WANYIKA MEMORIES
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WANYIKA MEMORIES

By Peter Toll

A radio programmer sends music out into the air, never knowing where it will fall. In this case, music played on the "African Beat" began a chain of life-changing events for listener Peter Toll, who, captivated by East African rumba, went on to become European representative for and friend of the seminal band Simba Wanyika, as well as an observer and chronicler of the music of East Africa. Uniquely privileged with intimate insight into the group, he reminisces about founding duo George Peter and Wilson Peter Kinyonga, who established the Wanyika dynasty and created some of the best East African music ever made. After many years of struggle, Simba Wanyika was on the brink of international success, following two European tours and with a new cd about to be released, when sadly, George died. As of this writing, the band's future is unclear—can Wilson continue without his brother?

The Passing of Brother George Peter Kinyonga

"The Ones Who Grieved, Grieved Very Much"

Ten years ago when I was living in Santa Monica, CA, I started listening to a new program on the local college radio station, KCRW-FM. The program, hosted by CC Smith, was called the "African Beat" and the beat I got hooked on instantly was Zairean rumba.

That year I purchased my first Franco albums. I also bought two lps, released on Virgin, that featured music from East Africa. One was by Orchestra Makassy (OVED 94), the other by Super Mazembe (OVED 126). Both sounded very Zairean and I soon learned why: Both groups were made up mainly of Zairean musicians who had moved to Kenya and Tanzania. They basically played music from home, sometimes with Swahili lyrics so that the East African clientele could understand the words.

I liked the blend but also wondered why music by authentic Swahili outfits was so hard to get, at least in record shops in the Los Angeles area. Actually, the fact that the music did not seem to hold much commercial value with regards to Western ears made me curious.

My real introduction to Swahili music came the following year when a Kenyan woman, Bochiberi Moikobu, was invited to spin some of her records on the "African Beat" program. I found out that most of the important Swahili bands in Kenya had names with "Wanyika": Les Wanyika, Super Wanyika, and my favorite, Simba Wanyika. But one of the singles that really struck me was "Pole Jobiso" by Orchestre Jobiso. Unfortunately, they only played side A, part one of the song. Part two I did not get to know until seven years later when I visited George in Nairobi. He had been able to record the flip side when it was played on V.O.K., Kenya Radio.

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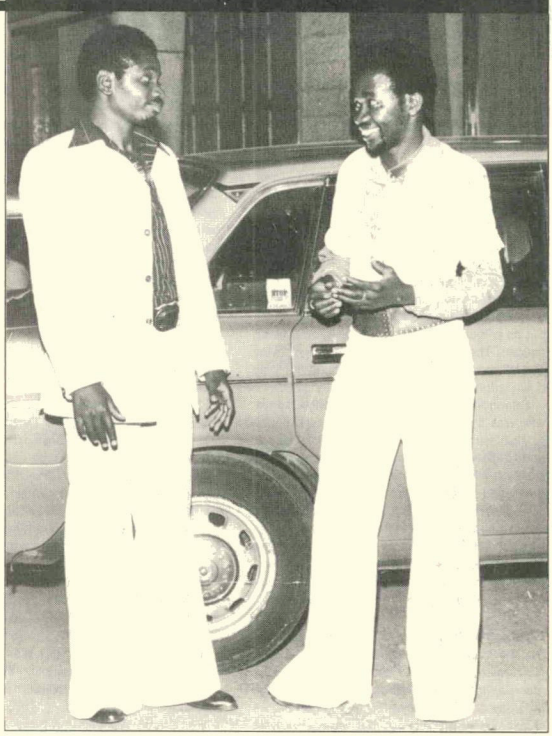

Above, George with brother Wilson (right) in front of the Bombax Club, Nairobi, in the late '70s. At left, George on stage at the Bombax in 1987.

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George died last Christmas Eve. His brother Wilson sometimes called him Jojo, but music fans in Kenya knew him as George Peter Kinyonga, singer/guitarist with Simba Wanyika. He was also the driving force of Orchestre Jobiso and the composer of "Pole Jobiso."

I met the Kinyongas in the spring of 1989 when I went to Kenya for a few weeks' vacation. My preoccupation with African rumba turned the trip into a musical safari during which I spent most of my time and money in record shops and stands in Nairobi. I went to see Orchestre Virunga perform at Garden Square opposite City Hall but was rather disappointed: Expecting to hear "Malako Disco," I was treated to mediocre covers of current Zairean hits.

