

INTRODUCING...

Msafiri Zawose

Alexandra Petropoulos speaks to Tanzanian musician Msafiri Zawose and producer Sam Jones about their inspired collaboration

Collaboration can be a tricky beast. A successful one takes mutual respect, equal talent and, perhaps above all, patience; all qualities that are evident in the latest album from Tanzanian Gogo musician Msafiri Zawose and producer Sam Jones.

Zawose comes from a long line of Wagogo musicians from central Tanzania, and his father, Hukwe, was a well-respected international artist, recording for Real World Records. The most important thing his father passed down to him was a sense of creativity based within tradition. “He was not afraid to be creative and write his own songs. My father was always writing something new, and creating new instruments even. So I really value creating something unique.” That sense of experimentation is the springboard upon which *Uhamiaji* developed, fusing together traditional and modern in one of the most inspired collaborations to come out of East Africa.

Uhamiaji is Zawose’s collaborative album with Santuri East Africa, a local underground network of artists, and producer and co-writer Sam Jones of the cultural organisation SoundThread. “The idea was to take some of Msafiri’s music and to put it through the Santuri machine via myself as a producer and co-writer,” Jones explains, “and basically just throw the rule book out.”

Even though Zawose is no stranger to updating tradition, he was initially wary of working with Jones. “It took some time to understand,” he admits. In fact, finding that mutual understanding and a successful working relationship was a journey for both. “The whole premise was to do something that was different, and we were all on the same page with that,” Jones says. “But how that actually worked out...” he pauses, searching for the right words. “It wasn’t obvious to



him where he was relinquishing control and I was taking it up, or vice versa. That nuance was lost. The record started with lots of enthusiasm and then we had a lost week which we continued to work in but...” he trails off before laughing, “it was a difficult week.”

“The thing for Msafiri is that he comes alive when he’s on stage or when you are playing instruments together. For him, that’s collaboration: sitting in front of a computer, saying ‘what do you think of that?’ didn’t feel like collaboration.” But they powered through and emerged on the other side with a mutual respect, and Zawose is clearly proud of what they created: “Sam did a very good job respecting the roots even though there is a lot of distortion. [The tradition] is still there.”

Bringing tradition into the 21st century is exactly what Zawose was aiming for with the album. “The vision I had is to explore the music in a completely different way.” He sees this new sound as a gateway to new audiences, helping those unfamiliar

with traditional Gogo music better connect with it. And connection is what *Uhamiaji* is all about. “Now, we are connected,” Zawose says. “It’s not like you’re from London, you’re from Africa – we’re connected. That’s the message.”

Uhamiaji translates as ‘Immigration’ and is about the movement of people. This is reflected musically in the melding of styles and genres. The music feels borderless; the complex rhythms of the traditional music effortlessly weave through sophisticated electronics. Hypnotic instruments like the *ilimba* (thumb piano) or *zeze* (fiddle) are complemented by mesmerising, subtle beats. It’s the perfect collusion between traditional and contemporary, Europe and Africa, acoustic and electronic. But Zawose doesn’t see this as the end of his collaborations. “I’m sure I’ll be doing more, a lot of this in different ways and with different peoples,” he smiles, “because I’m open to everyone.” ♦

➤ **ALBUM** *Uhamiaji* is a *Top of the World* review in this issue, see p57