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African Artists Lifted by the Promises of Democracy and the Web

by Nicholas Kulish

NAIROBI, Kenya — They built their reputation with wild music videos featuring a flying animated turtle and a campy urban hero often considered Kenya's first Internet sensation.

But when it came time to choose the subject for their video of the song "Matatizo" last year, the Kenyan musicians known as Just a Band abandoned the surreal and the ironic for the infamous torture chambers of Kenya's Nyayo House. They even posted a link on the YouTube page to a 77-page report on the victims of torture under former President Daniel arap Moi for good measure.

"We'll never solve things unless we stop sweeping things under the carpet," Bill Sellanga, one of the group's members, said backstage at a recent concert.

The political video would have been impossible under Mr. Moi, who kept an iron grip on the country for more than two decades. Just a Band formed in 2003, the year after he left office at a time of creative ferment following years of repression.

Binyavanga Wainaina, a writer and a founding editor of the Nairobi literary magazine *Kwani?*, said that the changes went beyond his country to include much of sub-Saharan Africa.

"The growth of democracy in Africa in the '90s led to the growth of many, many, many independent artistic institutions and artist production houses," Mr. Wainaina said, "some to do with technology but also increased freedoms for people to imagine things for themselves."

From the anti-colonialism movement to the decades after independence, successive waves of African art, whether writers like Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o or musicians like Fela Kuti and Youssou N'Dour, have reached well beyond the continent's shores.

But the growth of democratic expectations, the decline of dictatorships, the expansion of African economies and the explosion of the Internet and other technologies has created new space for African artists to thrive.



"Reborn Sounds of Childhood Dreams" by the Sudanese artist Ibrahim el-Salahi, exhibited at Tate Modern in London.

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Literary journals like Kwani? or South Africa's Chimurenga are incubating new writers. The Nigerian film industry, known as Nollywood, by some measures trails only India as the world's most prolific.

In visual arts, Angola won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for best national pavilion last year over traditional favorites like Germany and France. The Nigerian-born director of the Haus der Kunst art museum in Munich, Okwui Enwezor, was just named the visual-arts director of the 2015 biennale.

The Tate Modern in London displayed works by Meschac Gaba of Benin and Ibrahim el-Salahi of Sudan last summer. Nairobi-born artist Wangechi Mutu is currently the subject of an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

An auction in Nairobi of modern and contemporary art from across East Africa in November attracted large crowds and buyers for works like a woodcut plate of a cow with a barcode by the young Kenyan artist Peterson Kamwathi. Workers are busy converting a former library in this city's downtown into a contemporary art museum expected to open this year.

Significant restrictions on the news media and civil society remain in many countries, but the confluence of greater freedom of expression over all with the Internet's potential — as shepherd, teacher and evangelist — means artists from Africa can reach and attract new audiences. Just a Band performed at TedGlobal last year and has appeared at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Tex. Google declared the band a “connected” African success story.

Hundreds of people packed a warehouse downtown on a recent Friday night. Behind the turntables was Just a Band's Daniel Muli. The third member of the group, Mbithi Masya, curated a video installation playing on the back wall that included his own work and that of Ms. Mutu.

The chic, young crowd came out to see the award-winning Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie present her latest book alongside the Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. Ms. Owuor's “Dust,” which made its debut that night, is a searing work about the killing of a young Kenyan, largely set amid the violence that followed the 2007 election but stretching back to the Mau-Mau revolt against the British.

“There's something really thrilling about the questions Kenyans ask themselves through their work,” said Ellah Allfrey, a Zimbabwean-born editor and book critic based in London who came to Nairobi for the event. “It's not just about celebrating the past and emulating what's happening elsewhere.”

Ms. Owuor said it was particularly exciting to publish her first novel as Kenya was celebrating its 50th anniversary of independence. “Things are always in flux, always in convergence, always something new,” Ms. Owuor said, citing the new visual and conceptual art. She called Just a Band “very Nairobi,” and said, “They are the pulse in so many ways.”

This past weekend, the group performed with a seven-piece band at the Blankets and Wine music showcase at Carnivore Gardens in Nairobi, as Mr. Sellanga, the dapper lead singer wearing a black tie and a broad-brimmed hat, egged the audience on to wave their hands and sing along.

The members of the group met at Kenyatta University in Nairobi, where they started producing an eclectic mix of electronica and hip-hop, with clear local influences. They grew up with Michael Jackson and can draw on traditions as diverse as Japanese anime and African mythology. A conversation with band members can shift from the energon cubes that power the Transformers robots to plans to sail along the Nile with musical groups from every country along the river's path.

Their first album came out in 2008, but it was not a hit in local radio. They produced their own video for the song “Iwinyo Piny,” with Mr. Muli drawing the giant turtle that floats over Nairobi with a DJ on its back. The

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group was largely self-taught, using YouTube tutorials to pick up new skills, including animation.

“You just jump online and find some way to experiment, fail the first time, but at some point you get it,” Mr. Muli said.

Creative videos became a trademark. One called “If I Could” shows a man and a woman in split screen going about their days – brushing their teeth, eating breakfast, getting dressed – before narrowly missing a chance to meet. It was part of a video installation at the Goethe Institut in Nairobi that helped solidify their reputation as visual, not just musical, artists. Their second installation went to New York, where it was exhibited at the Rush Arts Gallery.

In 2010, they released the video for the song “Ha-He,” starring a tough guy named Makmende who seemed transplanted from the movie “Shaft” into Nairobi. The video changed the group’s trajectory from a local band with a loyal following to one with a rising international profile, becoming a hit that has been viewed more than 500,000 times on YouTube.

Political themes had already cropped up in their videos, like in the one for the song “Usinibore,” in which police beat clubs against riot shields as they prepare to clash with youths and dancers in white masks. Then came last year’s video featuring the torture house, “Matatizo.”

“We went through a few melancholic ideas but most of them seemed a bit contrived; you’re scripting some fake sadness,” said Mr. Masya, 27, the co-director and cameraman for the video. They chose to delve into real events instead. “We decided to visit a point in our history that’s one of the saddest.”

The video was shot in a grimy, abandoned gym in a friend’s apartment building, with garbage bags taped up to blot out the light. The finished project feels like a scene from a Kenyan version of “Zero Dark Thirty,” the victim’s T-shirt covered in blood as he convulses from an electric shock. Yet the scene shifts from torture to bright sunlight, suggesting how life in an open society could be.

“There’s a certain sincerity and innocence in Just a Band that kind of feels like I imagine the ‘60s were, when everyone thought that all kinds of stuff was possible,” said Mr. Wainaina, the writer.

During a raucous live set at a recent concert, Just a Band played “Usinibore.” Mr. Sellanga wore a giant afro wig, a hooded sweatshirt that read “Africa is the Future,” and strummed a black Fender electric guitar with a white pick guard.

“Just because I’m an African with black skin, it doesn’t mean that I won’t win if I try,” he sang. “Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do,” went the refrain, “I can change the world.”

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