

## East African Soul Train 2017: a traveling residency with a Difference

East Africa is known internationally as a prime destination for wildlife safaris and experiences with 'exotic' traditional cultures. However, the contemporary art scene in the region is diverse and buzzing with an energy that often goes unnoticed by international audiences and visitors. Music and art from West or Southern Africa are recognised globally, and they also enjoy a more robust regional industry than their East African counterpart. But this is slowly changing; a number of exciting regional festivals and international successes by East African musicians, visual artists and filmmakers are moving this vibrant and exciting contemporary creative scene into the spotlight.

Despite this, creatives in the region are still experiencing a range of challenges. One such hurdle is a lack of mobility, which in turn leads to a lack of exposure and limited collaboration with other artists. This absence of connection leaves many artists frustrated and disengaged. Initiatives that aim to increase mobility, regional and international exposure, and develop talent can make a real difference, especially residencies that offer a space in which trust can be built and creative ideas expanded beyond disciplines and national boundaries.

This is where East African Soul Train (E.A.S.T.) comes in. Founded and piloted in February 2016 by Geraldine Hepp and Poppy Spowage, this traveling residency on East Africa's historic train tracks brings together artists, creative sector stakeholders and passengers to share perspectives, engage in deep conversations and incubate interdisciplinary collaborations. Through a core partnership with Africalia, in association with Creatives Garage and kindly complemented with some mobility funding from the British Council, in 2017, EAST expanded from a two-day journey supported by a local media company 'What's Good Live' to a five-day travelling residency.

The residency included two days of workshops in Nairobi, a 24-hour train journey on the Lunatic Express from Nairobi to Mombasa, a multi-media performance installation and day of community building in Kilifi on the Kenyan coast. Out of 160 applicants, 40 artists from different disciplines and countries were selected. The participating creatives worked with 9 masterclass artists – 'Artivators' – and 1 Artistic Director, the illustrious Ghanaian musician Jojo Abot, around the theme 'Kovu Safarini, 'Scars Acquired Along the Way'. The train – itself a 'scar' in the landscape and with its own historic baggage – offered a journey that was intense, unique and challenging, space and time were compressed, which accelerated the process of connecting and creating.

Each Artivator hosted workshops around a specific creative discipline in Nairobi – fashion, beat production, music, dance, visual arts and words – and developed ideas and creative processes for collaborative projects within the moving train. Artivators came from across the region and included the prolific contemporary visual artist Michael Soi (Kenya), Founder of Kampala Fashion Week Gloria Wavamunno (Uganda), and internationally renowned DJ and Producer Blinky Bill (Kenya). The train is old with compact sleeping compartments, which turned into 'creative cells' during the journey. Cramped up in those small cabins and narrow hallways, it was amazing to observe artists breaking out from their comfort zones and accepting the grueling challenge of creating new work with strangers from different cultural backgrounds and disciplines. The time and space constraints sparked creativity in a unique way. According to Anne Mwititi – a successful artist and lecturer at

Kenyatta University in Kenya – *“the whole experience was special and unparalleled: from the introductory process of getting to know each other as artists at the National Railway Museum in Nairobi, to meeting the Artivators, to the intense train journey to Mombasa with very little sleep, to the final destination at the Distant Relatives Eco-lodge in Kilifi, to the performances on the final evening. The experience was real, unpretentious and very committed, leaving an after taste that generated a new “identity” at a very primal level.”*

Artivators managed to melt and mound their teams into working groups with a shared vision despite the heat, time constraints and space limitations that challenged the participants. The focus of the residency was on the creative process, building trust and collaborations between artists from different places and disciplines. The final installation performance served as a driver and focus point for the 99 artists and passengers who jumped on board. Nine very powerful collaborative pieces beautifully demonstrated the growth from 2016 to 2017 and the diverse creative processes that had happened.

Moving forward, there are a range of exciting projects emerging from EAST 2017 still: a filmmaker and an illustrator from Kenya have teamed up with Salooni, a Ugandan multi-disciplinary art project that explores black women’s hair practices through installation, film, performance and photography; an illustrator and filmmaker are creating a sci-fi animation about their experience; a Ugandan drummer, Kenyan performance artist and photographer are developing their final performance; and a group of artists’ planned a showcase of new work in Kampala for April 2017. It was a unique and impactful journey for many of the artistic travelers and the whole creative collective that emerged from this continues to build EAST moving forward.

This article is the result of a collective effort by Anne Mwiti, Geraldine Hepp and Poppy Spowage.

*“Thank you Soul Train for creating a context that allowed me and many other people to [re]connect more and more profoundly with our creative selves. It’s been a safe haven this journey, where masks could fall off, boundaries were challenged and pushed and redrawn, discoveries made, magic happened. Thanks for allowing the messiness of creative processes and trusting artists to do what they are best at, create and inspire.”*

Artist, East African Soul Train 2017

*“I spent yester-week with a collective of some of the most beautiful creatives on historic train tracks built by our ancestors. It was a wonderful learning experience for me, full of collaboration, hard work and growth. I feel so complete, enriched and blessed. I’m still processing it all but one thing is for sure, my life will never be the same.”*

Artist, East African Soul Train 2017

One of the collaborative artworks that emerged from this project is “**X EAR X**” by filmmaker Emily McCartney, featuring dancers Jackie Manyapelo (South Africa) and Adam Cheinjo (Kenya) with music by Jinku (Kenya) and Ken Mvvalye (Uganda) / (E.A.R. = East African Railway).

<https://vimeo.com/209153378>

Here’s another collaborative video artwork that resulted from EAST2017: “**Speak Soon**” by Nikissi Serumaga, a short about leaving things behind and trying your best to move to the next part of your life with grace (filmed as it was happening).

<https://youtu.be/rIDGHBQKR1g>

For more impressions please visit the Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/eastsoultrain](http://www.facebook.com/eastsoultrain) and Instagram @eastsoultrain. You can also find more images, videos and testimonies under #EAST2017 and #kovusafarini on both platforms.

Or read : <http://www.okayafrica.com/culture-2/east-african-soul-train-kenya-artist-residency>