

adam

MEN FIRST

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to me, baby'**
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The lads
behind the ads

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**AGEING
ACTION
HEROES**
Give it up,
Grandad!

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to raise a
GENIUS

who the hell is ...

ABBI?

Afro-fusion finds a new face



TOYOTA COROLLA: THE LEGEND LIVES ON • GHOST MULEE: 'FOOTBALL IS MY LIFE'



REBEL WITH A CAUSE

He quit university to play music, and left his band to play solo, but he's no rebel – just a man pursuing his dream

WORDS JACKSON BIKO PHOTOGRAPHS EMMANUEL JAMBO

Somewhere in the well-to-do Lavington area, Abbi Nyinza is having his dreadlocks waxed. He sits under an umbrella in his garden, next to a pool that hasn't been cleaned in a couple of days. A faded towel is wrapped around his shoulders as a woman works magic on his hair. His eyes are fixed on a paperback, *Ancestors of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer.

He reaches for a cigarette from the silver ashtray, lights up, then cocks his head towards his humble, one-roomed studio, Indigo Productions, that spills beats of Afro-fusion across the swimming pool.

He seems to be swirling the music around in his head – like a connoisseur gargling wine at the back of his throat. He turns to me and asks from behind a cigarette cloud, “So, what do you think, man?”

What I think of Abbi's budding debut production is largely inconsequential, because his is a rhetorical question. I can tell that he doesn't really need any

WHO THE HELL IS ABBI?

In 2003, Abbi bagged the Kisima Awards for Most Promising Artist and Best Male Artist. That stirred the hornet's nest. He was just a little-known Afro-fusion artist, and the awards started tongues wagging in the musical fraternity.

“Who the hell is Abbi?” they asked one another, thinking he didn't deserve the awards. They couldn't understand how he had come out of the cold to bag two awards when not even the local radio stations were playing his music.

“I'm gonna tell you one thing, I was as surprised at the awards as the next guy. But I think it elicited the best response – people took notice. Even artists need a saga to make a point,” he says.

“I remember Cess Mutungi, a radio presenter calling me live on air and asking me why I thought people had voted for me. I told her that I had not cast a single vote myself, so she ought to ask the people why they voted for me.”

Abbi says the fact that people voted for

THREE RULES

- 1 Be true.
- 2 Be yourself no matter what.
- 3 Enjoy the journey.

Abbi has been carving out his destiny with music. He has been sharing the stage with heavyweights like Salif Keita in the Netherlands, where a survey showed that his performance was the most popular out of the 10 or so artists who performed there. Together with his group Kikwetu, he toured the Netherlands doing a colossal 40 concerts in two months, including the North Sea Jazz Festival in 2005.

Abbi grew up in the Shaurimoyo estate and is the seventh child of a family of eight children. The family shared a modest house. His father, who worked in a cigarette company, supplemented his income by growing sugar cane at their rural home in Mumias.

“I worked as a shoeshine boy after

music and it's unfortunate that this is the benchmark of our sound.

“We all have a life to live, and the sad thing is to live your life a certain way over a long period of time, then realise that you're actually not living your own life, but life according to someone else's idea of what your life should be,” says Abbi.

Now, what does he mean? I ask.

“A lot of artists are going the American way. Sure, modern influences are a part of life, but I always ask myself, how do I bring it back home? Simply put, my choice of music is a representation of myself and my ideals. And as such, I have to preserve it. The sound has to be protected,” he says.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

His pursuit of musical expression started at a Bible study class at Parklands Baptist Church. After completing high school, he, together with four friends, started an a capella group called The Boyz. He was a student at the University of Nairobi at the time and also singing as a backup vocalist for Achieng Abura. “Abura is a great friend and teacher,” he says. Apparently, it was Abura who first shortened his name “Absalom” to

‘MY CHOICE OF MUSIC IS A REPRESENTATION OF MYSELF AND MY IDEALS, AND AS SUCH, I HAVE TO PRESERVE IT’

reassurances or endorsements. His faith in his music seems cast in stone.

Abbi and a five-man production crew have been camped at his residence for the last five weeks, producing for a little-known artist called Mutinda, whose talent and vocals are astounding and irreverently fresh.

He knows this first album, *Matopeni*, is important to his career as a budding producer. He wants to make sure that everything is done properly.

His crew has been literally holed up at his charming residence working around the clock; having their girlfriends take turns to come over to cook and bring changes of clothes, taking turns to sleep in the bed in his studio or the tent pitched in the garden.

“Surrendering to creativity,” Abbi, 34, calls it. “We are meeting about new talent, and in so doing we have in a way rediscovered ourselves as producers, engineers and artists. We have been born.”

his genre of music was an indication of changing attitudes towards local sounds. Jack Ojiambo, a jazz presenter on radio acknowledged that Abbi is considered a controversial man on the scene.

