

The Ugandan whose music fooled East Africa

Mad Ice's journey, from the video halls of Bwaise to the airwaves of East Africa and the cultural scene of Finland, is a story of reinvention. He became the artiste everyone thought they knew, while few ever knew where he actually came from.

BY BETTY KAKULU

For a generation of East Africans, the song *Baby Gal* transports them back to 2003. Many Ugandans assumed the artiste behind it was Tanzanian, another name to add to the golden era roster that included Lady Jaydee and Professor Jay. The Swahili was flawless, the vibe quintessentially Bongo Flava. But Mad Ice was actually a Ugandan boy from Bwaise who had learnt to blend in so seamlessly that an entire region claimed him without knowing his real story.

The Bwaise years

Ahmed Mohamed Kakoyi, known professionally as Mad Ice, was born in Kagololo, Masaka but grew up in Bwaise, Kampala. His first encounter with Tanzania came in 1987 at seven years old, when his family relocated there for three years, a period that gifted him the fluent Swahili that would later define his career.

The family returned to Uganda in 1990, but economic pressures soon forced his parents back to Tanzania, leaving young Kakoyi with guardians in Masaka. At 18, he began tagging along with Ssaza Mobile Disco, working as a roadie in exchange for moments on the microphone.

In 1999, he moved to Bwaise to join his uncle at a motor repair garage. When he asked to paint artwork on taxis instead of doing panel beating, his uncle dismissed the idea. Mad Ice left, eventually working in video halls and selling Cool Cool bar on Kampala's streets. Back in Tanzania, word reached his parents that he had become a thug and a drug user. This was before mobile phones when misinformation spread easily.

The journey to Tanzania

When MV Bukoba sank on Lake Victoria in 1996, claiming more than 800 lives, Mad Ice's world stopped. His parents were in Tanzania and had been planning a trip. Fear consumed him. He boarded MV Victoria from Port Bell to Mwanza.

"I remember being detained in the cell of the MV Victoria," he recalls. "They interrogated me. I gave them my parents' contact, but no one was picking up. I was later released."

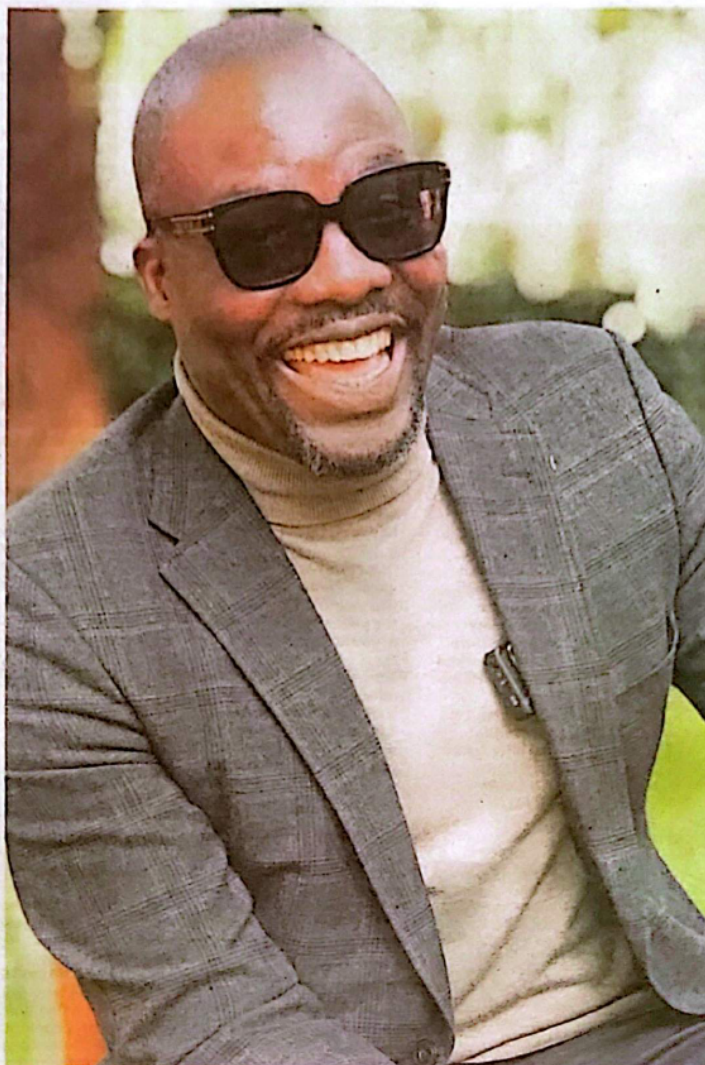
When he finally reached his family, he was met with suspicion. "I kept getting the 'Are you okay?' questions. Later, I found out they had been told I had gone mad and was on drugs."

