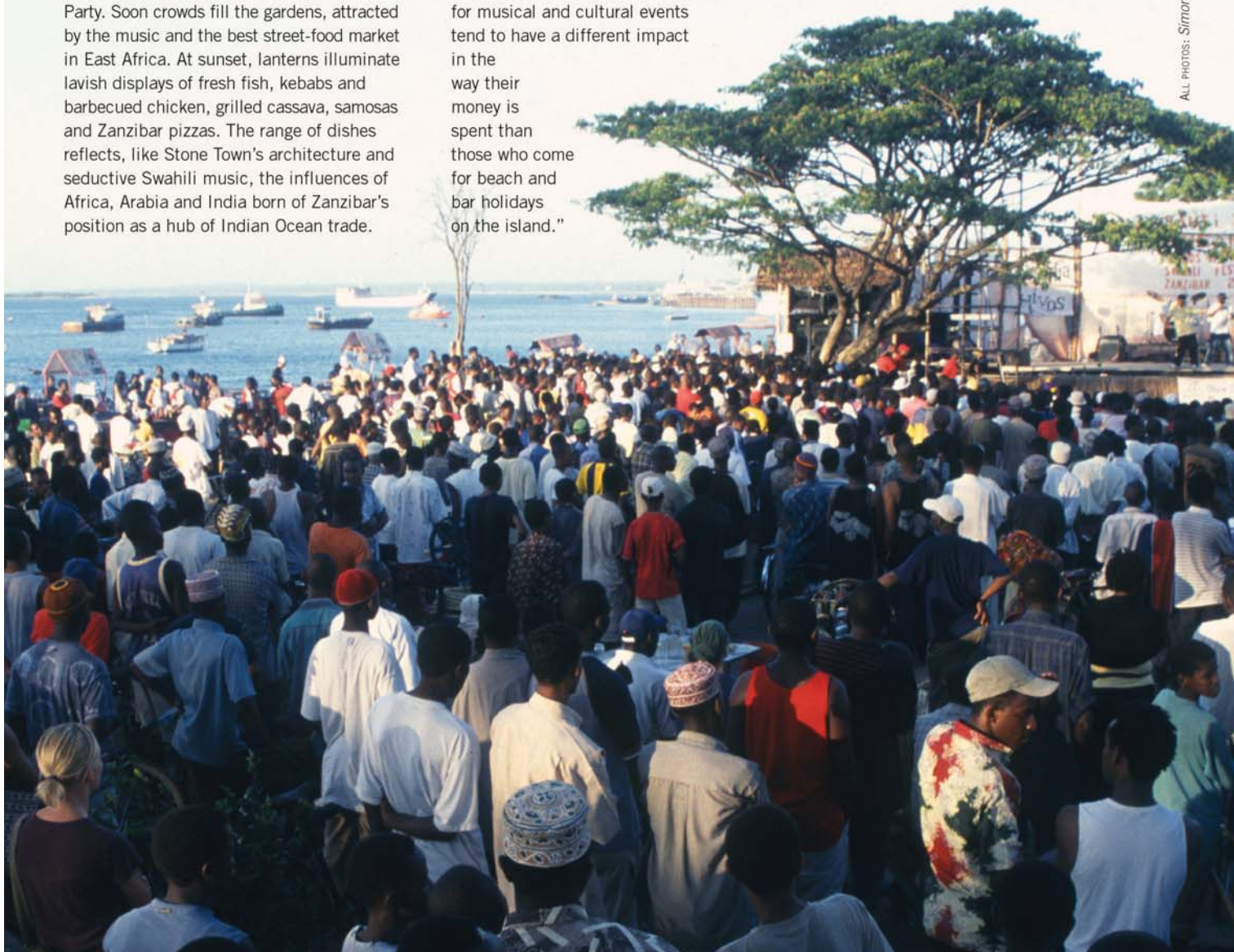
Zanzibar, like Timbuktu, is one of those magical names that conjures up exotic and romantic images. In the case of Zanzibar, off the coast of Tanzania in the Indian Ocean, they're true. Spices, palm-fringed beaches, coral reefs and Stone Town, with its labyrinth of narrow streets which is one of Africa's most alluring cities. Forodhani Gardens is quite a location for a music festival, between the so-called House of Wonders (Beit al-Ajaib), the tallest building in Stone Town, and the ocean with fin-shaped sails of dhows gliding by.

As the heat of the afternoon starts to abate, the gardens resound to the sound of taarab from old-time Kenyan wedding singer Maulidi Juma and his Mombasa Musical Party. Soon crowds fill the gardens, attracted by the music and the best street-food market in East Africa. At sunset, lanterns illuminate lavish displays of fresh fish, kebabs and barbecued chicken, grilled cassava, samosas and Zanzibar pizzas. The range of dishes reflects, like Stone Town's architecture and seductive Swahili music, the influences of Africa, Arabia and India born of Zanzibar's position as a hub of Indian Ocean trade.