“A lot of people thought he was not worthy of those awards. Time has been a great tester. People might be critical, but only time will tell.

“I think Abbi could be one of the best musicians in Kenya right now. Unfortunately, because of the nature of the Kenyan mass music market, radio listeners tend to be a young audience and they can be very skewed in the way they listen to music. What Abbi is doing, and the quality of work he produces, is fantastic,” he says.

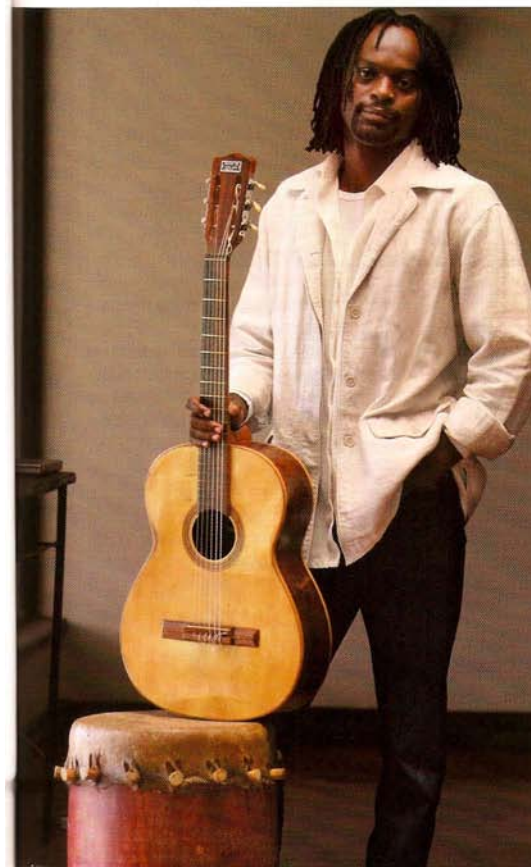
During a concert at the Alliance Française last year, Tabu Osusa, chairman of Spotlight on Kenya Music, told the audience, “A number of years ago, people asked the question ‘Who the hell is Abbi?’, I think the question now should be ‘Where the hell is Abbi?’”

school,” he tells me with a tinge of pride and a wry smile. He was later admitted to the Upper Hill High School on the more affluent side of town.

“I was proud to be from Shaurimoyo despite the new experiences there. I wanted to travel and see the world,” he says. At this point the woman finishes waxing his dreadlocks and he excuses himself to see her off.

From where I'm seated, I see a Caucasian woman with blonde hair in a room above the studio opening the window. She smiles and waves. Her name is Metta. She is Abbi's wife. Metta is Danish and multi-talented. She is a painter, a photographer and a dancer. She told me that the only thing she loves more than Abbi is Kenya.

“My music is playing in South Africa, the Netherlands and other countries in Europe. It's a new sound for them. They appreciate it and I'm satisfied with that. Afro-fusion is largely unknown and unappreciated here. There is a heavy western influence in our





'HERE WAS A SIMPLE SUGAR CANE FARMER WHO JUST WANTED TO SEE HIS SON GO TO UNIVERSITY. I BROKE HIS HEART'

"Abbi", because "it was too long and cumbersome".

The Boyz later changed their name to Safari, and recorded the album *The Journey* in the UK. It included famous tracks such as *Yaye Woo* and *Secrets*.

The group also toured Scotland and Ireland for a year before returning home in 1998. They soon left for another European tour, returning the following year. In 2000 Abbi broke away from the group.

"I told them, 'Guys, I can't make it. I have to find my own path', and I started off as Abbi. I think part of my decision was based on the fact that although most people thought our music was great, they couldn't help wondering why we sounded American. That worried me."

He formed the Kikwetu band in 2001. They got their first international gig in 2004 when they performed at the Festival

Mundial with 40 other artists.

In 2006, they performed at the North Sea Jazz Festival in the Netherlands. Abbi's first solo album, *Mudunia*, came the next year, followed by *Indigo* last year.

Music has been the nucleus of his existence. Everything else in his life has

had to find resonance, reason and rhythm with this passion.

He has come to several crossroads on his journey. For instance, he quit university in his third year to pursue music, a difficult choice considering that a lot was riding on his education.

ABBI TRIVIA

FAVOURITE FOOD	Grilled chicken
BEST DRINK	Gin and tonic
FAVOURITE CITY	Madrid
BEST GADGET	iPod
FAVOURITE QUOTE	"It is as I shall think it is." (his own words)
FAVOURITE BAR	Wasanii (in Nairobi)
BEST MOVIE EVER	<i>Matrix</i> (Good choice, mate)
BEST ARTIST	Salif Keita ... but there are many.
BEST AUTHOR	Paulo Coelho

LEFT: Abbi's musical style borrows from many other sounds, but retains its African roots

"My dad showed up with a bag full of money for my school fees. He had just harvested sugar cane. I had stopped going to campus and I told him that campus was not for me," he says as we sit in his garden.

