

Forget Africa 23: Deborah 1

American film artist Deborah Stratman combed Malawi in a passionate search for dj's and musicians. Programmer Gertjan Zuilhof joined her for a week and had dinner with the local filmmakers.

Deborah Stratman is into sound. And music as well. So in Malawi (yes the Malawi of Madonna and yes, one of the poorest countries in the world) we not only visited filmmakers, but quite a number of musicians and radio people as well. And she likes to involve local people in her quest for songs and other sounds. Visiting the local video store of Blantyre (not the official capital city, but the more happening place where the media people work) she asked the workers in the store about their favorite genre and when this turned out to be musical she asked them to write and perform a musical number for her movie. Even the doormen and the cleaning ladies of the head office of the internet provider Skyband (we camped often in the lobby of the building since it was the only place with a decent wifi reception) she convinced to do a choir song together in the entrance hall of the building.



Spontaneous choir of doormen and cleaners in Blantyre, Malawi. Deborah is the pale lady with the Rich Guy sign (she found it on the street and took it as a present for the poor guy who looks after her cats).

She also asked serious and professional musicians to do things for her and her movie. She asked the singer-songwriter Agorosso to go back to his home town in the N'sanje region (a four hour drive on a bumpy road) and perform his songs in his hometown. We went with a small company in a small car driven by the eccentric Englishman (Englishmen in former colonies are mostly eccentric I guess) Harold Williams. Apart from the musician and ourselves also local filmmaker Michael Phoya joined the outing.



Deborah Straman and musician Agorosso.

When arrived in Agorosso's village (just simple huts, sand, goats and a lot of dirty and dusty children) we quickly greeted his mother and right after that we had to pay our respect to the village chief.



Paying respect to the Village Chief.

The chief in return gave his respect to the musician from the big city. Moving around through the village (in fact just dry emptiness) we were permanently followed by the cliché image of African villages: a big group of running and shouting smelly children. But when Agorosso unpacked his guitar and started singing in front of his mother's house they sat themselves quietly down on the dirt for as long as the concert lasted. Agorosso was clearly emotional about it all. Not that long ago he himself had been running around in



Musician Agorosso performing in front of his mothers house.

Agorosso is still a young man, but as an even younger man he had been a boatman. With a boat made out of a hollow tree he would bring up to 20 people (or 10 people and 20 goats) to the other side of the river. To the border with Mozambique. Inspired by the river Agorosso told us about the traditional hippo song. Children playing at the river would sing it when they saw hippo's. According to legend the hippo's like the song and dance on it under water. For Agorosso not a legend by the way. He had seen it himself. More than once even.



It was not so dry as it looks.

Behind us is the wide river. Musician Agorosso in red, Michael Phoya in yellow and Deborah Stratman in blue. Our driver Harold told us many stories and anecdotes along the way. He had been living in Malawi for almost fifty years. Approaching seventy he had come as young officer in the repressive colonial police force (his words). He stayed after the independence and married a Malawian wife. Like other white people in Malawi he had devoted himself to preserving the nature of the country. Although he only lived a small part of his life in England he still wanted to be back in time to see Liverpool play on tv. The ride back was even more bumpy.



Far right Harold Williams and far left the Wife of the Village Chief.

FORGET AFRICA

Notes and travel diaries from programmer Gertjan Zuilhof researching a programme on African cinema with the slightly paradoxical title Forget Africa. Click here for [previous entries](#).

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