The Sauti za Busara Festival took place for the first time in February this year and attracted some 12,000 people over three days. Sauti za Busara is Swahili for Sounds of Wisdom and it's principally a festival of the hybrid Swahili music that dominates the East African coastal territories of Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar. Its organiser is Yusuf Mahmoud: "Our main aim is to showcase the wealth and diversity of music from the Swahili-speaking region. It's geared primarily at the local audience who turn out in their thousands and create a lot of the buzz and excitement of the festival. But we also hope the festival will bring more recognition of the fertility of the local culture and bring a different kind of tourism. People who are coming for musical and cultural events tend to have a different impact in the way their money is spent than those who come for beach and bar holidays on the island."

The performances take place from 4pm till midnight with a couple of 15 minute intervals to coincide with prayer times (Zanzibar is 90% Muslim). The concerts are free, to ensure a large local audience, although a \$10 pass (for the weekend) gets you into a seated area. Music ranges from traditional ensembles playing rootsy Zanzibari kidumbak or Tanzanian ngoma, to contemporary guitar bands, from Islamic Sufi music to Swahili hip-hop - in short it's a great window onto the current East African music scene.

A remarkable figure is veteran Zanzibar star Bi Kidude. At 93 years of age she is old enough to have known Siti bint Saad (1880-1950), the most famous of all



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Swahili singers, when she was making some of the first recordings of taarab in the late 20s. Although she sings taarab (and performed with Culture Musical Club at WOMAD this summer), Bi Kidude's speciality is drum-led female initiation music. Bi Kidude stands straddling her tall msondo drum and, with two other female drummers, beats out insistent rhythms and sings provocative verses which bring laughter and cheers from the audience - 'you might be grey-haired, but you're not old if you can still get it up' or such like.

Revelatory was the extraordinary ritual performance by Maulidi ya Homu ya Mtendeni, also from Zanzibar. I've seen Sufi musicians from all over the Islamic world, but never encountered anything like this. About 15 young men dressed in pure white robes and white caps kneel in two rows. Musicians beat drums while an elder burns incense and leads the prayer in a call-and-response with the chorus. It's as if they are shaping and sculpting the words with elegant, butterfly movements of their right arms, hands and fingers. So sensitive and refined. Suddenly it moves up a gear and they rise up and start swaying forward and back in waves. It's a visual spectacle that is beautiful, profound and spiritually uplifting. There are only three remaining groups like this in the world - all based in Zanzibar. Maulidi ya Homu are certain to get taken up by international festivals and are booked for the World Sacred Music Festival in Fes next year.

Kenya's stylish pop star Eric Wainaina was another highlight. His tight band includes soukous style guitar, keyboards, djembé drum and bass. Wainaina's song 'Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo' (Country of Small Bribes) is a stinging criticism of bribery and corruption that was the soundtrack to the electoral defeat of President Moi's

KANU party in 2002. Wainaina quizzed the Zanzibar crowd asking whether people asked for kitu kidogo or baksheesh in Zanzibar. The audience seemed slightly nervous about replying as if they were wondering who might be watching. Wainaina also ran into problems with the local censorship board who insisted his scantily-clad dancers cover up so as not to offend Muslim sensibilities.

The highlight from beyond the Swahili world was Ghorwane from Mozambique, Tanzania's neighbour to the south. The band have been active for over 20 years (with releases for Real World and Piranha) and now seem back on form after a difficult couple of years since the murder of their singer Pedro Langa.

Despite the world-class quality of artists like Ghorwane, Eric Wainaina or Tanzania's African Revolution Band who closed the festival, there's no doubt that the most popular music with the locals is Swahili hip-hop or 'bongo flava'. Outfits like Off Side Trick, Wazenji Kijiwe, Al Hajj Goya and X Plastaz had people climbing every available tree and pole for a view. Of course, without a knowledge of Swahili I'm missing the biting relevance and satire, but musically they seem pretty thin.

Intrinsic to the Zanzibar music scene is the Dhow Countries Music Academy (DCMA), five minutes walk up the shore from Forodhani Gardens. It's home to the small Baladna Taarab group comprising teachers at the DCMA, the only local taarab group playing at the 2004 festival. It was also the location for cross-cultural workshops bringing together musicians from different corners of the Swahili world and beyond under the guidance of Arnold Chivalala. Probably more important than the performances at the festival were the insights and discoveries of master



LEFT: Veteran singer and drummer Bi Kidude

BOTTOM LEFT: The Sufi singers of Maulidi ya Homu ya Mtendeni

musicians and young players juxtaposing some very different musical instruments and styles.

Already in its first year, Sauti za Busara has proved itself a significant event and a great showcase for Swahili music. The stage design could be more artistic than a patchwork of sponsors' logos. And it may be an idea to add some indoor concerts (with paid tickets) for taarab music and other styles not suited to busy outdoor settings. Why should West Africa and South Africa hog all the attention? It's time East Africa got its share of the spotlight. Stone Town is one of Africa's most beautiful cities and, during Sauti za Busara, home to some of its most exciting sounds. █



Sauti za Busara 2005 runs for four days from February 10-13 and will include Zanzibar's Malindi Taarab Orchestra, celebrating their centenary.
www.zanzibar.net/zanzibar/sauti_za_busara/

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