

**A STUDY ON THE EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE OF POPULAR MUSIC BANDS IN
KENYA: THE CASE OF MASENO UNIVERSITY BAND**

Fred Wekesa Kusienya, Lecturer, Kabarak University, School of Music and Performing Arts
fredwekesa@kabarak.ac.ke

Kaskon W. Mindoti, Lecturer, Maseno University, Department of Music and Theatre Studies,
kaskonmindoti@gmail.com

Mellitus N. Wanyama, Dean, School of Music and Performing Arts, Kabarak University.
mwanyama@kabarak.ac.ke

ABSTRACT

Majority of the music audience both within and without the academic circles in Kenya have perceived the function of popular music bands to be entertainment. This paper however takes a departure from this notion and explores other functions that the bands serve, beyond entertainment. Therefore, the study explored and brought to the fore the educational function that such bands also give to the society. With a focus on Maseno University Music band, the authors objectively sought to establish the teaching and training process, the performance styles, genres employed in music band instruction, the leadership organization and management of the band. Data collection methods and tools included interviews, participant and non-participant observation and tape recorder. The study population which comprised band practitioners, trainers and instructors was obtained through purposive and snowballing technique. Qualitative data obtained was organized in topics of discussion and presented in prose. It is hoped that the findings of this study shall augment the pool of existing knowledge of popular music locally and internationally.

Keywords: Music band, Popular music, Educational, Academic, Musical equipment, Training.

INTRODUCTION

A Historical Background

The idea to start Maseno University band was developed by the late Professor Caleb Chrispo Okumu way back in the late 1990s (J. Mutuku, personal communication, October 7, 2018). The idea was exacerbated by the supremacy rivalry that ensued between Prof. Okumu and the late Sam Ochieng' Mak' Okeyo over the University choir patronage that; Mr. Ochieng had claimed monopoly over for a long period. This environment made it difficult for Prof. Okumu to land and carry out any practical work with the students after coming back from South Africa; where he

had been pursuing his PhD studies (W. Obiero, personal communication, November 3, 2018). It was for this reason that Prof. Okumu took a bold step and wrote a proposal to the first Vice chancellor (VC) of Maseno University. The proposal sought to start a band of this kind that would be used as a teaching and training facility for music students. This would boost their practical skills in the area of Music performance. This was also a way of avoiding conflict between him and Mr. Ochieng' (O. Ouko, personal communication, October 8, 2017).

The vice chancellor approved the proposal doubting whether or not there was going to be any musician within the department who could competently handle the musical equipment; and produce a sensible popular tune that people would identify with. The vice chancellor approved the purchase of just one powered mixer of six channels and two mid-range speakers (J. Akumu, personal communication, September 4, 2018).

Prof. Okumu provided his own lead guitar and three microphones and a departmental electronic keyboard. The approval was granted on condition that, within a month, there should be a band otherwise it would be presumed that Prof. Okumu was incompetent and lacked the capacity to establish such a band; meaning that his job was at stake. Nonetheless, his dream came to be realized in the year 2004 (K. Mureith, personal communication, July 6, 2019).

The founding members of the band were: Prof. Okumu who was the main lead vocalist also doubling up as a guitarist and band leader, Dr. James Mutuku keyboard player, Mr. Fred Wekesa lead guitarist, Mr. Obiero vocal backup and Dr. Zippy Akatha the female lead vocalist. (K. Mureith, personal communication, July 6, 2019).

The band began performing from a humble background and gradually established itself as a band to reckon with. After some time, the then VC found the band performing *Karubandika*, song by

Orchestra Macquis of Tanzania. This prompted the VC to indulge with Prof. Okumu and the outcome was the purchase of more musical instruments for the band. This then led to formation of a band that had good instruments and motivated the musicians to perform better leading to more fame and popularity within Kenyan University circles and the general public's popular music scene (P. Akumu, personal communication, June 3, 2018).

Challenges

The main challenges that Maseno University band faced were as follows:

- Recruitment and training of artists: This used to take time since majority of the students that were joining did not have prior band music orientation.
- The school lecture timetable: It was very difficult to meet all the artists at the same time for training and practice, since all of them were doing different courses scheduled at different hours of the day.
- Academic/semester Calendar: This also posed a big challenge in that; best artists would be compelled by the calendar to be home for long holidays when they were most needed in the band.
- Completion of studies/Graduation: It was difficult to retain accomplished artists since after completion of the four years of studies, one had to graduate and go. This meant that, the leadership had to start a fresh every year by recruiting new members to replace those who had graduated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Popular band music in Kenya is largely attributed to the influence from musicians and bands from Congo and Tanzania. Hence a lot of literature in this study inevitably must touch on Congolese bands as roots that inform the popular music situation in Kenya.

