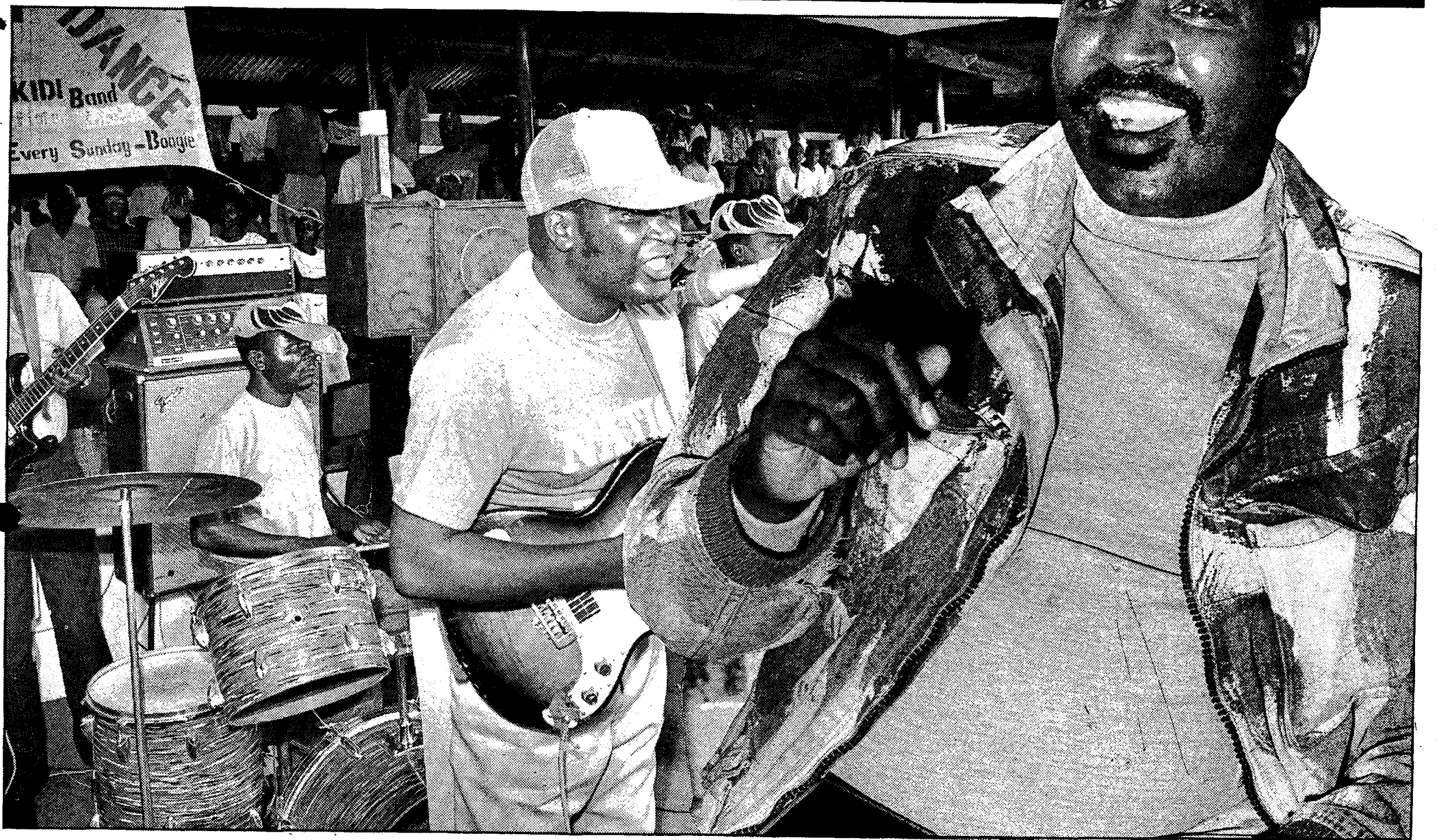


YOUR

Weekend

ZINE



Ochieng Kabaselleh: Through musical shows, we tell them what to do or perish.

By CHEGE wa GACHAMBA

Aids: Kabaselleh in the front line

The heavily-built Ochieng Hajullas Kabaselleh reclined deeper into the sofa. Dressed in khaki shorts, *akala* sandals and a cosy, thick woolen cardigan, the popular musician was quite at ease.

He was at his city home recuperating from a bout of pneumonia which had for the last two months driven him from his Kisumu town base into Nairobi hospitals.

In his usual jovial mood, Kabaselleh explained to us his work since the Ministry of Health and UNICEF incorporated him into their western Kenya's Aids Awareness Campaign.

"Since August last year, I have been singing and talking Aids. I have criss-crossed Kisumu District and staged musical shows three or four times a week, in some of Kenya's most remote places," he said.

