



The Boy from Tandale: The Rise of Diamond and his Wasafi Record Label

By Darius Okolla



Tandale estate is a solid flood-prone flat pan stacked amidst patterned limestone shacks at the heart of Dar es Salaam, just north of Kwa Mtogole and south of Kijitonyama and 7 kilometres from Dar's famous Coco Beach. It's also home to a former clothes vendor, Naseeb Abdul Juma and Raheem Rummy Nanji from Iringa.

Raheem, a budding musician, would alongside Tanzanian youthful celebrity Hakeem 5 earn the Nyamwezi-sounding moniker *Vijana Sharobaro* from the versatile all-time hit-maker Dully Sykes, who then worked under Dhahabu Records. In christening them *Sharobaro* in the 2000s, Sykes, then a popular bongo musician, seemed to have infused their budding careers with long-sought street cred just as the industry panned out to new sounds and styles.

The clothes vendor Naseeb was meanwhile stuck in blue-collar trade, first in freelance photography, then as a filling attendant, and also had a stint in gambling, while pursuing the ever-elusive money for studio fees. Meanwhile Raheem, now famously known as Bob Junior, would go on to establish Sharobaro Records, a hole-in-the-wall recording studio built for its time, and weirdly successful for its stature.

Back in Tandale, Naseeb's dalliance with talent manager Chizo Mapene didn't yield much

professional or economic outcomes despite lots of initial prospects after which Naseeb hooked up with producer Msafiri Peter, aka Papaa Misifa, in 2009. Naseeb linked up again with Raheem of Sharobaro Records from where he recorded his first major hit, *Nenda Kamwambie*. The year 2010 looked promising, and with this debut album, the young Naseeb was introduced to Tanzanians and the East African region.

The album is mushy, existential, soulful, with heart-tugging reflections. It is borderline whiny, yet relatable and includes songs like *Kamwambie*, a dedication to his unrequited love, and *Nitarejea* sung alongside the ailing star Hawa. The latter is about a love that his foray into the city for work won't quench despite the distance.

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In a region where the wider creative economy largely apes - and where possible solicits - the stature, money and alliances with global (and mostly American hip hop) for traction, Diamond Platnumz's success has defied the odds both in style, sound, reach and influence. [It's in his 2017 interview with Forbes magazine](#) where he would credit the traction that enabled him to consistently cash in on his musical talent as the mark that transitioned his music from a passion to a career.

No doubt his ability to craft a cultural Bongo Flava moment owes credence to legends like the 1990s Radio DJ Mike Mhagama. Mhagama coined the term Bongo Flava as a distinctive buzzword for the yet-to-be-defined musical genre that arose after the advent of private radio stations in Tanzania in the mid-1990s. Bongo Flava originated in Dar and is derived from a variety of musical genres, including American hip hop, reggae, R&B, afrobeat, and traditional Swahili musical styles, such as Taraab. The phrase, which was meant to delineate Tanzanian hip hop from American hip hop, anchored itself in the country's showbiz lexicon as a tell-apart and defining tag for Tanzanian pop.

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Naseeb's best contribution to the East African artistic scene is through his WCB Wasafi Records platform, for which the wider public has rewarded the company monetarily and brand-wise due to its astute combination of edgy production, track-for-track hits, balanced quality music, and commercial success. These, coupled with entrepreneurial vision, and unyielding versatility, reminiscent of Bigg's Roc-a-fella or Irv Gotti's Murder Inc inevitably centred Wasafi as an East African cultural project.

The 2012 *Lala Salama* album shifted the recording company from soulful and heart-felt tunes to a flashier Afropop that saw the label pan its wings and doggedly pursue partnerships with Africa-wide celebrities and global brands such as Ishmael 'Omarion', and American hip hop star Rick Ross.

Back in Bongo, the musical fan base and their gladiatorial instincts fuelled supremacy wars akin to the imagined rivalry between Ronaldo-Messi in football, or Dar musicians' Dudu Baya-Mr. Nice's tiff. The online infractions saw the Wasafi Records founder Naseeb aka Diamond unwittingly pitted against his fellow star and [erstwhile rival Ali Kiba](#). None seemed too pleased by the fan base warfare, which they've repeatedly admitted they are unable to quell or contain.

Lizzer Era

Diamond's 2013 performance in Burundi not only linked the Wasafi founder to Burundian star Lolilo, but also led to a chance encounter with the then Burundi-based influential producer, Kigoma, born Siraj Khamees and stage-named Lizzer Classic.

