

# Conscience clubbers

When Liverpool haunt Chibuku Shake Shake visited Malawi, they offered more than good times to an impoverished land – and got much more back.  
By Marc Rowlands

LAKE OF STARS FESTIVAL  
Lake Malawi, Malawi  
9-11 September 2005

WHEN THE heavens open early on Sunday morning, just hours into the final day of the Lake of Stars Festival, everyone is taken by surprise. With the six-month rainy season not due for another two months, many of the audience are unprepared. The freak downpour stirs those who have been sleeping in front of the main stage, wrapped in coats or blankets, oblivious to the pummelling dance music. Others, still encumbered by the effects of popular beer milkshake Chibuku Shake Shake, stagger off in search of cover, or begin the long walk home.

Will Jameson, organiser of the festival, frantically tries to shield the imported sound system from the torrent before he resigns himself to fate and makes his way the few yards down to the shores of Lake Malawi to join his brother dancing in the warm water.

Lake of Stars is the culmination of Jameson's long dream. In the late Nineties, he signed up to a gap year programme, hoping to spend some time doing voluntary work in Australia or New Zealand. Instead, he ended up in Malawi. It's described by tourist brochures as 'the heart of Africa', and, after spending time with its incredibly friendly people, Jameson realised this was more than a geographical description. He worked with the Children in the Wilderness charity, educating young people affected by poverty or Aids, before eventually returning to Liverpool to set up a club night. Named after

the drink, Chibuku Shake Shake was born in 2000 and aimed to fill the void left by the closure of Liverpool's dominant superclub Cream. Eschewing a regimented music policy, Chibuku's diverse guests were, instead, booked purely for their ability to rock the party. The response was overwhelming and the club acquired a reputation for a lively, hedonistic atmosphere. But, driven by restlessness and altruism, Jameson's thoughts returned to Malawi.

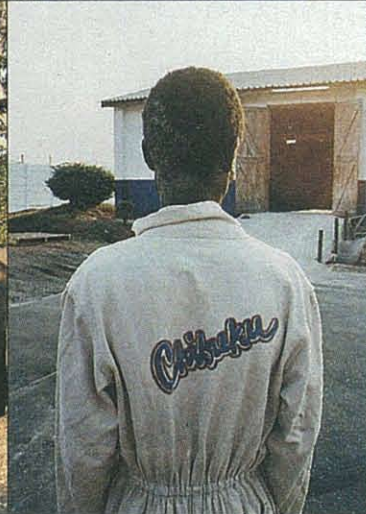
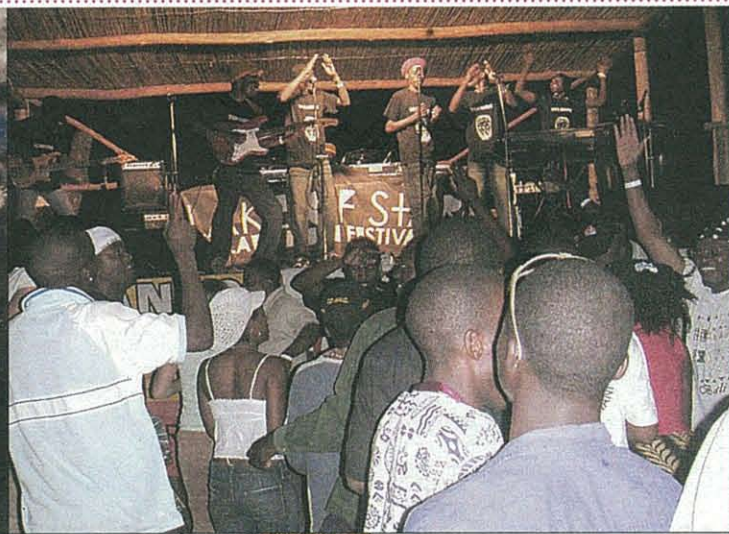
'I was desperate to get back here,' he tells me, sipping lumpy Chibuku from a sun-swelled carton. 'But I didn't want to return as a tourist; I was determined that my next visit should have more worth than just a holiday.'

Last year's inaugural festival was a sharp learning curve, but many of the teething problems have been ironed out this year. The site is based around Chintheche Inn, a converted folly gazing out across the great expanse of freshwater Lake Malawi, with an adjacent camping site covered by remnant patches of tropical rainforest. The copse breaks to reveal a central performance area reminiscent of an embryonic Womad or Big Chill event.

The festival starts on Friday evening, with Western DJs. The live music comes into play on the other two nights, and this proves to be the main draw for Malawians, who double Friday night's throng until at its peak, on Saturday, some 1,300 people are on the site.

The largest attraction is Wambali, the country's most popular traditional singer, who provides a stirring performance that runs over by half an hour in response to the demands of both Westerners and Malawians.

His set, as with most Malawian acts, comprises traditional, gospel-based songs. In structure the music differs from the diverse African music sounds readily accessible in Western stores, fea-



Clockwise from top left: festival organiser Will Jameson; the Black Missionaires on stage; a Chibuku brewery worker; the Malipenga Dancers strut their stuff. Photographs by Sam Clack, Dylan Southern

turing less repetitive, expanded motifs than those heard in the popular music of West Africa. Although the rhythms are less regimented than hi-life or Afrobeat, the exemplary musicians pride themselves on their ability to keep the music flowing despite the complicated time signatures.

By Sunday lunch, the ground is once again dry, prompting spectators to laze on the grass. Everyone is enraptured by the colourful Malipenga Dancers, the lively spectacle only slightly eclipsed by



Chibuku DJs and Chibuku cartons.



the heavenly Children in the Wilderness choir which follows.

Previous performances by highly animated nine-piece boy band Tinkhu Vibrations have, by and large, been limited to funerals and weddings. They perform an a cappella number at one point, each member writhing slowly on the spot, ushering spirits via wavelike arm gestures.

RELATIVELY UNTOUCHED by tourism, Malawi is racked by economic problems, food shortages, Aids and a population increase spiralling out of control, all of which is evident to the Western visitors, most of whom have spent two weeks in the fragile countryside prior to the festival on wildlife drives in game reserves, snorkelling or exploring.

'It's been such an eye-opener,' admits DJ Yoda, one of the headlining acts from England. 'It's not the kind of trip you return from saying "it was wicked", although the wildlife, scenery and people are. It's more thought-provoking.'

Some visited MVA, a Catholic mission which helps keep the traditional Malawian culture

– the Chewa – alive. 'We saw a group of Gule Wamkulu perform a traditional dance as part of an occult ceremony,' says 20-year-old Liverpool student Gavin Kendrick. 'They wore these ornate masks, rags and reeds, kicking up the dust as they danced. It was like nothing I've ever seen before. Incredible.'

On the final evening of the festival the traditional sounds give way to several Malawian acts offering a local take on hip hop and reggae. For the first time all weekend, the crowd is split. The Australian, British and South African visitors decamp to the bar where house DJs entertain, leaving the wealthier members of Malawian society, who have had to fork out a full week's wages (500 kwacha) for a weekend ticket. Both camps dance long into the sunrise.

They converge again in front of the main stage only after the bar closes down, the evening's last DJ bringing a smile to everyone's face as his cheery finale, a radio jingle song, blasts defiantly from the stage – 'Chibuku brings you joy and happiness. You'll never forget that special moment with Chibuku Shake Shake.' **OMM**