Once reunited, he immediately started looking for gigs. Anything to survive.

Finding footing in Tanzania

In Mwanza, Mad Ice taught kindergarten in the mornings, worked at a video library in the evenings, and spent weekends at Capricabana nightclub where local artistes gathered for battles. There he met Tanzanian artiste Dr KB, who suggested they travel to Dar es Salaam to record.

In 2001, Mad Ice found himself thrown out onto the streets by the same people who had brought him to Dar. Journalist



Mad Ice relocated to Finland in 2005, where he worked as a radio presenter for more than 10 years. PHOTOS/ BETTY KAKULU.

Mama Sango Kipozi offered him a room and a voluntary position at JEAN Media. Soon after, he secured an internship at Marimba Studios, spending a year mastering audio engineering under Richard Mloka.

That same year, he met Corry Moriaty, a music teacher from Canada. When she heard him sing *Malaika*, she said she had nothing to add to his voice. Still, he insisted on vocal coaching. She gave him money to rent his first small room in Dar and, when she left Tanzania, gave him a guitar, the same one he used to compose later hits.

Finding his sound

In 2002, Mad Ice met Finnish producer Miikka Mwamba Kari, who had produced songs on Saida Karoli's celebrated album. Under Mwamba's production, Mad Ice recorded his first solo single, *Wanadamu*, about loyalty and betrayal. In December 2002, it was released and spread across Tanzania.

The birth of Baby Gal

"One morning, I called Miikka and sang him the chorus of *Baby Gal*. Immediately he said, 'That is a hit,'" Mad Ice remembers.

Released in April 2003, the song took over the country within weeks. The remix spread to Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Congo, and Malawi, becoming bigger than the artiste himself.

"There were rumours that I was a rich young Tanzanian, yet I was still hustling. I remember being in Nairobi and hearing the song in *matatus* while people tried to guess the artiste. My friend wanted to tell everyone it was me, but I asked him not to because I had nothing to show for the fame," he recalls.

After the album was completed, Mwamba had a disagreement with the studio owner and left for Finland. But in 2004, he reached out and invited Mad Ice to join him. "I signed a three-year contract with Mwamba Records. It started flying in and out for work," he says.

Surviving Tanzania immigration

During a tense period after a heist in Kinondoni, Tanzanian authorities began arresting undocumented Ugandans and Rwandans, forcing Mad Ice to adapt.

"I stopped hanging around Ugandans. Most of the time, I spoke only Kiswahili. When asked where I was from, I would say Mwanza. Part of my childhood was there. I had friends who knew me as their own," he recalls. That is how a Ugandan boy from Bwaise blended so seamlessly into Bongo Flava.

Finland and beyond

Mad Ice relocated to Finland in 2005, where he worked as a radio presenter for more than 10 years, a performer, and producer. He founded and hosted "Afro Sunday" (AfroSunday/Helsinki), which became the biggest Afro event platform in Finland for 13 years.

He received the 2022 AfroFinns Achievement Award in the music category and served on The Arts Promotion Centre Finland (Taite) as a member of the Uusimaa Art Council from 2023 to 2024.

After nearly two decades in Finland, he still calls Uganda home. He continues to sing in Swahili and Finnish.

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-Mad Ice