MALAWI’S EMERGENT MUSIC INDUSTRY  BY TRISTRAM JOHNSON
Market and Industry overview

The Malawian music market is buoyant and most villagers even in remote regions listen to the radio and buy albums. The Copyright Society of Malawi (COSOMA) has recorded music sales over the last financial year of 1.2 million units sold. The vast majority of music sold is on audio cassette. This remains the format of choice as most of Malawi do not have access to electricity and rely on battery operated cassette players to play music. Also this is the cheapest way to buy music selling for under a third of the price of a CD. This current market value (wholesale) is approximately 300 million Malawi Kwacha (2 million USD).

Malawi has an emerging middle class as the country has experienced growth in the last four years thanks to stable government and the return of aid agencies, the inflation rate is at single figures and interest rates are at their lowest. This emerging middle class means more goods and services consumed.

Malawi Record Industry

Even though Malawi has no established record labels, no professional recording studios and recording artists/producers have no access to music education/training, between 1 and 2 million albums are sold each year in Malawi. All duplication and distribution of these albums is done by the Afri Music Company. This monopoly has existed for 30 years and remains virtually unchallenged today. The current distribution network appears to be simple. There are seven wholesale outlets that are supplied by the monopoly in Lilongwe (Malawi’s capital city) and Blantyre (commercial capital). Vendors visit theses outlets and purchase music albums that they sell as retail. Vendors travel from all across the country to purchase album cassettes for re-sale. Most albums are sold in the cassette format and have a wholesale price of between 200 and 250 MK. This is the only way for Malawian artists to sell their music.

An artist is responsible for all the costs of recording and any promotion including live performances. They are also subject to whatever deal is on offer from the monopoly.
The current deal involves artists producing an inlay card for each cassette sold which is then purchased by the Afri Music Company for 25 Malawi Kwacha (0.17 USD) each. The number of inlay cards is equal to the number of cassettes that will be distributed.

The Copyright Society of Malawi (COSOMA) collects a royalty of 10% (wholesale) for the artists. Each inlay card that is sold to a distributor or record company has a hologram attached by COSOMA. This hologram acts as proof of sale between the artist and the distributor and enables COSOMA to collect a royalty on behalf of the artist. This is designed to ensure accurate recording of albums officially sold and tackles piracy.

Malawi Music

There are six different types of music produced in Malawi; Local Music, Malawian Reggae, Traditional Music, Urban, AfroJazz/AfroSoul and Gospel music.

Local Music is the most popular type and is the predominate seller of the six. Local music is often poorly produced yet this has no bearing on sales. Of the countries top five selling artists, four produce music that is described as “local”. This is the pop music of the nation and is mainly purchased by the rural population. The sound is influenced by pop music from Zambia and South Africa as well as traditional Malawian dances. Artists of this genre include Lucias Banda and Lawrence Mbenjere.

Malawian reggae has in the past rivaled Local music as the most popular music form. The Black Missionaries, one of Malawi’s most popular bands have been producing and performing Malawian reggae for close to a decade. Malawian reggae has a strong live tradition and all the most popular acts are performing bands.

Urban Music (Hip Hop and R&B) has grown incredible over the past three years. Hip Hop acts are springing up from urban centers across the country. Most notable is Blantyre based Tay Grin who has enjoyed the most international exposure of any Malawian based artist. Urban Music is supported by young people from the main cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe. Unfortunately this means that the buying power of fans of this genre is low and the genre is undermined by mass piracy. Much of the growth of this genre is due to many radio stations currently favoring American urban music.
This includes the nation's largest, most listened-to music station MBC 2. Most Malawian Urban Music is a direct copy of its American counterpart to the point where most Malawian Hip Hop artists rap in English with an American accent.

AfroJazz/AfroSoul is reminiscent of the Southern African live sound which is a subcategory of the World Music genre. This genre has the most international appeal of all Malawian music as it is performed and composed by the nation's most talented musicians, has an authentic African sound and is performed by live bands. Acts of note include Wambali, Peter Mawanga, Body Mind and Soul and Tiwonge Hango. Wambali has in fact been nominated for an African “Coura” award and been nominated for a United Kingdom “M.O.B.O” award. This is very much a niche genre in Malawi with low sales mostly on CD in urban areas. Musicians in this genre desire success on the international music market, this means the quality of their recordings and performances must compete with international World Music acts. This is a massive challenge for the genre as there are no professional recording studio/producers/engineers, no established record labels, a lack of musical instruments, little quality live music equipment and only one quality music venue in Malawi. Most acts search for sponsorship to produce albums and few acts have managed to produce international quality albums. Wambali remains the only act to secure a record deal (with South Africa’s Sheer Sounds) and has performed at festivals and gigs across South Africa.