This made organisers of the annual Musician of the Year Awards ceremony give him a special prize for his efforts in the Aids Awareness Campaign. Accompanying the glittering silver trophy and award certificate was a packet of condoms.

The concept of spreading the anti-Aids message through music, "was very appropriate because entertainment provides a captive audience. Music is a very popular medium for communication, and taking top Kenyan musicians to the rural areas for free shows is a sure way of luring the masses," said Owino Nafa, the Kisumu District's Medical Officer of Health.

In this campaign, the ministry has teamed up with the Belgium-

funded STD Control Programme and UNICEF, who sponsor the events and provide a power generator.

They normally pick on market places, shopping centres and chiefs' camps especially during market days, chief's baraza's, local Agricultural Society of Kenya shows and other big social events.

The functions usually begin at 6 p.m., with the team screening music videos of such popular artists as Kanda Bongo Man, Aurlus Mabele and Franco and the TP OK Jazz.

This has the effect of holding back audiences, lest they start getting bored before the star of the show arrives. Then at about 7 p.m., the Lunna Kidi band takes to the stage, with Kabaselleh himself joining them an hour later.

When the 44-year-old musician takes to the stage, he usually starts by telling them why the team has come there. "...I know you have previously seen several groups bringing you the 'good word'. We bring you the anti-Aids gospel... For now, we shall give you music. We shall later show you videos on Aids and have medical experts talk to you about

One of Kenya's most popular musicians is now teaching wananchi throughout western Kenya how to avoid contracting Aids.

the disease..." which Luo's describe as *Ayaki Matieka* - the 'grabber that ultimately finishes'.

The programme which runs until dawn features Kabaselleh playing his usual dance numbers - the ones people know. "In fact, I often end up playing many songs by 'request', when the public demands such numbers as *Zainabu, Achi Maria, Milicento, Mbuta Mombasa, Wuora Ogola Adoyo, Nyager, Sikul Agulu, African Man and Piny Dunia Mokili*," he says.

He will occasionally do some specially composed songs on Aids and while doing the song about his former girlfriend, Achi Maria, for example, tell his audience that she actually died of Aids because of her reckless sex life.

There will be three short breaks through the night as the band takes a rest and the medical

team takes over showing videos on Aids victims and giving lectures.

"We tell them about modes of transmission, how to avoid contracting it and the effect on the family and society," says Owino.

Telling them that Aids is mainly transmitted through heterosexual sex, we emphasis on the need to either use a condom, abstain from sex, or better still faithfully stick to one partner. We finally open the floor to questions and, this is where we get some very funny ones, he says.

The people will ask about visible symptoms of Aids, whether the disease can also be found in rural areas, whether non-circumcision contributes to it, and whether it is in any way related to *chira*, a "slimming" condition which kills, and Luos traditionally believe is caused by curses, taboos and wronging the dead.

"We emphasis on the possible dangers of wife inheritance. We tell them the skin of an uncircumcised penis is more tender and likely to crack more easily and allow the HIV virus enter the body," he says.

All this may sound very boring stuff, but the audience will be keenly listening because they know Kabaselleh's big hits are still yet to come, he adds.

He says the shows attract between 800 and 1,500 people per performance and that they must have reached over 200,000 people so far. Most of them are in the sexually active group of 17 to 45 years.

However it is "not unusual to see grandfathers and elderly mothers walking in with their children and grandchildren - and telling us: Tell them. They just have to mend their ways or else..."

Kabaselleh enjoys a major following in Nyanza, perhaps because his music's tempo and beat is a kind of fusion between benga and popular Zairean soukous and rumba. Many of his songs are about women and love.

The man also has the advantage of fluently speaking most

western Kenya languages besides 'Sheng', English and Kiswahili.

The Nyanza Provincial Commissioner, Joseph Kaguthi, says the magnitude of the Aids scourge in Kisumu is "of major concern to the administration. But it requires a multi-sectoral approach where churches, NGO's and leaders of all shades chip into the big war for the survival of mankind."

He however says the Lake Victoria region has its peculiar traditions and beliefs which often compound the fight against Aids.

The easy employment on the lake, for example, often helps create numerous cases of ignorant primary school dropouts who are more difficult to penetrate with the Aids Awareness Campaign.

High on Kaguthi's plan of action is a mooted leaders workshop for the entire province as a way of making them appreciate the magnitude of the problem. While much of Kisumu district's earnings are, for example, being ploughed into funerals rather than into investments, the burden of Aids orphans could in future be staggering if remedial measures are not taken in good time," he says.

Owino says they are also having a promotion campaign on increased use of condoms using a group of 400 commercial sex workers in Kisumu. About 80 per cent of them now permanently carry condoms in their purses.

The Population Services International salesmen, have also been promoting their *Trust* condoms (and of course Aids Awareness Campaign) through music extravaganzas, comedy and drama.

Owino says they would want to recruit more musicians into the campaign, but it is an expensive exercise.