At the top of my list of bands to see live was Simba Wanyika. The problem was that they did not play in the city but on the outskirts where the urban masses were struggling to survive. After asking around, I was directed to the Kibigori Day and Night Club on Juja Road, across from Nairobi's biggest slum, Mathare Valley.

When I arrived there on a Friday night the band was already in full swing. I paid a dollar to get in but as a tourist I could not enter without being noticed. The Kinyongas spotted me right away and Wilson, the band leader, motioned me to sit down in the corner where he was standing.

During the intermission I talked with George, who was the only one in the group who spoke English. He asked me if I had a request for a song and I replied "Pole Jobiso." For a moment, the smile on Wilson's face disappeared and too late I realized I should have perhaps asked for a real Simba Wanyika tune. But George responded he would sing the song, although he had not played it for a long time. He took over his brother's guitar and proceeded to perform a set of his own compositions which, besides "Pole Jobiso," included "Pamela," "Baba Asiya" and "Maria Uko Wapi."

George played a fine solo guitar but really impressed with his handling of the rhythm guitar, his own adaptation of the mi-solo technique. Live, it sounded even better than on some of the records I had at home. When I mentioned this the next day as we sat down in the Kibigori before showtime, he pointed out that Simba Wanyika used to be a seven-piece formation and during recordings he would often leave the rhythm guitar to the third guitarist, Abu Omar, one of the many musicians he had trained. However, times had been tough and the band had been reduced to five people. Abu had left and formed his own group, MAS System, who were playing at Muungano Point, Simba Wanyika's old venue in nearby Eastleigh. MAS System constituted the latest in a series of Simba Wanyika offshoots that had begun in the late '70s when Professor Omar Shabani, another former rhythm guitarist, founded Les Wanyika.

When I inquired what had happened with his own band, Jobiso, George answered that the group he had set up in 1980 after splitting with Wilson had been only short-lived, lasting less than a year. People kept telling him his place was with Simba Wanyika and by the end of the year, after recording a song entitled "Christmas," he was in a reconciliatory mood and reunited with his brother.

Most of the members of Jobiso hooked up with Issa Juma, lead singer of Les Wanyika, to form a new outfit named Super Wanyika Stars which became quite successful. As a matter of fact, by 1984 Juma was probably the only Swahili artist who could match Simba Wanyika's popularity. But hard times hit him too—he moved to Kakamega in western Kenya where his Wanyika Stars collapsed.

Orchestre Jobiso, however, had survived in a curious way. After George's return to Simba Wanyika, the brothers solved an old problem of the band's recording contract being exclusively in Wilson's name. The solution was an arrangement enabling George to record his own material with the musicians of Simba Wanyika and release it under his own contract as Orchestre Jobiso. This is how songs like "Natafuta Mwali" and "Tatizo la Pesa" were recorded, as well as his 1984 hit, "Epuka Kizai-Zai."

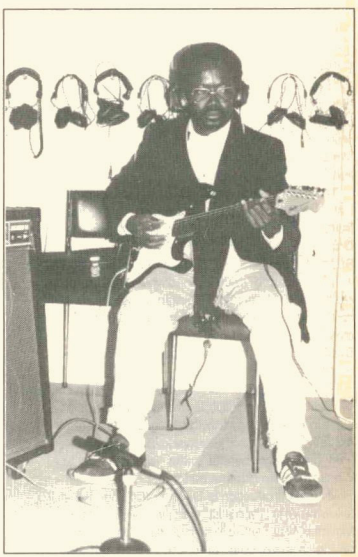
1988 saw two separate releases by the Kinyongas, *Mapenzi Ni Damu* by Wilson Peter and Simba Wanyika (POLP 572), and *Maisha Si Nguvu* by George Peter and Orchestre Jobiso (POLP 574). George's album offered new versions of "Baba Asiya" and "Epuka Kizai-Zai" but the sound quality was abominable. George explained that like so many things in Africa, the recording equipment at Polygram was breaking down. He also complained that Polygram producer Justus Kasoya was not interested in anything that had to do with Simba Wanyika. Kasoya favored Les Wanyika and he did a good job promoting them: Les Wanyika's "Afro" and "Nimaru" were big sellers in the late '80s.