In the clear moonlight, his strong, charismatic face is bereft of any fat. The shadows cast by the moonlight glide over his lean features, forming small pools of darkness around his deep-set eyes.

"Here was a simple sugar cane farmer who just wanted to see his son go to university. I broke his heart. I disappointed a lot of people in my family. They said I was out of my mind, but I think you've got to be out of your mind to be your true self. It was my leap of faith."

He lights a cigarette and reflects on what he has just said. "But it was a moment of choice. I chose to pursue music in a country where music was not considered a proper profession."

He blows smoke, then sighs. "I don't regret it. Success is not a result, but a manifestation of what you hold inside, and I hold freedom inside me. I have learnt to take moments to look inside and not be afraid to go there. My freedom is inside me and it manifests in my music. I had to do it, otherwise it would have consumed me."

THE MAN AND HIS SOUNDS

Abbi explains to me that Afro-fusion is amorphous. "It's a dynamic sound that borrows from many other sounds while retaining African roots."

"I want to sing a global album in which all societies would be represented by fusing borrowed elements and blending them with local sounds. So whether it's Afro-jazz, Afro-soul, Afro-reggae, benga or hip hop, this is the new sound, a natural mysticism."

Why aren't the radio stations catching on? I ask him. He flicks the cigarette, then jams his hands in his pockets and says, "Napoleon Bonaparte once said, 'Not even an army can stop an idea when its time has come'. This sound is growing too fast, the radio is not fully aware of its magnitude."

"Check out the concerts that play this new sound. They get a good attendance. People love it, they appreciate it. I think it's time for the radio producers to wake up and smell the coffee."

This statement hangs in the cold air between us. We let it float around as we mull it over for a moment, then he adds, "This revolution will not be televised."

When I contacted music critic, John Kariuki, who has had the longest-standing association with Afro-fusion music, he told me that he thinks that the genre is a grey area, uncharted territory.

"I would say that Abbi is one of the few artists who have moved from the West to embrace an African beat. I appreciate him along those lines, and it's people like him who are trying to define this sound ... a Kenyaness. >

RIGHT: Abbi sings *Malaika* as a curtain-raiser for an Angelique Kidjo concert in Nairobi last year

"I submit that eventually he will become an inspiration to people who are venturing forth in this genre. This will make more people listen to this kind of music," he says.

"His music is not aired, because radio is prejudiced. If you are too Kenyan, people think you are local and they don't want you. It's a snobbish culture," Kariuki adds.

Eric Wainaina, the quintessential Afro-fusionist, says that Afro-fusion is a label that was created to differentiate the music from similar sounds, and that it has its roots in benga. "I think Abbi, with his excellent voice and songwriting skills, is definitely charting the way forward in this respect," he asserts.

THE COMFORT OF HOME

As I join Abbi and his wife for dinner in a small cosy room with a round dining table and miniature stools, I notice that the wall is adorned with unframed watercolour paintings obviously painted by a child.

"We were looking after a friend's son during the post-election skirmishes. He did those paintings and we wanted to hold onto those moments," Metta explains.

She takes her seat next to Abbi, who later tells me, over dessert, that this is his second marriage.

"I have two kids from my first marriage, my eight-year-old, Lola, and three-year-old, Noel. I was young and passionate. I had just started my music and I was travelling a lot. There comes a point in life when you have to choose between the right thing and the easy thing. There was no point pretending the marriage was working."

At this point, a track by Youssou N'Dour starts playing and he closes his eyes and starts playing air guitar. "That's my teacher," he says when he returns from his private Youssou N'Dour moment.

"Walking away probably gave me the best opportunity to reflect and understand myself," he continues.

"After all, I lived the music, breathed it even and so, you know, I didn't walk away from the kids, but really I walked forward to my life ... It was a moment of pain for me, a confusing time for my daughter and

a real hard time for my ex-wife. But I'm connected to my kids. They understand my decision."

Makadem, the Afro-beat artist, told me a story that sort of sums up the whole "Who the hell is Abbi?" saga.

"I was new in the industry when I came to Nairobi in 2003. I desperately wanted to perform at a concert at Alliance Française, so I asked Abbi for help. While most people would tell you to go talk to so and so, Abbi tapped me on the

shoulder reassuringly and said, 'your time will come'. As much as it annoyed me, I later realised that he was telling me that everyone has their destiny already woven, that I should be patient and wait. To me, Abbi is an alchemist."

Maybe Makadem is prone to hyperbole, but one thing is certain: Abbi is true to his dreams and his path. He heard the music calling him and he followed. He continues to follow a destiny that only he knows and understands. **E**



'SUCCESS IS NOT A RESULT BUT A MANIFESTATION OF WHAT YOU HOLD INSIDE – AND I HOLD FREEDOM INSIDE ME. THE FREEDOM INSIDE ME MANIFESTS IN MY MUSIC'