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# Selamta

THE IN-FLIGHT MAGAZINE OF ETHIOPIAN AIRLINES

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Orthodox icons.



# SPOTLIGHT

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The Arts

## SAUTI SOL DREAMS OF GREATNESS

First in Kenya. Then, the world.

BY BELINDA OTAS

Any live performance by Afropop Kenyan quartet Sauti Sol is sure to come with an eclectic display of showmanship. The group is backed by a troupe that alternates the roles of actors, singers and dancers, creating a dynamic interaction and connection with the audience.

Take Sauti Sol's performance of "Blue Uniform" during a Niko Na Safaricom Live concert, one of the biggest music tours in East Africa. For this song — which relates the relationship between citizens and the police in Kenya — actors filed on stage, playing the roles of a policeman and a policewoman, and a group of dancers soon joined, fusing traditional Kenyan moves with hip-hop.

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(Clockwise from top left)  
Willis Chimano, Polycarp  
Otieno, Delvin Mudigi and  
Bien-Aime Baraza formed  
*Sauti Sol* in 2005.

It's this drama, coupled with the group's vibrant, eccentric personalities and sense of style — a combination of skinny jeans and blazer jackets or shirts made from traditional, colorful Kenyan fabric — that gives the quartet its signature stage presence.

"Whenever we perform, we bring energy," says saxophonist and vocalist Willis Chimano, "and people notice this chemistry and synergy."

Indeed, be it on the European stage in Prague or at SXSW (the United States' South by Southwest music festival), the boys bring Kenya and Africa with them, and the audience responds.

#### FILLING A VOID

Band members Chimano, Delvin Mudigi, Polycarp Otieno and Bien-Aime Baraza, each age 25, have been friends since their high-school days. They formed *Sauti Sol* in 2005, shortly before entering college. *Sauti* means "voice" in Swahili, and *sol* means "sun" in Spanish, which they say makes them "Voices of the Light."

Until *Sauti Sol* came on the Kenyan music scene, rarely did musical acts from the group's generation sing live on stage or tell a local narrative to which a young audience could relate.

"It was rare to find a young band that crafted live music onstage, with rich,



“I think Kenyans are at a point where good music is more than the instruments and beats but also the message.”

—Willis Chimano

three-part harmonies,” says Buddha Blaze, a well-known Kenyan music promoter, as quoted in a September 2012 NPR online article. “Here are some young people who don’t want to be rappers.”

“Their music is fresh and lyrically strong,” adds David Muriithi, creative entrepreneur and managing director of the Creative Enterprise Centre, who keeps a pulse on the music scene in Kenya and East Africa. “It provides Kenyans with a sound that is local but with international appeal.”

Muriithi remarks that the only local comparison is to Five Alive, Kenya’s first “boy band” — an a cappella group from the mid-1990s.

Audiences across Kenya and East Africa have gravitated to Sauti Sol because “we sing about things that affect us,” says vocalist Baraza.

“I think Kenyans are at a point where good music is more than the instruments and beats but also the message,” adds Chimano, referring to such popular songs as “Soma Kijana,” which advocates for education, and “Awinja,” which was written as a tribute to African mothers who work abroad in order to provide for their children.

Chimano’s point is shared by Muriithi, who says the group’s ability to write songs that transcend boundaries is one key factor that has attracted audiences.

“Sauti Sol’s power lies in their writing skills,” he says, adding that the band’s songs resonate with young people across Kenya, and that it will only be a matter

of time before they get an international publishing deal.

Indeed, after two albums, an EP, and tours in Europe and East Africa — all within a space of three years — Sauti Sol is on a mission to be the biggest band Africa has ever given the world.

#### RESISTING STEREOTYPES

The band’s debut album, *Mwanzo* (Swahili for “beginning”), was released in August 2009, and a second, *Sol Filosofía*, followed in February 2011. Most recently, the band collaborated with Spoek Mathambo, the critically acclaimed South African artist renowned for his Afro-future sounds, which he incorporated into the group’s self-titled, six-track EP, *Sauti Sol*.

The band’s influences range from Habib Koite and Daudu Kabaka to Janelle Monae and Coldplay. “We are trying to come up with our own sound,” says Delvin Mudigi, vocalist and drummer, “by mixing the African elements of our music, and trying to make it pop enough to go global.”

“Our guitarist, Polycarp, is a legend,” Baraza adds. “His African riffs are inspired by the likes of Lokua Kanza, Papa Wemba and Franco, so you will always hear some crazy African guitar melody.”

Even so, the band cannot be easily pegged into any of the usual descriptions of Kenyan music: Genge, Kapuka, Afro-fusion, Afro-rock, Afro-electronic or Benga. “Sauti Sol sits in a very unique position,” Muriithi declares. “This trait is probably their *pièce de résistance*, where one can’t quite describe their music category.”

Although band members are aware that they have yet to win the hearts of

everyone on the continent, Muriithi says the decision to fuse Swahili and English as their musical language gives them an edge to break out of Kenya and into the global music market.

“Swahili is a beautiful language,” Chimano says. “You find that people who don’t get the language [still] relate to it.”

With an impending third album due for release in 2014, the band will continue releasing singles and shooting music videos in the months ahead, and plans are in the works for tours around both Kenya and the United States in 2013.

From the colors and rhythms of their native Kenya to a presentation style all their own, the members of Sauti Sol are taking Africa to the world’s stage and dreaming big for what’s to come. [▶](#)

—Belinda Otas is a London-based journalist with a passionate interest in Africa, the African diaspora, politics, art and culture, gender and social development.

The group’s eponymous, six-track EP, *Sauti Sol* — a collaboration with South African artist Spoek Mathambo — was released in 2012.