For Simba Wanyika the glory days seemed to be over. Still, Wilson's *Mapenzi Ni Damu* contained some good material, although I discovered this only later when I heard it live. On the record, just like on George's album, the music was ruined by the crude use of Simmons drum pads, while the vocals sounded like they had been phoned in. It was a violent contrast with the clear, crisp sound of previous albums like *Haleluya* (POLP 552, released by Polygram in 1985) and *Baba Asiya* (AMG 003, recorded in 1986 for the African Music Gallery in Washington, D.C.). Also, on both lps George had contributed a song of his own; on *Haleluya*, the wonderful finale "Baba na Mama" and on *Baba Asiya* the rousing title track. This contribution was conspicuously missing on *Mapenzi ni Damu*.

Why had it not been possible to make another record for the African Music Gallery? George replied that they had gotten a raw deal from producer Onyanga Joel: He never paid them. Also, they had never heard from the African Music Gallery again.

After talking with George, I realized that Simba Wanyika was experiencing serious problems and that the brothers were drifting apart again. In order to turn things around, I proposed to contact some booking agencies at home to see if anybody could organize some concerts in Europe. George agreed it might help.

I returned to Kenya six months later, this time to pick up Simba Wanyika for their first overseas tour. While in Nairobi, I had to fix a major problem: Only Wilson and George were holding passports. Because it was too late to get papers for the other three band members, George suggested three musicians from a new group, Africa Jambo Jambo. Their names were Sammy Kasule, Coco Kanyinda and Micky Jaga Jaga and they were not just your ordinary musicians. Kasule, Ugandan by birth,



George at PARS studio, Holland, November 1989, during their first European tour. At left, the young guitarist in Tanga, Tanzania, sometime in the '60s.

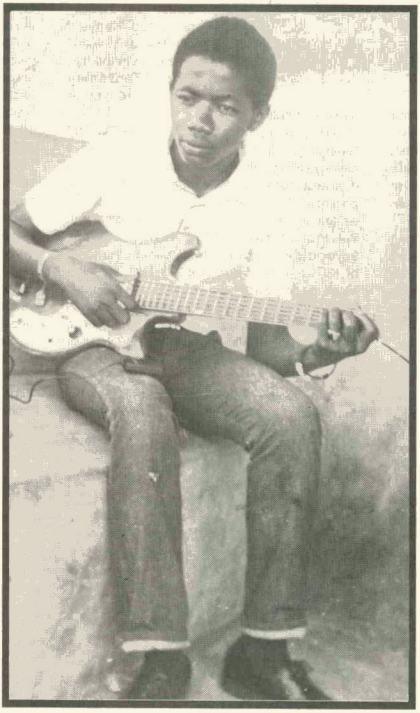
had made a name in Kenya as a solo artist with several records to his credit. Coco and Micky were Zaireans who had been part of the legendary Les Mangelepa. Les Mangelepa, whose name derived the dance term "manquer le pas," was one of the many Zairean orchestras in East Africa that did not make it through the '80s. Others were Super Mazembe and Orchestra Makassy, another group for which Micky had played drums.

Although the formation that went to Europe in 1989 was not really Wilson Peter's band, they played strictly Kinyonga material and they did it with verve and skill. Their concerts met with wide acclaim, and before their return to Nairobi, they recorded a medley of Simba Wanyika hits that was used to promote an extensive European tour planned for the summer.

When I went back to Nairobi in May, the brothers had made sure that this time all the members of their band had passports. Still, there were a great many formalities to take care of which I tried to do by myself as much as possible. This way it could be done faster, because walking in downtown Nairobi with either Wilson or George usually meant being stopped constantly by people wanting to chat.

Although for the most part the Kinyongas enjoyed these street encounters, their dispositions differed remarkably. While George was somebody who liked to go out, meet other people and mix with fellow musicians, I came to know Wilson as a rather self-contained person, inclined to keep to himself. The differences also showed up in their musical attitudes. George had an open ear for all sorts of music and was interested in the African pop being recorded in Western studios, including its use of synthesizers and high-tech effects. Wilson, on the other hand, never really cared for any effects but the old echo device, preferring a more natural sound. New developments also seemed to leave him cold—his favorite music was old Tanzanian and Congolese rumba, in particular the records of Docteur Nico. Wilson clearly had found his style early on. And if after more than 20 years Simba Wanyika still sounded the same, as many Kenyans claim, it could only be because the bandleader himself never really changed. A prolific songwriter, Wilson was the mainstay of the band's repertoire.