Malawi is categorised as a Christian nation and many people are regular church attendees. Gospel music appeals to this section of society. There are many performing musicians and bands who play at churches and church conference centers. There are also a number of Christian radio stations and Commercial radio stations have daily Gospel shows. This genre is currently the second most popular genre in terms of sales and is possibly number one in terms of live event attendance. Gospel album and DVD launches are often very well attended with the most popular acts attracting 1000’s of revelers. Top selling Gospel music albums can sell up to 20,000. Music DVD’s can reach sales of 5000 units.
Music Promotion and Radio.

Due to the lack of established record labels musicians promote their own albums. The main way music is promoted is on the radio. Radio is the only media that penetrates the whole country with the state owned Malawi Broadcasting Corporation providing the widest coverage. Most stations don’t utilise a playlist system and individual DJ’s dictate what is aired. These factors create an environment where recording artists pay DJ’s to play their music. The more popular the artist the larger the price demanded by DJ’s. This practice is widespread and is active at all radio stations, in fact the term “music promotion” literally means in Malawi, paying DJ’s to play music! The situation is made worse by the fact that DJ’s are poorly paid, work long hours and aren’t regarded highly by the Malawian public. Unlike the West, DJ’s aren’t seen as celebrities and most radio listeners can not distinguish between different DJ’s.

Top selling artists music is literally not aired if a sufficient bride has not been payed which drastically effects sales. One anonymous artist sold 200’000 copies from two consecutive albums when ‘promoting’ in this way. The following album sold only 10’000 copies when no payment was made to the DJ’s. This is possibly the biggest challenge facing the industry as the practice is common and ingrained. The mindset of the DJ’s is that they are doing artists a service when playing their music thus they expect a financial return.

Music Distribution

Music distribution is done through music vendors throughout Malawi. Vendors either have market stalls at trading centers, or can be found selling music on foot in car parks and busy trading centers. These smaller vendors buy music at wholesale prices from seven large music vendors. The large vendors are supplied directly from the Afri Music Company. So in reality distribution is done by the smaller vendors who travel to the main cities of Blantrye and Lilongwe to purchase music for retail.

Afri Music Company

The Afri Music company started their business by pirating international music for sale in Malawi.
The Afri Music company has been established in Malawi for over two decades and has remained the sole music duplicator and distributor. Their strength currently lies in the fact that it has had the only mass cassette duplication line in the country and has established a group of music wholesalers that sell virtually all music produced in Malawi.

Many have tried to compete with this company but have failed. All that have tried to compete have used cheaper equipment. This has resulted in a product that is less than adequate, often poor and this has then perpetrated the belief that the only company that produces quality music in Malawi is Afri Music.

The consequence of this has made the music buying public highly skeptical of any cassette that doesn't have the stamp of the company. That skepticism has been compounded by many years of propaganda from the Afri Music Company about how the quality of their cassettes compare with the apparent competition.

This created a conflict; on one hand the Government, Musician's Association of Malawi, COSOMA, musicians and artists 'crying out' for an alternative. On the other there is a general consensus from consumers and producers of music that the only reliable audio cassette duplication in Malawi is through the Afri Music Company.

**Popular Artists**

Lucias Banda, Joseph Nkasa and Lawrence Mbenjere are three of the biggest names in the music industry here. Lucias Banda recently released his 15th album and is without question the most consistent selling artist in Malawi music history.

Lawrence Mbenjere is the currently the highest selling artist in Malawi. Over the past 4 years his albums have sold in excess of 600'000 copies. Also he has written, produced and composed albums for other artists many of which have sold in excess of 50’000 copies.

Both artists have expressed a desire for a change in the way there music is distributed. Laurence Mbenjere has gone as far as breaking away from the Afri Music Company altogether because of an alleged breach of contract by the company.