

Profile

Suraj: I dropped out of school for music and picked up good lessons

He's rarely invited to play as a deejay but as an artiste, and that has been rewarding in terms of pay

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I asked one of my editors if he'd heard of DJ Suraj (Suraj Mandavia), and his face lit up with a grin.

"Who's that? Never heard of him until today," he shrugged. That's understandable, for the 31-year-old deejay isn't exactly the kind of name and face you will find plastered across billboards or dominating mainstream playlists.

He's not a household celebrity in the conventional sense. But, to anyone into Kenya's electronic and deep house music scene, DJ Suraj isn't just a name, he's the name. For devotees of this growing, tightly knit sound, especially within the urban scene, DJ Suraj is one of the genre's most exciting prospects, and his name rings loud.

The Afro-deep house and electronic DJ has been gathering faithful in the past few years with his exciting sound blends of contemporary electronic rhythms with traditional musical and cultural textures, creating tracks that feel both futuristic and rooted. It's a style that has steadily earned him attention and has also created a lucrative business through his Gondwana outfit.

"I haven't been able to celebrate Christmas in the past five years because it always finds me travelling for shows. For most artistes, December is the busiest month, it's the time of the year that for many of us go out and try to perform in as many gigs as we can and make as much money as we can.

"There is always this narrative about Hindus and their shrewd money culture but, for me, I was never privileged to experience it like that, and that is because growing up in Kisumu. There were times when my parents were together and then they were not. And so there were moments we would lack, and that had me figure out how to make money at a very young age to support my single mother, he says.

That's how DJ Suraj's career began, by first playing in Hindu temples and earning a little money.

"I naturally gravitated towards music because my father and my extended family played at the temple. That is where I discovered my love for music. At first, I would play just for fun, then whenever there were those religious



events, I would get calls to go and play, and I figured out that I could actually ask for some money whenever I performed. It was a much, but it was exciting to see that I could actually make money playing," he recalls.

His love for deep-house music developed when the family relocated to Nairobi from Kisumu. DJ Suraj was just 17 at the time. Inspired by an Olympic performance by Dutch DJ and producer Tiesto, revered as the godfather of Electronic Dance Music (EDM), DJ Suraj began his quest.

"Watching him, my first question was, what is this type of music that he is playing? Then I discovered he had a weekly radio show and, as I kept following his journey, I came across a popular software called virtual Deejay and that is where I actually fell in love with the art of Deejaying. Putting two songs together, knowing when to play the song next and because I was following Tiesto a lot, I downloaded all the songs he played that I liked then began practising by myself on the virtual deejay, day and night. I was always practising all the time," he narrates.

But that wasn't enough. DJ Suraj be-

at the club from 11pm, why dont you start from 10pm to 11pm?" and that became my introduction into performing for people in the clubs. Before I started making some good money from the gigs, my first substantial pay cheque was three drink coupons at the club each worth Ksh250 (\$2), the price of a beer or a shot. And because I have never been a drinker, I would give those out to my friends on condition they'd never leave the dance floor whenever I was playing."

As DJ Suraj got better at his craft the gigs kept coming and so he began generating more income from playing in different clubs. It was time to leave home.

"When I began taking care of myself, I felt it was time to let my parents know that I didn't want school anymore but also it was time I moved out of their home. So I told them to give me one year and if there wasn't any substantial growth with my music career then I would give up on my hopes and dreams and focus on whatever plans and dreams they have for me."

At the end of the year nothing had worked.

"I wanted to keep going but my parents said no. I struck another pact and got another year to try to make things work and it kind of worked because a new lounge opened in Westlands and they reached out needing someone who would be a residency DJ. Now I was on a monthly salary and I would take all that money to my mother. It wasn't a lot of money — Ksh7,000 (\$54) — but it helped convince them that there was some progress. What I made from side gigs is what I would use that for my personal upkeep."

Noticing how frequently he had begun receiving invites to gigs, DJ Suraj began dreaming big.

"I thought Ksh100,000 (\$775) would come quickly but it didn't."

Every month, DJ Suraj and his friends would secure a venue where they would only play Tribal and Techno house.

"That is when I started opening myself to more financial returns. I began building a name.

Being one of the few Kenyan DJ who solely focused on EDM music, DJ Suraj's name began to get even bigger. In 2016, he founded Gondwana, this time staging own shows where he would play Afro-deep house.

And the rest is history.

He has been touring extensively with performances some of Africa's biggest festivals such as Nyege Nyege, Beneath The Baobab, Blankets and Wine, RISE in Berlin, CityMatine Festival in Budapest as well as debuts in Vienna, Luanda, and Dubai, and many times in Cape Town and Durban in South Africa.

gan visiting a night club in Nairobi every weekend and standing by the DJ watching and asking questions.

"I looked for Deejay schools around, I found one but it was very expensive, so I was looking for alternatives. During one of those club visits, one of the deejays offered to train me. I had become a common face and it was obvious to them I never went to the club to party but rather to watch how they played. So I was trained on the basics and kept on practising."

"One day, he said 'I'm going to play

Since 2017, the first time he performed outside Kenya, DJ Suraj has fulfilled his dream of touring the world playing Afro house music