

Liz Ogumbo
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There are few Africans whose creative journey has been as wide-ranging, singular and successful as the one travelled by Liz Ogumbo.

Over the past decade, this formidably focused Kenyan has established herself as creative entrepreneur whose work in music, fashion, television, radio and wine. Through all these, she shares an enviable commitment to excellence and to fostering relationships and projects that advance the African creative industries globally.

Whether it's writing, recording and performing her original music, designing for her eponymous fashion label, hosting and producing Fashion Lab Africa TV and radio, or starting new creative initiatives like #LSHW, *Lipstick Skirts Heels & Wine*—which has opened up an avenue for her to introduce her new wine brand, 'Liz Ogumbo', into the market—, Liz is unquestionably the new face of modern Africa. She is as much rooted in the continent she loves as the global community that is fast embracing her irresistible vision.

In conveying her creative output, Liz came up with a new, all-encompassing term—*KenSoul*. “KenSoul represents my Kenyan soul that allows me to stylishly weave stories of my Kenyan origin and global influences into the KenSoul experience,” she says of this description that is as original as the person behind it.

KenSoul is also the title of Liz's first album, released to acclaim in 2010 - and is the reference point for her recently released follow-up, *KenSoul, The Lotus Chapter*. Traversing multiple musical influences and expressed in Luo, Swahili, English and French (all of which Liz speaks fluently), Liz's two albums reflect her genre-agnostic sound, her Kenyan soul and her life experiences. Her humorous writing and skilled storytelling, combined with her smoky, sultry vocal abilities and mature yet playful sound, mark out Liz as one of Africa's most notable artists.

It's no surprise to discover why Liz's attachment to her roots, visibly threaded through everything she does, is far more than simply lip service.

"I come from a tribe called the Luo, which is one of 42 tribes in Kenya and is rooted in the western part of Kenya, by Lake Victoria," she explains. "The Luo culture is very rich. One thing all Kenyans know about the Luo community is that we love music, we love to dance and we are larger than life. Because we live near the lake, we love to eat fresh fish that is put on our table by the most skilled fishermen in the country. Music and dance is a part of our DNA."

Although Liz grew up in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, at least four times a year her parents would take her and her siblings to visit their homeland, most frequently her Dad's home village situated in Seme Kowe near Kombewa in Kisumu county. There, Liz and her siblings would experience the richness of village life and the beauty of the surroundings, which include Kit Mikayi, a stunningly unusual stone formation in Kisumu County that draws visitors from all over the world. Liz and her family also took trips to her mum's home village in Gem, Siala K'aduol during their trips to the western part of Kenya to connect with her roots and culture.

There's something else too: Liz is named after her great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Loye, a talented singer and performer who was born around the 1860s and lived until the 1940s. There's a very real sense that Liz carries the spirit of this powerful musical and creative lineage in her contemporary work. "It's crazy because I don't even know what she looks like but everyone says that I remind them of her, musically and creatively. She was a pioneer and a very strong woman and I love knowing that there's something 'Elizabeth' in me."

"We see a lot of the late Elizabeth in Liz," confirms her father, Fred Ogumbo. "She is very creative and courageous and whatever she puts her hands into turns to gold." It was from her father that Liz learned Luo songs, giving her a foundation based on her roots, culture and heritage, while the Christian songs taught to her by her mother, Jane Esther Ogumbo, helped instil the lifestyle and values that Liz lives by.

Both of Liz's albums feature songs from her childhood and traditional melodies – among them "Maro Pamore" off her 2010 debut *KenSoul*. "I love the melodies of that song and what it stands for," says Liz of

the recording (which features a guest vocal from Zambian-raised rapper, Zubz). *KenSoul, The Lotus Chapter* maintains the mix of genres that have influenced Liz (soul, hip hop, reggae, jazz, and blues) as well as the roots influence of the likes of Turaab music on songs like “Oringo Bayoyo” and “Msenangu”. As Liz puts it, “When I sing in my vernacular I know what I’m singing about”. “How do you identify yourself in this global village if you don’t have the fundamental foundation when it comes to language and culture?” she asks.

Another influence on Liz’s creativity and music in particular, is Chakacha—a Swahili cultural dance that Liz learnt growing up in Kenya and which she describes as “the most sensual dance I know of beyond my geographical boundaries”. Those who’ve seen Liz perform live have witnessed how she weaves Chakacha into her live show, adding another layer to what is one of the most uplifting, near spiritual and joyous performances in contemporary African music.

