

Dance

Live bands: what makes them so popular?

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During the lockdown, focus shifted. Tusker Malt, which in the past had hosted the famous Tusker Malt Band Nights, continued investing in music differently, introducing the Swangz Avenue-produced Conversations. Now, as nightlife regains its rhythm, The Singleton alongside Tusker Malt are bringing back the Tusker Malt Band Nights, this time with Abeeka Band as the official influencers of the experience, tapping into the very culture that made live music a staple of Kampala's evenings.

More than three years after the lockdown was lifted, nightlife is finding its feet; more bands have been birthed and what used to be a weekly act has since evolved into a daily fixture. From The Villa to Roza Dymz and dozens of other bars, live bands are now fixtures of Kampala's nightlife. Every evening, somewhere in the city, a resident band, whether it is Janzi, Abeeka, Vanessa and the Band or The Maestro, is mid-set.

Bands are popular that these days, they popularise songs and perform some songs even before their owners; for instance, before Tracy Melon, performed her Ogenda Kukilaba with Janzi Band on Valentine's Day, the band's lead singer had performed the song for months and audiences loved her take on the song.

Part of the answer lies in authenticity. There is a growing fatigue with what some patrons call "CD musicians", artists who perform over pre-recorded tracks, often lip-syncing or offering minimal live instrumentation. In contrast, a live band promises risk and spontaneity. A missed note can turn into a jazz riff; an audience request can reshape an entire setlist. The performance feels alive because it is.

"Imagine going out for a night with a loved one and you have the power to request for their favourite song," says one Patrick Kaboyo, an accountant and a regular at band nights in different hangout spots. On a business side however, Wintah Nabatanzi who works with one of the prominent bands, says people have started going out again and places with live bands, as opposed to mainly DJs give people a chance to interact.

"Bands perform from Monday to Friday, do private events on Saturday and resume public performances on Sunday," she says. For the outlets, however, it has been said that when there is a live band, patrons tend to stay longer, buy more drinks and food.

Then there is the energy. Kampala's social scene thrives on collective experience, birthdays, work celebrations, heartbreak therapy and random Tuesday indulgences. Live bands stretch for hours, moving from *Kidandali* classics to Afrobeats, from Congolese rumba to Western pop, keeping audiences on their feet. Unlike a DJ set, which can feel curated from afar, a band engages directly, teasing the crowd, inviting sing-alongs, adjusting tempo to match the mood.

"Besides specific or genre bending bands, a band can take you around the world in one night; from a Chris Brown RnB song to a Konshens dancehall song. It's like people coming together to sing," says Peter Mukalazi, also a regular at band nights.

A single set can slide from traditional folk rhythms into contemporary Afrobeats, then into a 1990s RnB anthem. In that blend lies a reflection of Kampala itself: rooted yet cosmopolitan, nostalgic yet restless.

Live band nights create memory. The sight of a trumpeter stepping off stage to solo among tables; the shared chorus of strangers belting out an old classic; the drummer pushing the tempo as the dance floor swells, these moments are difficult to replicate with speakers alone.

Bands form and break up. Some lose members who later reemerge as solo artists, for instance, there wouldn't be a Tracy Melon if she did not leave Bahati Band, there wouldn't be a Joshua Baraka if he did not stop doing covers or Azawi if she did not leave Karma Band, and many many more. Bars open and close. Yet the appetite remains. In a city that never truly sleeps, live music offers something deeper than background sound. It offers presence.