When Diamond started Wasafi around 2014 - the origins of which came in the midst of a fast-rising career - the Tanzanian music scene had hit a lull after the heydays of Matonya, Mr. Nice and Ray C. His creative and business acumen seems to have chanced upon the realisation that the market yearned for a new sound and style.

From the get-go, reservations arose regarding Lizzer's sampling of Burundian sounds into Tanzania's Bongo Flava music. Lizzer, who had fled the 2010 state-sponsored electoral clashes in Bujumbura to Kigoma, was unrelenting and convinced there was place in the Tanzanian market for an updated version of Bongo Flava. He would take his first shot with Rayvanny's *Kwetu*, a mushy-tinged serenade whose popularity gave legitimacy to Lizzer's cross-border musical style.

In the working partnership between Lizzer and Diamond, a rising star met international experience; a mercurial duo akin to the then young Shawn Carter's co-directorship with the steely Kareem "Biggs" Burke, and the colourful Damon Dash back in 1995.

Wasafi's rise, like any other cultural moment, exists at the confluence of historical accidents, chance encounters, demand for new sounds, and huge individual effort just at the point where Dar's audio-visual culture boomed, primarily on YouTube and Vimeo. As [Odipodev clarified](#), the combination of local relatable content, proliferation of smartphones, and YouTube algorithms often helps generate a self-perpetuating model of proliferation and popularity onto what the viewers have already deemed to be superior content.

Lizzer, in his interviews with Bernard Mpangala at the WCB Wasafi offices, modestly remarked that their outsized commercial and cultural success wasn't anywhere near monopoly, given that lots of their musical stars still work with other producers besides them in producing their albums.

Even then, he'd opine that at least 50 per cent of the album would be produced by Wasafi. Lizzer attributes his updating of Bongo Flava music from its widely varied days in the 2000s to the influence of Korean and Chinese music, of which he is an ardent fan.

The Korean influence on the updated Bongo Flava sounds can no doubt be gleaned from the storylines, the colourful Oriental dressing, and the unsynchronised dance moves of the Korean pop crew BTS in their [hit song DNA](#). The same can be seen in the Chinese pop hits in the strain of NGirl's [Goddess choo choo choo](#) and the Chinese songstress Feng Timo's sleek improvisations and animated dramatisations, with their parallels in Salome, Zigo, or Mwanza Nyegezi.

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Lizzers' signature tune Ayo Lizzer is a drop by Diamond edited to obscure his easily recognisable voice. Lizzer claims the tune allows the production team to dissuade artistes from mentioning him in the lyrics while still acknowledging his creative contribution.

Lizzer's career's steep ascend in late 2000s in Burundi drove him up the ranks and roped in big

regional artistes like Sat B, Big Fizzo, Lolilo, Rally Joe and Emery Sun. Even then, it's Rayvanny's *Kwetu* that earned Lizzer acceptance in Tanzania, and the updated rendition of Saida Karoli's *Salome* that set him up as a new sound in East African production.

Let's make money

The Wasafi ecosystem hit its golden age from 2015, with Rajab 'Harmonize' Kahali, their newest signee chugging hit after hit with dizzying commercial success. Then came Mwanajuma 'Queen Darleen' and Raymond Shaban 'Rayvanny' in 2016, and Richard Martin 'Rich Mavoko', Juma Idd 'Lava lava' and Yusuph Kilungi 'Mbosso's' hits in 2017. Wasafi became a [Foxconn](#) of music in which insane work schedules blended with keen and demanding producers, and ever inventive back stage casts.

Director Diamond, as well as managers Babu Tale, Sallam SK, Said Fella, Joseph King, and producers Lizzer and Tuddy Thomas capitalised on the new sounds to feed a frenzied and ever-expanding fan base, while revitalising production wherever their music was heard. The rising popularity, combined with commercial astuteness and a growing band of talented artistes, saw the label dabble in top-selling ringtones, pricey and sold-out concerts, Wasafi Festival tours, royalties, product lines, club and TV appearances, and brand deals.

The Tanzanian record label pursued a multimedia model with the music streaming service wasafi.com launched first, while Wasafi TV and Wasafi FM further widened their reach and offering. This Wasafi ecosystem's unprecedented savviness also earned them brand endorsements from Vodacom, Red Gold, DSTV, and Coca Cola.

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Curiously, the Wasafi ecosystem's numerous rags to riches stories within its ranks is easily traceable to a policy of working with talents from poor backgrounds, something the directors admit to be true and deliberate. The ecosystem's big acts, Konde boy Harmonize, Chibu Dangote Diamond, and Vannyboy have morphed from bootstrapping a half a decade ago to commanding fees in excess of \$10,000 to \$70,000 per show and earning upwards of \$25,000 from streaming apps monthly.

