

Musical Sunshine from Malawi

Posted At : February 26, 2008 1:33 AM | Posted By : Matthew LaVoie

Related Categories: Malawi

Nestled between Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique, Malawi has earned its nickname as 'the warm heart of Africa'. And 'warm' is precisely the adjective I would use to describe Malawian music. There is a sunny optimism in much of the Malawian music I've heard, and after a grim weekend of cold, rain, and snow, here in Washington D.C., I figured I'd warm myself up with a few Malawian recordings from our collection.

One of the most popular styles of music in Malawi, in the late 1960s was South African Kwela; a driving dance music, powered by virtuoso penny whistle players. Migrant workers returning from South Africa and Zimbabwe brought kwela music to Malawi, and it was in Salisbury, the capital of the federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (which is now Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe), that Daniel and Donald Kachamba discovered Kwela music. When the brothers returned, in 1961, to Nyasaland (which became Malawi in 1964), they started to perform Kwela music on the streets, at markets, and in nightclubs. Daniel played the guitar, and his younger brother Donald was a penny whistle virtuoso; he had been playing the instrument since the age of six.

In 1967, the Austrian ethnomusicologist Gerhard Kubik heard the Kachamba brothers playing for a large crowd near the main market in Blantyre, Malawi's largest city. And at some point that same year, he brought the Kachamba brothers band to the United States Cultural Center in Blantyre. In February of 1968, the United States Information Service office in Blantyre, sent a four-song tape to the Voice of America, with the following description: 'enclosed is [a recording, made on December 4, 1967 of] an African combo consisting of four boys aged 7-16. They were recently discovered by a German musicologist who was researching African music in Malawi.'

In fact, at the time of these recordings Daniel was 20 years old (he was born in 1947, and passed away in 1987), and Donald was 14 (he was born in 1953, and passed away in 2001); two younger boys accompanied them, one playing the string bass, and the other the rattle. Donald's penny whistle playing on these two tracks is fantastic.

↳ [The Kachamba Brothers 'Malawi Moto'](#)

↳ [The Kachamba Brothers 'Malawi Cha-cha-cha'](#)



Let's jump ahead a couple of decades, with one of Malawi's most popular bandleaders of the late 1980s and 1990s, Robert Fumulani (he is the man crouching in the picture above). He was born, in 1948, in the city of Zomba (which is 40 miles northeast of Blantyre), and first started to draw the attention of Malawian audiences in the 1970s. During the 1980s, Fumulani won the Malawian 'Entertainer of the Year' award three times. And by the time he passed away, in 1998, his musical earnings had allowed him to open several businesses, including the Likhubula Entertainment Centre, his nightclub in Chileka (a suburb of Blantyre), and a cargo services company at Chileka airport. His musical legacy is kept alive by three of his seven sons;

Anjiri, Musandide, and Chizondi- who are the core of the Black Missionaries, currently one of Malawi's most popular groups.

This track gives you a good idea of Fumulani's relaxed Afro-ma (a contraction of Afro-Malawian) groove. In this one Fumulani pleads with 'Patricia', he sings, 'don't leave us, stay with us, don't break up your family.'

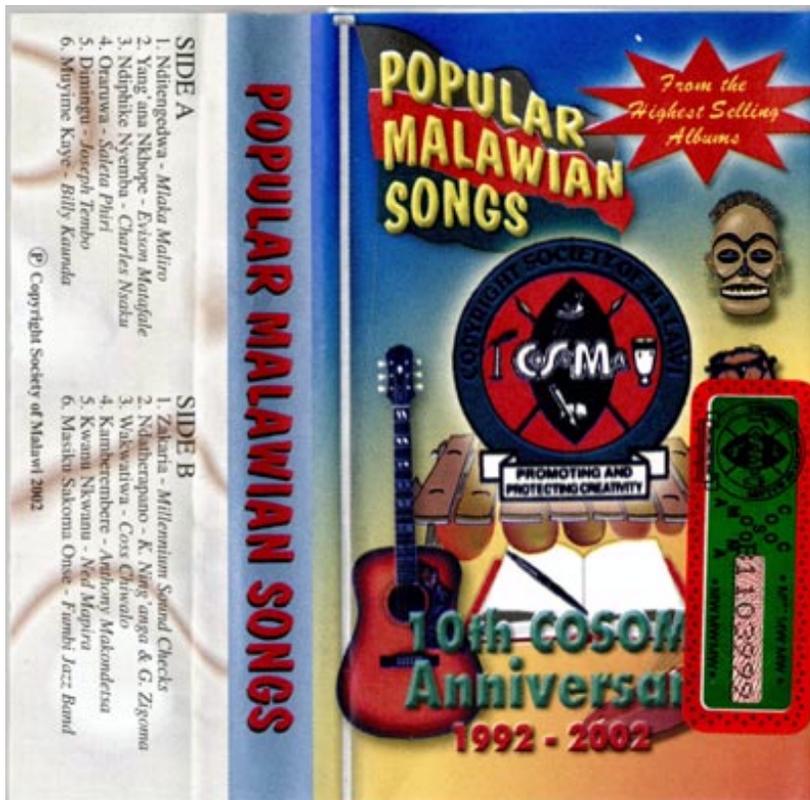
↳ [Robert Fumulani & the Likhubula River Dance Band 'Patricia'](#)

One of the key ingredients of the Likhubula River Dance Band's sound was the guitar playing of Ernest Mapemba. Near the end of 'Mwana Wanga', or 'My Child', Mapemba breaks things down with some wonderfully relaxed playing.

↳ [Robert Fumulani & the Likhubula River Dance Band 'Mwana Wanga'](#)

This last track has got a nice reggae beat. Fumulani asks for guidance and advice.

↳ [Robert Fumulani & the Likhubula River Dance Band 'Malangizo Anu'](#)



Let's keep the reggae beat going with Evison Matafale, who before he passed away in 2001, was one of Malawi's most loved artists. In 2000, he surprised music fans with his debut release 'Kuyimba I', which became one of the year's best-selling releases. Matafale recorded the album with Robert Fumulani's three aforementioned sons, who after Evison passed away, renamed themselves the Black Missionaries.

In 2001, after a long battle with tuberculosis, Matafale released 'Kuyimba II'. He passed away several months later, however, dying suddenly while in police custody. He was only 32 years old. According to an article published by the BBC, Matafale's brother Elton believes Evison was killed, because of letters he had written to then-president Bakili Muluzi, denouncing his government's policies. In 'Yang'ana Nkhope', Evison sings 'Look at my face, look at your face, we are all God's Children.'

↳ [Evison Matafale 'Yang'ana Nkhope'](#)

Next up is Joseph Tembo, a great guitar player, from southern Malawi. He was born in 1977, in southern Malawi, and is a member of the Sena ethnic group, who are related to the Shona people of Zimbabwe. This relationship helps explain the similarities between Tembo's music and the Shona melodies and rhythms of Zimbabwean Chimurenga music.

↳ [Joseph Tembo 'Dimingu'](#)

This last song is by Coss Chiwalo, who for many years was (and may still be) the bandleader of the 'Alleluja Band', a Malawian musical institution. He was born in 1974 and has released three solo albums. 'Wakwatiwa', one of his biggest hits, is a song that is usually played at weddings. He sings of the joy of the bride and groom.

↳ [Coss Chiwalo 'Wakwatiwa'](#)

I hope the music hit the spot. I would like to thank Dr. John Lwanda of Pamtondo records for his help with research and song translations.