According to Stewart (2000), the earliest bands ever formed in Congo in the early years were by Franco Luambo and Grand Kallé. Some of the artists who joined and performed with this band were Tabu Ley and Dr. Nico Kassanda at the time. However as Stewart (2000) observes, “In the 1950s and 1960s, some of the artists who were previously in Franco’s band decided to form their own bands. For example, Tabu Ley Rochereau and Dr. Nico Kasanda formed their own band known as African Fiesta and transformed their music further by fusing Congolese folk music with soul music, as well as Caribbean and Latin beats and instrumentation” (pp. 20-25). Stewart (2000) explains that, Tabu Ley and Dr. Nico were later on joined by Papa Wemba and Sam Mangwana. They produced songs like *Afrika Mokili Mobimba* which means ‘Africa the whole world’ made them one of Africa's most prominent bands. Stewart adds that Congolese "rumba" eventually evolved into soukous (p. 28).

According to Stewart (2000), Tabu Ley Rochereau and Dr. Nico Kasanda are considered the pioneers of modern soukous. Other greats of this period include Koffi Olomide, Tshala Muana and Wenge Musica. A lot of the views propounded by Stewart, gives the reader a historical orientation about the evolution processes of the Congolese based bands, the music genre and the key musicians. Information detailing the dynamics that informed the establishment of bands in terms of whose idea it was to start a band, funding, acquisition of musical equipment

process, recruitment and training of musicians and the main objectives of forming the bands was not captured. This is what this study sought to establish in Maseno University band.

Samba (2005, p. 20) states that While the rumba influenced bands such as Lipua-Lipua, Veve, TP OK Jazz and Bella Bella, younger Congolese musicians looked for ways to reduce that influence and play a faster paced soukous inspired by rock n roll. A group of students called Zaiko LangaLanga came together in 1969 around founding vocalist Papa Wemba. Pepe Kalle, a protégé of Le Grand Kallé, created the band Empire Bakuba together with PapyTex and they too became popular. Samba has given a solid historical background on how rumba influenced most bands and how ways were sought to reduce the influence on young musicians since they wanted to play a faster soukous. However, Samba (2005) is only mentioning about young musicians championing for change but silent on how these young people became musicians. This study holds a position that for someone to become a musician, he/she must have undergone an instruction process whether informal or formal. Therefore the information regarding the teaching and learning methods, training, leadership and mentorship processes of the musicians was not explored. Hence the educational perspective in this literature fails to stand out conspicuously. Nonetheless, Samba's effort to mention the names of the bands involved in the evolution process was found informative. These aspects were all addressed in Maseno university band.

In East Africa in the 70s, Stewart (2000, pp. 40-42) states that Soukous now spread across Africa and became an influence on virtually all the styles of modern African popular music including highlife, palm-wine music, taarab and makossa. Stewart argues that as political conditions in Zaire, as the Democratic Republic of Congo was known then, deteriorated in the

1970s, some groups made their way to Tanzania and Kenya. By the mid-seventies, several Congolese groups were playing soukous at Kenyan night clubs. The lively *cavacha*, a dance craze that swept East and Central Africa during the seventies was popularized through recordings of bands such as Zaiko LangaLanga and Orchestra ShamaShama, influencing Kenyan musicians. This rhythm, played on the snare drum or hi-hat, quickly became a hallmark of the Congolese sound in Nairobi and is frequently used by many of the regional bands. Several of Nairobi's renowned Swahili rumba bands formed around Tanzanian groups like Simba Wanyika and their offshoots, Les Wanyika and Super Wanyika Stars. Stewart (2000) has given an account of the spread of soukous to East Africa and mentions the bands that were formed during the time. However, information regarding the reasons for starting the bands, recruitment and training of musicians' strategies were not explored. This information was captured in the study of Maseno University band.

