

MUSIC

WHEN OLDIES ARE NO LONGER GOLDIES

BY JOSEPH BATTE

Back in 1999, Chance Nalubega stepped out of Kasiwukira Studios with sh1.5m tucked safely in her bag. It was real money earned from her debut album, *Guma Omwoyo*. There were no royalties hanging in the air like unanswered prayers, no streaming dashboards blinking for attention, no late-night battles with TikTok algorithms.

Now jump to 2026, and picture a young artiste hunched over a glowing screen at 2:00am, refreshing YouTube analytics, watching numbers climb into the millions, only to realise the money trickling in cannot even settle a studio bill.

Suddenly, the oldies do not just sound sweet, they feel like a better deal. So what changed, and when did music stop paying?

To really feel that shift, you have to rewind the tape to the cassette boom of the 1980s and 1990s, when a few sharp-eyed music businessmen turned raw talent into nationwide stars. At the centre was Eriya Bugembe Ssebunya, better known on the streets as Kasiwukira, a man who did not just sell music, but controlled how it moved and who profited.

Starting around 1983 at Capital Traders, he brought in blank cassettes from Asia, recorded Ugandan songs onto them using a gramophone, and stamped each one with his growing brand. By the late 1980s, he had turned that hustle into Kasiwukira Music Publishers, the country's first music publishing machine. Artists would walk into his studio, record six-track albums, and walk out with a lump sum payment in cash.

Nalubega walked away with sh1.5m for *Guma Omwoyo*, an album that moved over 250 cassette copies in its first wave. A year later, *Balinsekerela* pushed her

earnings up to sh3m and by 2001, she got sh15m for *Yiga Okwagala*. That kind of money could buy you land upcountry, put up a decent house and bankroll a side hustle.

Meanwhile, Kasiwukira was stacking a catalogue that read like Uganda's greatest hits: Paul Kafeero with *Omwana w'omuzungu* and *Kampala mu Kooti*, Lord Fred Sebatta with *Gwanga Mujje* and *Mpawo Atalemererwa*, Mesach Semakula crooning *Tukwegomba Bangi*, Elly Wamala giving us *Emilly owe Nsambya*, and Eddy Yawe riding the wave with *Omuyaga*.

Kasiwukira even stepped in to fund Herman Basudde's final album *Egwala*, paying him well enough to drive off in a Land Cruiser. Alongside him, Lusyn Enterprises ran a parallel lane.

As one industry veteran would later put it, "If he [Kasiwukira] told you sh20m for the album, you left with sh20m that day."

After the 1994 liberalisation that gave birth to stations like Sanyu FM, radio became the loudspeaker of the nation. One well-timed single, backed by Kasiwukira's push, could sweep across the country in weeks. And then there were the live shows where bands filled village halls and Kampala bars.

Then it fell apart...

Now place that golden era side by side with today's high-pressure battlefield. Promotion is



now a full-time hustle. An artiste today must think like a filmmaker, a marketer and a data analyst: shooting a cinematic music video that can easily swallow sh10-sh20m, flooding TikTok with dance challenges, paying for visibility through Facebook and Instagram ads, chasing playlist placements on platforms like Boomplay and Spotify, and still showing up for club performances that sometimes barely recover transport costs.

Radio still holds some power, but between whispered Payola deals and overcrowded playlists, even a strong song can disappear.

Digital distributors such as The Orchard or DistroKid will place your music on global platforms, but here in Uganda, streaming money remains painfully thin.

And then there is the deeper question, the lyrics. Until the 2000s, Ugandan music was

storytelling dressed in melody, poetry carried by guitar strings and steady voices.

Voices like Philly Lutaaya, Elly Wamala, and Afrigo Band held up a mirror to the country. As Dr John Mulumba puts it: "In the 1990s and earlier, Ugandan music was heavily message-driven. Artists used their music to address social issues, political unrest and personal struggles." You could hear it in Paul Kafeero's *Kampala mu Kooti*, or feel it in Lord Fred Sebatta's anthems.

Today, the modern listener is chasing a different feeling: lighter, faster, something that offers escape from the daily grind. Beats dominate, designed to ignite TikTok trends.

"Music is now more accessible than ever, leading them to prioritise rhythm, melody and beat over the message," Mulumba says.

And maybe that shift reflects the times, a generation dealing with economic uncertainty, social media pressure, and wide, restless ambition, looking to music less for instruction and more for release.

HOPE ALIVE

Still, the message has not disappeared completely. Bobi Wine has turned protest music into political force, while Jose Chameleone and Eddy Kenzo weave social realities into crowd-moving hits. Newer voices like Azawi and Fik Fameica try to balance catchy hooks with the

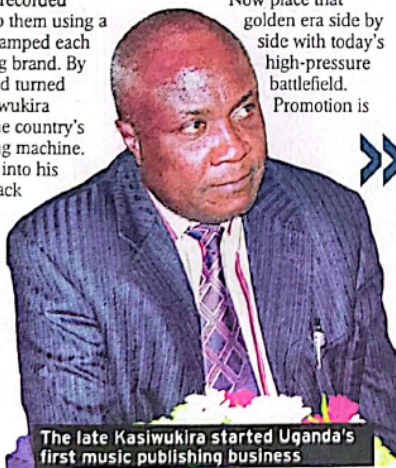
truths of their generation. But the market speaks loudly and it rewards the song that grabs you instantly.

So why does it feel like today's Ugandan artiste has to run a marathon just to be seen, let alone paid? Technology opened the gates wide — smartphones, cheap recording software and bedroom studios turned anyone into a producer overnight. Songs are released daily in their thousands and attention has become the rarest currency.

Then the money model flipped on its head. A 2025 report painted a sobering picture: 27% of Ugandan artistes earn nothing at all from their music, while nearly 70% remain stuck in the struggling "Tier 3" bracket, chasing inconsistent income. Even live performances now depend on sponsorship deals that companies increasingly avoid.

Add to that a changing audience that demands crystal-clear production, while piracy and low spending power continue to choke local earnings. As one promoter recently admitted in frustration, the industry has grown 'dull,' stripped of the vibrant competition and showbiz spark it once had.

Today's artistes enjoy a kind of freedom their predecessors never had — no gatekeepers, no single boss controlling the flow — but that freedom comes with a heavy price: total self-reliance in a fast-moving, unforgiving global market. It is a Catch-22.



The late Kasiwukira started Uganda's first music publishing business

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