A standout feature of Liz’s energetic live shows is the visual element which makes full use of her unique fashion sense. The latter takes expression in the style consultancy and designs that she creates under her own label, from her showroom boutique in Johannesburg. Known for her intricate pieces that depict the modern, fashion-savvy woman, Liz’s fashion line is stocked with bold, elegant, timeless pieces that embrace self-definition through sleek cuts and simple yet provocative designs. Established eleven years ago, Liz Ogumbo’s Fashion offering epitomises attitude that comes from the inside—and this part of her creative life is as much a part of Liz’s soul as music is.

Making the move into fashion was a natural step for an individual whose natural height of six foot, and exotic, raw beauty, saw her become an a sensation in the fashion world after she moved to the USA in the 1990s, to further her studies. Embraced by the modelling industries in NYC and LA, Liz’s time as a model also saw her impacting the French and Italian markets. Driven by the entrepreneurial urge that remains such a powerful force in her life, in 2002 Liz established a modelling agency, Imani Int Model Management, after she moved to L.A. Her vision for Imani Int Model Management was to specifically promote that “rare” kind of model that she felt was under-represented in the business which she encapsulated. A few years later, in 2004, Liz set up Imani International Model Management in Nairobi, to raise the bar within

the fashion industry in Kenya, by focusing on training, packaging and representing African models to the global fashion marketplace.

It was while in LA that Liz began seriously engaging with musicians in the music industry. One of her encounters was with Manu Dibango's drummer at the time, Andre Manga who gave her chance to get into studio for a jam session. "I will always pay tribute to Andre for urging me to just get on with the business of creating music," she says now. The first song that Liz laid down was her remix version of Manu Dibango's 'Soul Makossa', marking the start of her journey to make music in earnest while living in LA.

Another critical encounter in Liz's music journey was with her friend, Ian Martin, an accomplished Bassist, Writer and producer who had worked with K C & Jojo, Angela Bofill, Barry Manilow and many other big names—and continues to be a force in the music industry. "Ian lightly asked me to join him in studio, to record an intro for his new album in Swahili," recalls Liz. "I really felt like this was another sign for me to pursue music."

It was important to Liz that she stepped into the music world with serious intent.

"I had lived in Maryland on the East Coast of the US, barely a four hour drive to New York City, a place where the hustle is so real. Then I moved to L.A. where no one seemed to have a day job, where stars were made overnight and where many claimed to be so many things that they were not. When I began taking the step from modelling into music I was careful and alert not to become another LA-wannabe but instead ready to show the world that I was serious about this musical addition onto my portfolio."

"Eventually, I felt the force driving me to record a demo, based on different feedback and interests in my music at the time so I finally got into studio. I knew I could sing and only after I completed my demo. When I got asked what I do for a living, I responded with real confidence around who I believed I was becoming: a model transitioning into the music business."

In 2004, Liz returned to Kenya. "My mom was very ill and so, as the oldest daughter in my family, I left the US to go home and be present," she reveals. Although the experience of witnessing her

mom's health struggles was painful, Liz says that returning home taught her a great deal about her mother's strength, character, resilience and faith. "I slowly realised how she has this way of allowing people to rise and shine despite her circumstances. I have nothing but respect for her. She's my hero."

In Nairobi, Liz established and ran her modelling agency, Imani International Model Agency, Kenya while concurrently making her first foray into her fashion design business. For many years she had been upcycling clothes because nothing ever fitted or looked the way she liked, but she took that further with the launch of her own fashion brand in 2007. While building her fashion brand, *House of Imani* which later became, *Liz Ogumbo*, she also took some tentative steps back into music—working in Nairobi with Blinky Bill of Just A Band, among others, and finally securing an album contract in 2010 with Gallo through her demos.

In 2010, Liz moved to Johannesburg and began working on her first album. The release of *KenSoul* later that year was a turning point for her with several guest artists (including MXO, Just A Band, Tumi Molekane, R.J. Benjamin & Zubz) underscoring how rapidly her musical gifts were recognised by the African music industry. "After *KenSoul* was released, I remember thinking to myself, ok, now I am truly a music artist with a 13-track album to name," she says candidly.

Eight years later, and now firmly established as a leading Afropolitan with real vision, Liz is ready to take on the world with all aspects of her *KenSoul* experience and creativity.

"I find it easy to communicate to the world through fashion and music because the world responds to these," she says. "I have a global market out there, one that is connected to its roots; one which isn't global because it is lost, but because it wants to experience the world—whether through music, fashion or lifestyle."

"My music is for the knowledgeable and interested the lovers of life who are open-minded, curious, and adventurous. All I am saying to you is that, I cannot wait to serve you my *KenSoul* Experience, in all its facets, over the coming years."