Samba (2005) adds to this, propounding that in the late 1970s Virgin records produced Long Plays (LPs) from the Tanzanian-Congolese Orchestra Makassy and the Kenya-based Super Mazembe. One of the tracks from this album was the Swahili song *Shauri Yako* ("it's your problem"), which became a hit in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Les Mangelepa was another influential Congolese group that moved to Kenya and became extremely popular throughout East Africa. About this same time, the Nairobi-based Congolese vocalist Samba Mapangala and his band Orchestra Virunga, released the LP *Malako*, which became one of the pioneering releases of the newly emerging world music scene in Europe. The musical style of the East Africa-based Congolese bands gradually incorporated new elements, including Kenyan benga music, and spawned what is sometimes called the "Swahili sound" or "Congolese sound". Samba's focus

was more on the recording component in popular music industry and how this element contributed to the popularity of the bands at that time. No information regarding the recruitment and training of musicians, acquisition of music equipment and mentorship program was explored in this instance. Nonetheless, the study was nourished with the knowledge from the list of the names of the bands mentioned in the literature. This was addressed in this study.

In the effort to give a historical account of rumba based bands, Roberts (1986) begins by accounting for the origin of rumba as a genre arguing that it originated from Cuba and later on adapted by Congolese bands which started doing Cuban covers, singing the Spanish lyrics phonetically. Eventually they created original compositions with lyrics in French or Lingala, a "lingua franca" of the western Congo region. The Cuban horn *guajeos* were adapted to guitars. The Congolese called this new music "rumba", though it was more based on "son" of Antoine Kolosoy, also known as Papa Wendo, who became the first star of African rumba, touring Europe and North America in the 1940s and 1950s with his regular band, Victoria BakoloMiziki (Wheeler, 2005).

By the 1950s, Robert (1986) explains that big bands had become the preferred format of using acoustic bass guitar, multiple electric guitars, conga drums, maracas, scraper, flute or clarinet, saxophones, and trumpet. *Le Grand Kallé* et l'African Jazz (also known as African Jazz) led by Joseph KabaseleTshamala (Grand Kallé), and OK Jazz, later renamed TPOK Jazz (*Tout Puissant Orchestre Kinshasa*, meaning "all-powerful Kinshasa band") led by Franco became the leading bands. One of the musical innovations of Franco's band was the *mi-solo* (meaning "half solo") guitarist, playing arpeggio patterns and filling a role between the lead and rhythm guitars. In the context of this study, other than the techniques explored by Franco, which this paper can deduce

as an educational element, a lot of the literature is about the historical dimensions of the bands in terms of when they were formed its name and change of names. Substantial information relating to the details and the specifics that inform the objectives of the formation of bands is lacking. For example, Robert is silent on the educational perspectives in terms of methodology of teaching and training of musicians, mentorship and leadership programs if ever these aspects were part and parcel of the bands of those days.

In the study of the origin of rumba music, Penalosa (2011) observes that, the history of rumba is filled with a lot of unknowns, contradictions, conjectures and myths which overtime have been taken as fact. He goes on stating that, most accounts suggest that, rumba first emerged in Cuba in 1880s at the time when slavery was finally abolished on the island. Penalosa argues that, the name rumba comes from a Cuban Spanish word *rumbo* which means ‘party’. Penalosa goes ahead saying that, the people of African descent in Havana and Matanzas originally used the word rumba as a synonym for party. Overtime, the name ceased to be just a word for party and took on the meaning of a definite Cuban musical genre and also a specific form of dance. Penalosa further contends that, African origins of rumba can be attributed to two secular dances of the Bantu origin-the *Yuka* and *Makuta*. Penalosa (2011) has given a historical background on the origin of rumba where he has explained the origin of the name first and how the name later changed meaning to refer to a definite musical form. Penalosa has also pointed out that the African rumba has its origin in African dances known as *Yuka* and *Makuta*. Review of this literature exposed aspects in the evolution process of rumba. However, the literature does not capture any information regarding the rumba based bands that could have acted as the agents of rumba music evolution process since, other than the media, it’s usually the artists either as

individuals or in groups of ensembles/bands that spread music around. With this position, it's not quite easy to contemplate the objectives of the bands that were involved in the rumba evolution process since they are not mentioned by Penalosa (2011) in the account given. However, the mere mention of rumba went a long way in anchoring the study especially in the objective of the kind of genres that are performed by most popular bands. This was relevant to Maseno university band since it is one of the genres that the band performs.

Low (1982) gives a historical account of the guitar music in Kenya from 1945-1980 in a general sense. In his account, he has mentioned the guitarist of the early years such as Fundi Konde, Daudi Kabaka, Jim Lasco, the techniques used for playing guitar in the 1950's and early 1960s, the influence of Kenyan traditional music, electric guitar bands and the Swahili songs of the 1960's among other elements of guitar music. The views of Low (1982) are critical in laying the historical foundation upon which subsequent studies can be premised in the area of popular music in Kenya. However the views so far advanced in the historical account given; do not explore the educational perspectives of popular bands in Kenya in terms of methods of teaching and learning, strategies of mentorship, talent development and leadership skills.

