



Mark McNulty

# Africa Oyé

Kevin Bourke visits the 25th edition of the free weekend festival that offers a slice of African culture in Liverpool's Sefton Park every summer

Africa Oyé is now the UK's largest free celebration of African music and culture, attracting tens of thousands of people to Liverpool's Sefton Park every June. But, like many great ideas, the festival started out as just another crazy dream.

After leaving university, Glasgow-born Kenny Murray spent time travelling through the whole of the African continent. He fell in love with the incredible array of music that he heard and decided to showcase it in the UK, offering a positive image of the continent at a time when it seemed as if the only messages infiltrating the UK about Africa were those of war, disease, famine and poverty. Murray was determined to redress the balance and highlight the fantastic range of cultures, foods, music and artists that make the continent one of the most vibrant and inspiring in the world.

After literally sticking a pin in a map of the UK and hitting Merseyside, he moved to Liverpool and started the first Africa Oyé. That year, 1992, it was just a series of small gigs in Liverpool's city centre. But no more than a decade later, huge demand and a rapidly rising number of revellers meant moving to its present home in Liverpool's picturesque Sefton Park. It was there where the festival celebrated its 25th anniversary last June with a sizzling line-up that included the Zimbabwean dance vibe of Mokooomba, Black Prophet (who opened with a blast of Ozzy Osbourne's 'Crazy Train'), Grammy-winning Dobet Gnahoré, the insanely energetic Jupiter & Okwess and closing with reggae legend Max Romeo. Significantly, Romeo was pretty much the only act who hadn't played at Africa Oyé before, a testament to the event's popularity with the musicians as

well as the crowds, who numbered somewhere in the region of 80,000 over the weekend.

Murray retired as artistic director at the end of 2013 "with no mega bucks pay off, no fancy leaving do, and no award, just a gentle goodbye and then off to the Scottish hills to enjoy life," points out his successor Paul Duhaney. Since he first joined the organisation in 1999 (after getting out of acid house promotions in London, moving to Liverpool and answering an ad in a local paper), Duhaney has been influential in ensuring that the festival is a truly international event that harnesses the spirit of multiculturalism and tolerance, not only hosting artists from nations right across Africa but also programming salsa, soca, reggae and other music from across South America and the Caribbean.

The festival is about more than just music, though, with over 40 stalls to explore the culinary delights, arts and crafts, and fashion of Africa and beyond. "The further back from the stage you go, the more it feels like a community event rather than a concert," I am told by one Mancunian chap who has been to every event since it moved to the park. "All ages, races, genders, sexualities, families with picnic baskets, kids with footballs, adults with beer – everyone is accounted for. This is a



The event in Liverpool's Sefton Park attracts a hugely diverse crowd with the likes of DJ Andy Kershaw (far right), Saidi Kanda from Tanzania (right) and Ghanaian reggae singer Black Prophet (below), just a few of the many acts to perform over the weekend

festival that brings people together. There's precious little need for much of a police presence because the Oyé crowd pretty much looks after itself. Nobody behaves like a dick."

When Andy Kershaw's DJ set at the Trenchtown area of the festival was hi-jacked by a football-playing dog, nobody seemed to mind, and photographer Bandele Iyapo's mini-stall with his Brompton bike and 100-year-old glass-plate camera proved nearly as popular as the SeneGambian curry.

"Man, that curry was really something, wasn't it?" agrees Duhaney, who believes that it's essential to the festival's atmosphere that it remains free and unfenced, especially after one ill-advised attempt in 2011 to ticket the event when the local council got a bit spooked by the massive increase in numbers.

The growth in its reputation, scale and ambition has been as inexorable as it's been gratifying, but as Duhaney points out: "costs that might have increased steadily and predictably in the past have really shot up in the last five years or so. We have had



generous support from the Arts Council for many years now and Liverpool City Council also support us financially. But other than that, we have to find all the costs ourselves. When I first started, we could bring over a drumming troupe from Brazil for ten days – just that one project would use up an entire year's festival budget for us now!"

"But the whole ethos of the festival has always been about keeping it free for the public and making it fully inclusive for anyone from any background, race, or with

any sort of health issues. At the end of every year we see the data about who has come but we're more concerned about who isn't there and why they're missing. I can remember early on how we had a predominantly white, more mature audience, yet we were in Sefton Park, in the middle of all sorts of different communities who all get together in that park. So I thought let's put on a reggae act on one of the days and see what happens. All of a sudden, there was quite an influx from the black community and, as they realised they liked the vibe of the event, that got stronger and younger people started to come too."

"It's about programming people who are distinctly linked to the African diaspora. We're never going to lose that integrity we've always had, trying to promote new African music and culture to the UK public." Duhaney goes on to explain "when I began, we had to seek out this music. Now we get hundreds of applications and, of course, we find great music at events like WOMEX. But stumbling across a brilliant band playing on a small stage in the middle of nowhere and thinking 'I can see them on the Oyé stage,' that gives me the most pleasure." ♦

+ DATES Africa Oyé takes place June 16-17  
+ ONLINE [www.africaoye.com](http://www.africaoye.com)