

THE AFRICA FESTIVAL

WÜRZBURG, BAVARIA, GERMANY

For four days in May, a small city in Bavaria becomes an unlikely hub of African culture. Bugs Steffen reports

Every year at the end of May, Africa is brought a little closer to Europe when the continent's biggest festival of African Music takes place in the historical Bavarian town of Würzburg, on the banks of the river Main.

Walking through the old streets of Würzburg, a town nestled in the German wine-growing region and renowned for its baroque Residenz – a UNESCO world heritage site – it feels very far removed from Africa indeed. But as you cross one of its bridges, you'll hear the sound of drums as performers from Senegal, Gambia, Ghana or Guinea start early morning and finish late at night. This for many is what African music is all about.

But this is obviously just scratching the surface of the music. Dr Stefan Oschmann,

musical director of the festival, has known about the spirit of Africa for a long time – it was 20 years ago when he first attended an African concert with a friend in Amsterdam. From that point on he became obsessed with the idea of bringing African music to his hometown in Germany. At the time it seemed like a crazy idea, but he was determined. The inaugural Würzburg festival took place in the local city hall with just 300 people, but now more than 120,000 revellers a year visit the festival site on a large stretch by the river Main.

The festival gets support from the German foreign ministry and the City of Würzburg who undertake to underwrite any loss, although, over 20 years, that has never been necessary. Entrance is very cheap (five euros) in order to make it accessible to all.

As Oschmann says: "We just want to bring a little joy to people's lives and break down the barriers between different cultures." He says African culture isn't as obvious in Germany as it is in France, Belgium or the UK due to their respective colonial histories – that's why he thinks it's such an important event to put on. Ticket sales show that people come from France, Holland, Belgium, Switzerland and the UK, as well as from all over Germany.

As you enter the festival ground, your first stop will probably be the Bamboo Hall, where African artists demonstrate how they make handicrafts and paintings. The smell of peppermint tea prepared by Touareg people from Mali wafts over from the Touareg Nomads tent – a good place to have a break, listen to stories from the

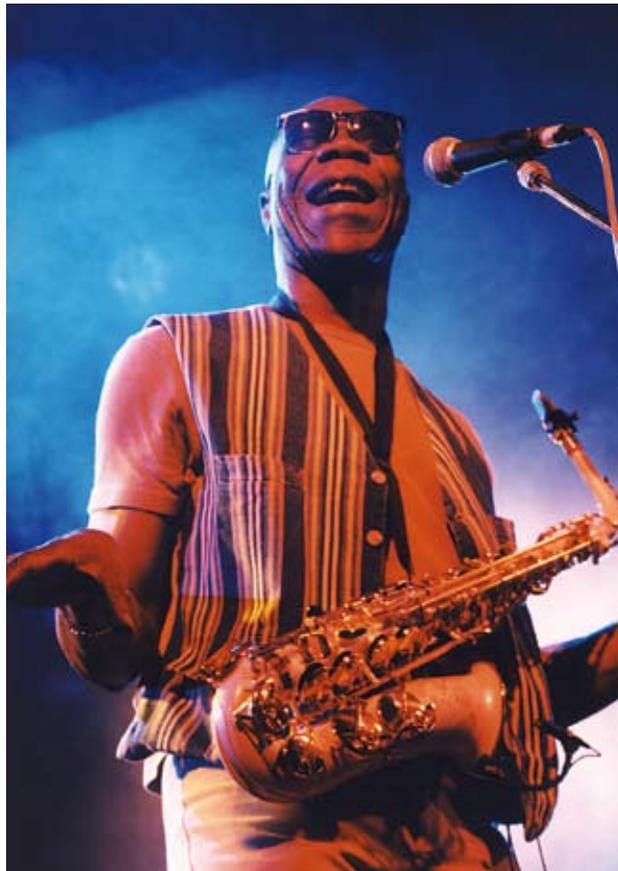
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Clockwise from right: the crowd soaks up the atmosphere; South Africa's AIDS campaigner Elaine Maane; the antics of Adesa the clown; Miriam Makeba; the festival site