This outsized influence has come with its own fair share of challenges. For instance, Baraza la Sanaa Tanzania (BASATA) took a moralising stance against the artistes' song *Mwanza* over what it dubbed explicit content. In 2018 BASATA put a leash on two of the label's defiant big stars, RayVanny and Diamond, who in the end called for a truce owing to the risk of commercial losses that came with the ban.

Mr Kayanda, the agency's interim executive secretary, brought down the full force of regulatory coercion, which elicited the age-old question of who deems what is explicit and triggered a moral debate in artistic expression. BASATA's move amounted to predictable flexing, given President Magufuli's wider crackdown on dissent, including clamping down on media personalities and political dissidents.

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Despite lacking a clear social cause, the Wasafi ecosystem has latched onto Dar es Salaam's goal of providing 100,000 additional desks in its primary school classes as part of [plugging the 1.4 million desks deficit](#). Their overall social cause and focus has, however, not been noteworthy outside of scouting for talent among the lowest socio-economic strata. The politically-conscious musician Roma Mkatoliki of the Rostam crew, who is a former teacher, and a dozen other artistes have also jumped onto the donation bandwagon.

The waning years

WCB Wasafi's ecosystem has managed to inspire a cultural moment, and an ardent fan base, and has surpassed the mere tag of a label or a brand. However, for this ecosystem, achieving collective success has been the easy part while handling individual flaws, infighting, substantial talents, and an ever-growing team and fame has proved to be a challenge.

Rommy Jones, the founder's kin, who is also Wasafi's DJ, reckons that the artistes' love lives and their relations with the female fan base are the main source of trouble for the organisation. In recent months, Diamond publicly fell out with his partner Zari Hassan and hooked up with video vixen Hamisa Mobetto, and then moved on to Tanasha Donna, while Rayvanny has a long talked-about dalliance with a Kenyan socialite.

Meanwhile, Harmonize dumped his lover after an alleged romp with a Caucasian female acquaintance. Rommy faced sexual assault allegations during Diamond's April 2016 tour of Sweden, which led to Diamond cutting short his performances.

Besides trouble with the national arts council (BASATA), artistes' exit from the recording firm could either be viewed as them having grown too big for one platform, or as the road to the demise of what's still the most popular and competitive recording company in the region.

The record company first sign-up, Harmonize, has exited the label while the prodigious Richard Rayvanny is allegedly also on his way back to his former Tip Top Records, citing dissatisfaction with his contract. Mbosso's manager, Ms. Sandra Brown, checked out, and so did Mr. Joel Vicent Joseph, who complained of poor pay and workplace harassment from one of the big name singers.

In a move reminiscent to Roc A Fella's 2002 fallout in which Shawn 'Jay Z' Carter and co-director Damon Dash, while enjoying huge creative success, were grappling with behind-the-scenes squabbles, Rayvanny felt relegated to third place as Harmonize took second spot.

Mtwara-born Harmonize, it is said, was unhappy with Chibu's public revelations of his personal matters. He was also displeased with regards to his contractual obligations, which eventually led him to exit and form the Konde Gang label.

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Because it is still patronised by great talent managers Babu Tale and Tudd Thomas, and producer Lizzer's innovative knack, as well as a huge financial chest, and street smarts, the Wasafi ecosystem may survive much longer than the naysayers imagine. Through this ecosystem, Naseeb, the boy from Tandale, has managed to morph local music into likable and popular music, earning it both regional

appeal and international stature.

The record label's rise though has put it at crosshairs with Clouds Entertainment, who though coming in later into the Tanzanian arts scene after DJ Mhagama had launched Bongo Flava, views itself as the bona fide curator of Tanzania's youthful cultural revolution. The late Ruge Muhataba and Joe Kusaga seemed unamused by the rise of a new media ecosystem outside of their patronage and capacity. This worsened after the altercation between a Wasafi staffer and two journalists from Clouds Media in February 2018 after which Cloud banned all Wasafi music and arts from their platforms.

The ultimate test for the five-year-old Wasafi platform will be managing Harmonize's transition from the ecosystem since he co-owned Zoom Production Inc with Diamond. Zoom is one of the biggest cogs in the ecosystem and in charge of most of its video productions.

As they straddle between sizeable successes, an insatiable fan base and internal fallouts, the Wasafi ecosystem, ironically, risks getting cannibalised by a cultural moment that it was instrumental in creating.

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