Perhaps of significant relevance to this study is the mere mention of the fact that there was the introduction of finger picking style as a technique of guitar playing by Jean Bosco Mwendawa Bayeke and Edourd Masengo. As much as the introduction of the finger picking technique was a boost in the development of guitar playing vocabulary, Low is silent about the methodological approach that was used to disseminate the technique to the artists (Low, 1982).

According to Ranger (1975), the origin of guitar popular music of Kenya is linked to the decline of *Beni* dance music. Ranger further argues that, *Beni* dance began declining in the 1940s due to

economic constraints whereby only a few people were allowed to be members and take part in the dance occasions. It also became difficult to transport large groups to venues, buy instruments and uniforms for them. Ranger's views expose the challenges that are associated with the dynamics surrounding the establishment of a new idea. Such information is critical in informing someone on what to put in place first before starting a band. Ranger has continued to highlight the factors that could have been responsible for the decline of the genre referred to as *Beni* dance. However, Ranger's views are given in a general sense since the scope of the investigation conducted did not capture the educational, mentorship and leadership perspectives in the context of popular music band practices. However, the educational perspective was well exposed in this study for Maseno university band.

In the study on the origin of *Kwela* music of South Africa, Manuel (1990) argues that, *Kwela* is a Zulu word for 'get up'. Manuel adds that in township slangs, the word also means 'Police Van' called 'Kwela kwela'. Manuel goes on observing that, *Kwela* as a musical entity or type evolved from the *Marabi* sounds which later on brought South African music to international prominence in 1950s. Manuel (1990) has addressed the origin and meaning of the name of the genre and the source of its evolution. These two elements were found informative. However, the scope of the views advanced by Manuel (1990) did not capture the challenges, educational perspectives, mentorship and talent development, training/learning in the practice of *kwela* popular music practice neither did they mention the bands that practice *kwela* music as a genre. However, of great importance to this study is the information given on *kwela* as a genre of music that was found useful in helping the band perform it from a perspective of knowledge.

In the study on *benga* popular guitar music of the *Luo* people, Okumu (1998) argues that, in *dholuo*, *benga* means ‘good’ or ‘nice’. Okumu observes that it is a musical genre that evolved in 1940s and late 1960s. Okumu attributes the origin of *benga* music to a process of imitation and contends that *benga* music style of the *Luo* came about by musicians imitating the *Nyatiti* instrument playing techniques on the guitar. In addition Okumu (1998) pines that, the bass guitar in *benga* music plays in a style reminiscent to *Nyatiti*. This literature has brought a component of imitation which perhaps can by deduction be taken as a method of learning. However, by and large, the literature on *benga* music accounts for the evolution process. Okumu did not even mention any single *benga* music band. Nevertheless, Okumu has detailed the characteristics of *Benga* music which are found applicable to this study in terms of the genres that forms part of the repertoire that Maseno university band likes performing.

According to Collin (2004), in East Africa, the main early guitar styles of the 1930s to 50s were based on western strumming or vamping techniques influenced by recording artists like Jimmy Rogers and were played by Fundi Konde and the Rhino Boys of Kenya and Zimbabwean/South African Zulu and Ndebele guitarists such as George Sibanda and John Benghu, who were also influenced by traditional mouth-bow music. Collins (2004) has concentrated the study on playing techniques which in essence form part of the conceptual package that constitutes educational elements. Only that these techniques of playing are not linked to a specific instructional mode. Other aspects such as recruitment and training of musicians were also not explored. This is paper therefore explore to fill this gap.

According to Kubik (1965), popular music in East Africa since 1950s has been characterized by strong and continuing intra-African exchange of musical ideas. He adds that, popular music in

East Africa has therefore been largely influenced by the music of Zaire and Southern Africa. This was made possible by the import of records of the new guitar music of Mwenda Jean Bosco, Losta Abelo and other musicians from the Belgium Congo (Zaire). He further observes that guitar musicians in East Africa liked the finger picking style in Mwenda's records and imitated him. Kubik(1965) has paid attention to how various forces influenced guitar playing style. In the light of the views advanced by Kubik (1965), this study finds the techniques of playing not linked to a specific instructional mode. Moreover, other aspects such as recruitment and training of musicians were also not explored. However, the techniques highlighted were relevant in this study in helping the artists perform regardless of how they were acquired.

