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**SUNDAY LIFE | September 7, 2008**  
**Omega's music is sweet for the musical soul**

BY MOSES SERUGO

The soundman at Omega Bugembe Okello's world music/ jazz concert last Friday should have been guillotined. The microphone feedback at the Kampala Serena Hotel was a fly in the concert's ointment. And much as Omega chose to sing through it, the frustration was there on her smiley face. The diminutive US-based singer could do little else but offer an apology and resign herself to that sound glitch being yet another occupational hazard that comes with doing a concert in Uganda. \*\*\*image1\*

The show got off to a near false start when, after the band had played the intro to the Summer Time jazz classic, Omega's voice was barely audible all through the first and second stanzas. "The sound check should have taken care of that but this is Uganda," she said when the sound guys finally got their act (half) right, at least enough for us to enjoy Omega's full vocal ability on Mujje, a jazzy showpiece that was an invitation for the audience to get into the groove proper.

And given our concert logistical issues, it is a great comfort for a musician to be able to fall back onto a "tight" band like the one on stage that night. That bunch comprised probably the finest instrumentalists to have backed up a musician on a Ugandan stage in a very long time.

Cleshoda "Cleo" Cook was hyper on the drums and being a female made her an instant darling. Percussionist Salvador Hernandez brought such finesse to playing the congas, while Miguel Ponder's synthesiser lines were crisp both on the up-tempo or the slow tempo tracks. Kirk Williams' bass guitar purred while Brett Gaines provided so many applause-worthy acoustic and lead guitar interludes that mitigated the nagging microphone feedback.

Omega's song list that night mostly comprised the songs off her 11-song World Music CD Kiwomera Emmemme, whose title track talks about the sense of contentment that comes with achieving one's goal after so many trials and tribulations. Her Ugandan debut may have been bittersweet but her desire to use her music as a platform for advocacy was genuine.

Yaye (mourning) could easily have been the cry of expectant mothers at Mulago Hospital, whose situation at the bottom of the healthcare ladder has them competing for the few surgical beds and anaesthetic machines; which is why Omega was fundraising for more. The cautionary words on Ndituusa Wa (how long) cannot be ignored in light of the iniquity the world seems to be bathed in while the marimba-tinged Zibasanze (woe) is stern in warning to those that feather their own nests at the expense of other people's welfare.

And for someone like Omega that wants her children to enjoy the earth long after she is gone, her song Tugilabilile is a good enough commitment to reducing her carbon footprint for someone that does not wield as much clout as global statesmen Al Gore. And hers is more than just paying lip service. Omega says she does not take 20-minute showers as a means of water conservation. She is also part of a tree-planting project in Lira.

But there is room for other subjects on her repertoire and although for most of her Shs85, 000-paying patrons it was their first taste of Gunyuma, the Sylver Kyagulanyi-penned song became an instant audience favourite, thanks mostly to the honesty she brought to it by

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way of her romantic life story that was mostly geared towards converting love cynics.

"Everyone told me that I would die single and that my standards were too high but I was not ready to lower them, and thankfully God sent me a wonderful man," she said of her husband Richard Okello.

And when your wife tells all and sundry that your touch is as intimate as that of an angel, you are left with no choice but to prove it by walking up to her on stage and giving her a nice squeeze that will leave her blushing halfway through the song. "I often pinch myself and ask if this is for real," she said as the towering Mr. Okello walked off stage.

To the sophisticated music palate, Omega's vocal range was the real thing. An amazing ease at reaching the low notes, not faltering on the high notes, and pulling off the incredible gymnastics she did on (Louis Armstrong's) What A Wonderful World is usually the result of either a church or school choir-tutored voice, at least in Uganda. Omega's is a result of the former, which may explain the occurrence of gospel-tinged messages on songs like Mujje, Ndituusa Wa, and You Said. Not since Penny Kigozi's single-handed singing at a KPC's Christmas cantata way back has Uganda's musical landscape been blessed with diva potential like the one at Omega's concert, where an act does not tire from singing for over 90 minutes.

And for those that felt short-changed by the sound glitches at the concert, Omega's music is sweeter for the musical soul when heard off a 5.1 channel surround sound system where listening experience on her Take Five jazz renditions and Kiwomera Emmemme CDs is sunnier than a Van Gogh painting.

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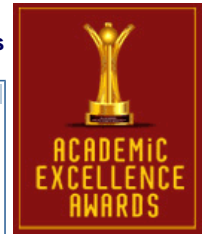
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