

Festival-goers milling around Harry's Bar on the beach at Lake Malawi

LAKE OF STARS FESTIVAL MALAWI

Simon Broughton joins travellers and locals for three days of multicultural music on the palm-fringed edge of Lake Malawi

It's really the lake itself that's the biggest star of the festival. Lake of Stars is held on the shores of Lake Malawi, the third largest lake in Africa, a vast inland sea larger than Wales with waves breaking on the beach. 'Lake of Stars' is David Livingstone's description of Lake Nyasa (as it was formerly known) when he set eyes on it in 1859.

The festival takes place over three days (Friday to Sunday) with a timber and bamboo main stage in well-maintained gardens, shaded with trees. Even the beach is dotted with palms, clumps of bamboo and occasional mango trees providing protection from the sun. This year, however, the festival moves from its former site at Chintchehe Inn to Senga Bay and the Livingstonia Beach Hotel. It's much closer to the capital Lilongwe, easier to access and I'm told there's a good campsite close to the beach.

Will Jameson, who organises the festival in the UK, got hooked by Malawi and

it's easy to understand why. But it only happened by accident, "I signed up to the Gap Challenge for a gap year in 1998 and said I wanted to go to Australia or New Zealand. They phoned back and said 'you're going to Malawi.' I didn't even know where it was." Jameson worked on a sugar plantation for six months before going to Liverpool

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University where he started a DJ club night called Chibuku Shake Shake – named after Malawian maize beer. As its popularity grew he thought about returning to Malawi and giving something back. He asked people if they'd be interested in attending an event in the heart of Africa with Western DJs and local acts. The feedback was positive and Lake of Stars first took place in 2004.

Its reputation as a cool, laid-back festival has been growing since then. Last year it attracted 1,500 people and contributed £4,600 to a UNICEF water project.

Frankly, on the Friday night of the festival I thought I'd made a terrible mistake. Here I was listening to a handful of British DJs playing house music to a (mainly Western and white) crowd of 20-somethings who might have been in Leeds, Bristol or a beach party in Goa. I don't want to travel across the world to listen to Radio 1's Annie Mac. But things improved dramatically on the Saturday and Sunday. The arrival of live Malawian music – and some bands from South Africa – made all the difference. There was a lively Malawian crowd and an infectious, excited atmosphere. "I come from a dance music background," explains Jameson, "but I've got more into world music and I love the idea that you can come to this unique location and listen to both genres of music. For instance, you can listen to Lucius

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HOW TO GET THERE

- Simon Broughton travelled to Lake of Stars overland through Mozambique from South Africa with Bundu Safaris, www.bundusafaris.com (see feature in *Songlines* #51)
- Global Link Travel are this year's official festival travel agent and are offering an exclusive festival package. www.globallinktravel.co.uk
- Alternatively you can fly Kenya Airways to Nairobi, www.kenya-airways.com



JACOB RUSSELL

Banda, a huge Malawian star with a 12-piece band and dancers, followed by Petebox, a one-man beatboxer from Nottingham and both of them can keep the crowd and atmosphere going."

Songlines readers will be aware that Malawian music, sadly, has virtually no international profile. So Lake of Stars is a unique way to sample the music scene. Lucius Banda is one of the country's biggest stars, with 13 albums and occasional run-ins with Malawian presidents. Banda was scheduled to appear at Lake of Stars in 2006 but was in prison for 67 days after criticising some of the actions of president Mutharika. That's probably one of the reasons his set last year was greeted with such euphoria; but Banda is also an incredible performer. A larger-than-life figure, he came on stage in a billowing white smock wielding a cane with a silver cobra on top. He was joined by half a dozen dancing 'soldiers,' as he calls them, in black and white uniforms.

Alongside his commanding vocals were rippling Congolese-style guitars, sexy dancers and an extraordinary fire-eater who did unmentionable things with his flaming torch.

"Music is what we use to carry our messages," Banda tells me afterwards, "and we get a great response from the people. Corruption in the government is the problem and if we don't check it, we could degenerate to a Zimbabwe type of level. What's happened there is a warning." What's good about the Malawi music scene are the live bands – in contrast to South Africa where it's now dominated by backing-tracks and DJs. "Malawians love music a lot," continues Banda. "But there isn't a single record company in the country. Everybody has to do their own recording and releasing and it means the quality isn't good." The other problem is instruments have to be imported and attract a large luxury tax. Banda tried to get this abolished. "But the government can't differentiate between a hi-fi, which is a luxury, and a guitar, which is raw material you use to make music."

As if to illustrate the point, the Makambale Brothers are a four-piece local band who use entirely home-made instruments. Their guitars are made from oil cans, but they are hard to find now as the oil companies have switched to plastic. Dyax Mbalule's BP guitar is made from a can from Zimbabwe featuring a logo that disappeared years ago. The guitar strings are bicycle brake cables and the one-string bass uses a cable from the inside of a car tyre. The instruments make a wonderful twangy sound, but not surprisingly Mbalule would rather be playing a modern electric guitar. These cost 15,000 – 25,000 kwacha (£55-92) in a country where half the population lives on a dollar a day.

As the live music winds down around midnight, the action shifts to Harry's Bar on the beach where the turntables play through the night until dawn. It's magical as the water turns from silver blue to burning orange as the sun rises around 5am. To mark the moment, the music moves from dance tracks to romantic strings as people settle in the sand to enjoy the dawn. Lake Malawi has more species of fish than any other lake in the world. As the sun rises, the fishing boats come ashore with the night's catch and pile it up on the beach. An incredible end to a night of music. ●

This year's festival takes place October 10-12 2008.
Seth Lakeman is headlining with local acts confirmed nearer the time
www.lakeofstars.co.uk



SIMON BROUGHTON



MARK HEIDFESON



Top to bottom: the bespoke guitars of the Makambale Brothers; Radio 1's Annie Mac; fishermen on the shore of Lake Malawi; the larger-than-life figure of Lucius Banda



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