BUGS STEFFEN, OBERMEIER & NORBERT SCHWARZOTT



Left to right: Lucky Dube performing at the festival and Cameroonian sax man Manu Dibango

BUGS STEFFEN

desert or simply enjoy the music from the big Open Stage. Every day three or four groups perform on this stage. "I've given not so well-known artists the chance to find more listeners and fans for their music," says Oschmann. Many of Africa's current big names – Africando, Daara J, Positive Black Soul – have performed on this stage in the past, plus others who are now prominent on the Afro-German music scene like Patrice, Gentleman and Seeed. The Bazaar is worth a visit and you can pick up a woodcarving, necklace or clothing. Alternatively, check out the Cinema Tent if you want to see Africa on celluloid. There's also a tented area for children – under 12s get free entry – who are kept entertained by the amusing clown show from Adesa of Ghana or by Senegalese narrator and musician Ibrahima Ndiaye who enthral the kids with his storytelling and singing.

Feeling hungry? Why not try an African dish from the north, *fufu* from the west, fine bread from Ethiopia or red wine from the south? All of this and more is on offer in the plentiful food area. "It's very important to show people Africa is much more than just drumming or a continent of war," Oschmann says, "so we try to bring all kinds of aspects of Africa to this festival. And the main message is 'Different Colours, One People.'"

But the main focus is naturally the music and every evening in the Music Tent a selection of Africa's finest artists get the crowd to shake out their dance moves. Past appearances read like a 'who's who' of African music: Miriam Makeba, Femi Kuti,

Tambours de Brazza from the Congo, Baaba Maal and the late Lucky Dube. Only a few names are missing – "but they will come one day," Oschmann says confidently. The atmosphere in the Music Tent is amazing, but don't worry if you've got more dancing left in you once it finishes. There's much more music to be found in the Reggae Hall or in the Havana Club, where Lady DJ Tania from Curaçao spins her Afro-Latin tunes until late.

On top of the music, Oschmann has founded The Afro-Project which has been

involved in numerous events, conferences and workshops with the aim of promoting African culture: "It's important that we support positive things, like initiatives or other festivals. So we helped the Festival in the Desert in Mali with our 'know how' and sponsored a car for the outdoor-work of the HIV organisation 'Steps For The Future' in Cape Town." In 2006 they donated a million condoms to this South African AIDS project.

The festival's motto for their 20th anniversary year is 'Celebrating with Friends': "Because it's our 20th edition, we wanted to encourage new meetings and create something that hasn't happened before." Each of the artists performing in the Big Tent has been invited to play one or two songs with artists they've never worked with before. So Youssou N'Dour has chosen to collaborate with singer Julia Sarr from Paris and Manu Dibango has asked to work with sax player Klaus Doldinger – one of Germany's leading jazz musicians. And there'll be further collaborations with Angélique Kidjo, Alpha Blondy, Lokua Kanza and Habib Koité.

"Everyone is welcome for our 20th anniversary festival. We're really proud to be able to present such a varied programme – it's a bit like a 'best of' really!" Oschmann enthuses. So, why not plan a visit at the end of May, when for four days, Africa well and truly arrives in the heart of Europe. ●

**This year's festival runs from
May 22-25 2008
www.africafestival.org**

HOW TO GET THERE

FLIGHTS

● Direct flights from the UK to Frankfurt International airport with BMI, BA and Lufthansa and to Frankfurt-Hahn airport (120km west of Frankfurt) with Ryanair.

GETTING TO THE FESTIVAL

● ICE train journey (70 mins) from Frankfurt am Main to Würzburg. www.bahn.de or www.deutsche-bahn.co.uk

ACCOMMODATION

● Check out the Würzburg tourist site: www.wuerzburg.de

