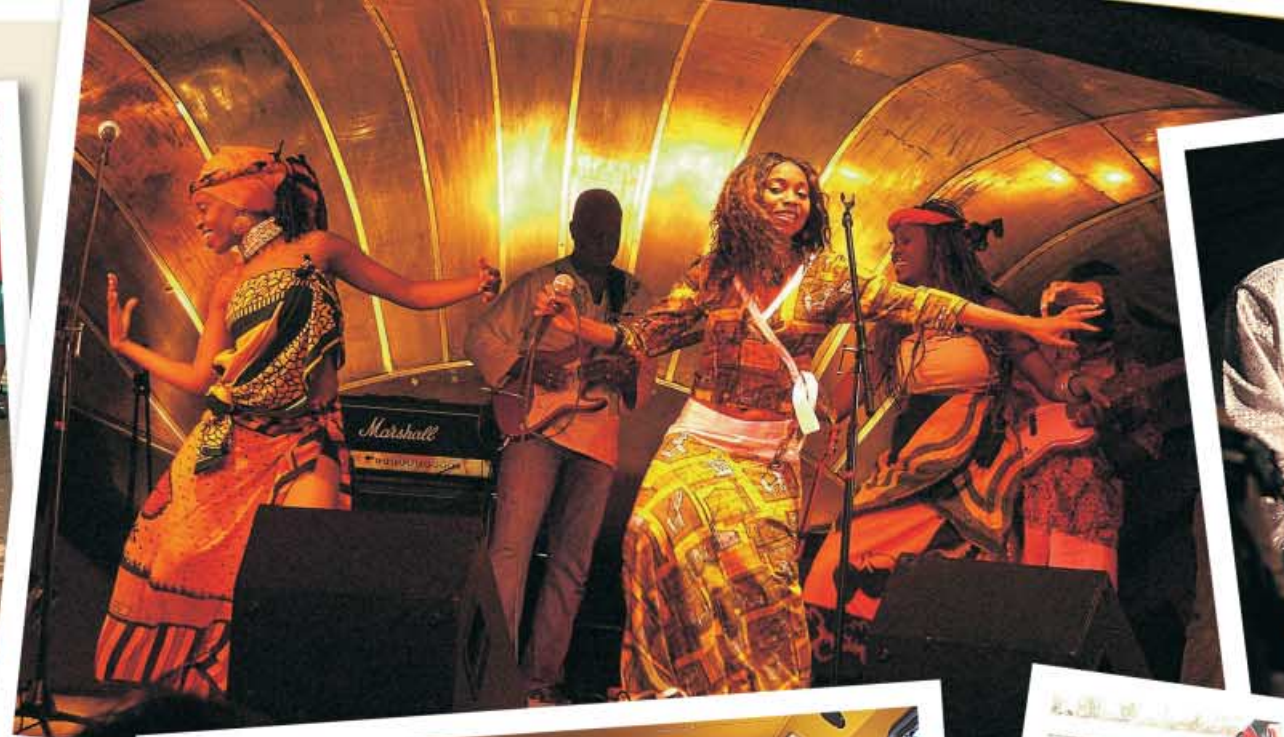


Above: Joe Driscoll (orange shirt) leads a triumphant arrival at Malawi's Lake of Stars festival. Right: laundry day at a nearby village.



Above: Venâncio Mbande and his family demonstrate the chopi timbila. Right: Habulu perform at Coconuts in Maputo.



Top: ursine Malawian superstar Lucius Banda. Above: a combative fan and friends. Left: space was at a premium on board the bus.

No sleep till Lake Malawi

Ed Potton joined musicians on a 2,500-mile trip across Africa by bus to the Lake of Stars festival. This is his story

For the past four years, the shores of Lake Malawi have hosted the Lake of Stars festival, a celebration of African and Western music. Last October, the organisers decided to preface it by sending a select band of musicians on a 4,000km (2,500-mile) road trip from Johannesburg to the festival site near Chintcheche, and invited *The Knowledge* along. As details are announced for Lake of Stars 2008, here are some highlights of a sleepless trip.

DAY 1: HEATHROW
Joe Driscoll attaches a protective sock to the end of his didgeridoo for the flight to South Africa. This will be

the farthest the beatboxing one-man-band has been from his native Syracuse, New York. Trey Reames, his genial giant of a manager, remembers their first meeting: "Kid, I told him [adopts gravelly mentor tone], you got charisma!"

DAY 2: JOHANNESBURG
We were expecting blazing heat, but it's pouring with rain. Full of dank concrete, Jo'burg looks like the title sequence from *The Office*. We join up with the rest of the party, which includes Pete Son, aka the Petebox, a former UK champion beatboxer whose mohican belies the sweetest of natures. With Joe and Pete, we have

two beatboxers on the trip — could a battle be on the cards? "Nah, man," Driscoll grins. "I'm the Ringo Starr of beatboxing." Both are booked to perform at Arts Alive, a festival designed to tempt visitors into Johannesburg's crime-ridden city centre. "Jo'burg's got a terrible reputation, most of it well deserved," admits the organiser Kevin Stuart. "But it's also got an incredible creative edge."

DAY 3: JOHANNESBURG
Thulane, our driver, gives us a tour of his native Soweto, whose fortunes are rising, judging by the stadium being built for the 2010 World Cup. Zulu warriors in full battle dress greet

us outside Nelson Mandela's former house, but Pete is more interested in jamming with a local rapper, who goes by the charming name of Torture Punishment. We approach the evening's Arts Alive festival with gun-crime horror stories ringing in our ears. But the scariest weapon on display is the huge, phallic kora being plucked by the Guinean superstar Mory Kanté, who performs an ecstatic rendition of his million-selling *Yeke Yeke*. Elsewhere, the charismatic local hero Zuluboy mixes hip-hop with jazz and the *maskande* guitar style, and Driscoll charms the crowd with his rabble-rousing brand of reggae, hip-hop and blue-eyed soul.

DAY 4: JOHANNESBURG
It's a day-long drive to the Mozambique capital of Maputo, so we board our safari bus at a spirit-sapping 6am. Nobody has been to bed. But a still-bouncy Reames holds court as we descend from the veldt through lush green valleys towards the border, leading us in an *Almost Famous*-style singalong to Finlay Quaye. Fourteen years after a civil war that killed more than a million, Maputo still looks down-at-heel, all rusty tenement blocks and glowering security guards. But the Latin influence on the former Portuguese colony is palpable: some of its clubs have been described as "several pieces of

clothing short of an orgy". The atmosphere is less incendiary at Coconuts, the *Club Tropicana*-style venue where Joe and Pete are booked to play tonight. Our resident MC Kimba Mutanda — half Malawian, half Danish, currently residing in Guildford — urges the crowd to "move your body like an African!" But this apathetic lot seem keener on slumping like octogenarians. Things improve when Mabulu, one of Mozambique's most successful musical exports, take to the stage. They mix the local guitar-led Marrabenta music with mellifluous vocals in four languages — five when Driscoll performs an English verse he has written

to their song about Aids in Africa.

DAY 5: MAPUTO
To a backstreet studio, where Driscoll and his saxophonist, James "Hollywood" Moore, are due to record their parts to the Mabulu track. Moses the sound engineer falls off his chair when Pete adds some drum'n' bass of his own. It's safe to assume that beatboxing hasn't reached Mozambique yet.

DAY 6: MAPUTO
A glance out of the hotel window reveals Maputo to be under several feet of water. It looks like a cross between Venice and Ilford. ▶▶