TEACHING AND TRAINING PROCESS

Maseno University band has grown into an institution with a program of mentorship and training. Recruitment exercise is usually carried out to interested members through an audition exercise (L. Ongeso, personal communication, November 10, 2019). This is paramount for placement purposes. This is because many that show interest in the band are either ignorant of, or do not demonstrate a proper understanding of a music band dynamics especially when it comes to placement. The training process is carried out through group as well as individualized tuition. This is between a learner and lecturer, tutor, mentor or peer trainers in various skills for both female and male students.

Students are usually taught basic formal music literacy course before undertaking training in specific areas. This helps the students especially those without a music literacy background to be fairly well versed with music knowledge and to develop an analytical mind; suitable for music discourse and performance (Asige, personal communication, August 8, 2019). The aspects taught

in the courses relate to music pedagogy, history, anthropology and psychology which are unique to a particular musical instrument.

Apart from this, students are also taken through knowledge on the various popular musical idioms of the world and their distinctive characteristic features. Musical idioms of the world refer to the distinctive features that make certain music unique. It can be a rhythmic motif or vocal timbre and rendition style. Students are given time to learn how to play and also spend time practicing to internalize the concepts taught (B. Asige, personal communication, August 8, 2019).

Students are also given tasks and targets within which to accomplish certain exercises. This serves as a motivating factor in making students self-driven in the carrying out of the assignments. For instance, a learner may be given a task like playing a minor scale within three days, and if he is unable then he will be given remedial tutorials by the peer trainers until he gates it (J. Adero, personal communication, September 6, 2019). Students are emphasized upon to maintain moral values. Smoking, drug and substance abuse, drinking alcohol, promiscuity and overt behavior cannot be tolerated within Maseno university band. This has gone a long way in ensuring that the band exhibits high moral standards, discipline and ethical behavior in its operations.

PERFORMANCES

Maseno University band has had opportunities to perform live in various occasions. These include national holidays, University exhibitions, Agricultural shows, and graduation ceremonies. Other occasions include wedding ceremonies, corporate organizations meetings especially during the launch of ISO ceremonies and many more. During the performances, the

band explores a range of popular musical genres ranging from rumba, Bongo/Bongo-Flava, sungura, Benga, Omutibo, Kwela, Kwaito, Hip hop, Soul, Neo-soul, Reggae, twisti and rap. The list is endless (B. Asige, personal communication, August 8, 2019).

CARE AND MAINTENANCE OF MUSICAL EQUIPMENT

Musical equipment worldwide, are highly valued and expensive to acquire. For this reason, Maseno University band emphasizes this in the care and maintenance of musical equipment for purposes of durability. Students are taught instrument-handling skills to avoid unnecessary damages arising from ignorance and carelessness (L. Nyambane, personal communication, November 7, 2019)

Students are taught on how to clean and service the music equipment and undertaking thorough physical examination in order to detect defects and repair them. In particular, the aim is to take good care of sensitive electronic equipment such as cables, amplifiers, and mixers to ensure their optimum functioning is guaranteed (L. Nyambane, personal communication, November 7, 2019).

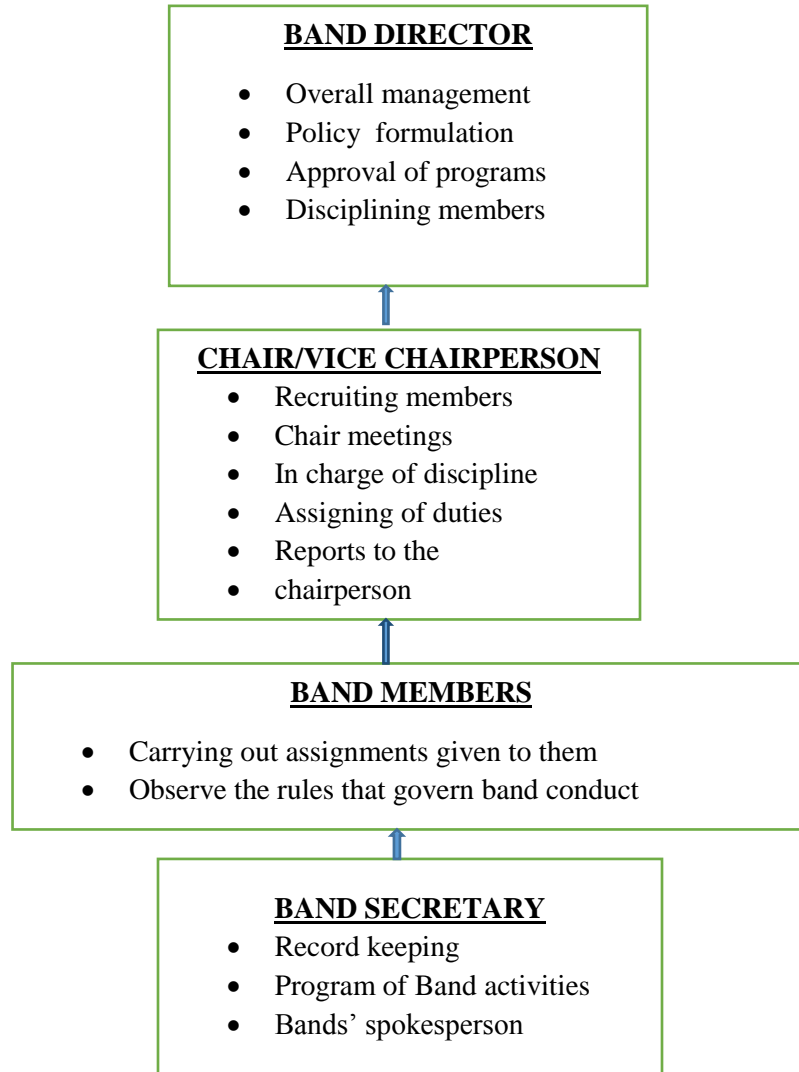
LEADERSHIP

Apart from the head of department and the director of the band who are members of staff and at the apex of leadership, Maseno University band has a leadership structure that is student based (L. Nyambane, personal communication, November 7, 2019). There is the chairperson, secretary and technical team leader (chairperson, vice chairperson and secretary. This team is charged with the responsibilities of coordinating the daily affairs of the band which include things like drawing the timetable for rehearsals, recruiting new members, enforcing discipline within the group, fostering team work in assignment allocation and etiquette in interpersonal relationships

during band engagements or activities (L. Nyambane, personal communication, November 7, 2019).

Leadership structure of Maseno University Band

Leadership structure of Maseno University Band



ALUMNI OF MASENO UNIVERSITY BAND

Many of the students of Maseno University who join Maseno University band can candidly affirm that by the time an individual graduates, he will be a fully accomplished professional who is adequately prepared to conquer the popular music scene locally and internationally. A case in point is Mr. Dominic Khaemba who graduated with a Bachelor of Music (B-MUS) degree and is also an accomplished pianist, drum set player, litungu and guitar player. Mr. Khaemba is the founder of the band known as, 'The Ageless band' based in Nairobi. He now owns a music recording studio in Muthaiga estate in Nairobi city Kenya. The other example is a female 4th year Music student and a band member called Mellyn Onywoki Barango (Stage name 'MEL'). She has already visited France as a guest performer during the UNESCO Conference in November 2018 owing to her exemplary performance of her own composition in egekusi language. In the year 2019, Mel produced and launched her own music video entitled 'Maumivu'.

CONCLUSION

Several studies have been undertaken on popular guitar music bands in Africa. Most of the accounts in the range of the literature so far consulted, are arguably more historical in nature. The literature gives accounts on the origins of musical genres and scanty information on the bands; when in the real sense the bands are the main carriers of these genres and therefore need to be accorded a fair share of attention. In cases where authors did best, they only mention the name of the bands. Details regarding the objectives, mission and vision, structure of leadership, mentorship programs, talent development programs, teaching, learning and training strategies as this paper would wish to capture are not explored in most of the accounts. This therefore attests

to the fact that, this area is suffering from under documentation. As such, there is need for more scholarly investigations in the said area to augment the literature.

The notion that popular music bands practices are forums for teaching immorality, social misconduct, vices and all manner of negative behavior; as is held by a section of the Kenyan community has been challenged in this paper. The study has established that popular music bands can also provide a forum for formal learning and training. This can endear an individual's talent to very great heights in the line of popular band musical career. This is exemplified in this study by what Khaemba and Mel, both alumni of Maseno university band are doing in the popular music scene in Kenya. The study has also established that, it is not just about performance but also preparation of students in other fields such as leadership. The study has established that, through the band, leadership skills and discipline are inculcated in individuals making them responsible for their actions. This came out very clearly when artists are tasked with ensuring proper care of the musical equipment as well as the management of concerts and the overall band administration.

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