George, meanwhile, hardly produced any new songs in recent years. The reason was not just a lack of inspiration but more a result of frustration; unlike his brother, he had never been able to earn much money with any of the songs he had written. In the late '80s when music piracy became rampant and Kenya's record industry fell into decay, he gave up dreams of ever making big money by scoring a hit. Instead, he began hoping that the engagements overseas would eventually make for a decent living at home and perhaps enable him to save up money to buy a small house for his family.



As life in Nairobi became more and more expensive, taking care of his wife and six children had the highest priority. Given his uncertain existence as a musician, George did not find it an easy task but he embraced it with a sense of salvation. He once confided he could have easily gone down the same path as all the musicians he had seen end up as down-and-out alcoholics. They included, he added, celebrated colleagues like Professor Omar of Les Wanyika, whose downfall was painfully illustrated by the fact that in 1990, he was kicked out of the group and John Ngereza formally took over as bandleader.

Another poverty case was Issa Juma, who had turned up again in Nairobi. Because I had always loved his music, I asked George if we could go and see him. "Let's go," he said. So we took a bus to Huruma, down in Mathare Valley, and waited near a tea stall while somebody ran off to get Issa. It took some time, as Issa had become a slow walker: He had suffered a stroke that had left one side of his body paralyzed. According to George, the condition also affected his speech and thinking. But when I told Issa that DiscAfrique had just released an album with some of his old material (*Sigalame 2*, AFRI LP 008), he had enough wits to inquire about any royalties to be paid. I said I did not know how the deal had been arranged but promised to contact Serengeti Records who had licensed the recordings.

When I called Serengeti back home, I was told that royalties were really out of the question because "any proceeds from the deal would be taken up by expenses." The person at Serengeti who provided the tapes for DiscAfrique's "African Classics," as well as for the Kenyan compilations that later followed on Earthworks, was Mike Andrews. Andrews ran AIT-Kenya, the record company for which bands like Super Wanyika and Super Mazembe recorded. Also instrumental in the various Kenyan releases on Earthworks was his brother Ron, head of Polygram-Kenya.

Because Simba Wanyika used to record for Polygram, George and I went to see Ron Andrews at the company headquarters in the industrial area of Nairobi. Ron had heard of the Simba Wanyika medley recorded in Europe and, expecting that the recordings were to be commercially released, had written a letter revealing that the artists had acted in breach of their Polygram contract. I was baffled. George had asserted that the band's contract with Polygram had expired in 1987. As a result, the *Mapenzi Ni Damu* album had been recorded and released without a proper contract.

George was right. However, unknown to him, his brother had later re-signed, supposedly a few days before the first tour to Europe in November

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1989. I remembered Wilson had gone to Polygram that day to ask if he could get some records to take with him to Europe. What had occurred then I never found out, but the result was a contractual mess that left us no choice but to abandon the release.

Still, the episode gave Polygram the idea for a new Les Wanyika album: a medley of their popular tracks. Released as *Les Les Non Stop '90* (POLP 606), it contained a reworking of their biggest hit, "Sina Makosa." Since the original version featured the deep, intense voice of Issa Juma, the tune had become associated with powerful singing that nobody in Les Wanyika could touch. They asked George if he would do the vocal part. George, however, declined. He refused to "help them sell a song that was stolen from him 12 years before."

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Although Professor Omar has always been credited as the composer of "Sina Makosa"—and consequently reaped the financial benefits—the song was actually cowritten with George during their time together in Simba Wanyika. The vocal line unmistakably bears George's stamp while the rhythm and chord progression recall "Daina," a song George had written earlier. Probably because of this resemblance the Kinyongas chose not to record "Sina Makosa." But when their musicians let them down and started Les Wanyika, the new group picked the song as one of the first tracks to record. To George's dismay, the record became a phenomenal success, both in and outside Kenya.

The split with Les Wanyika was a serious blow for the brothers and George always referred to the period before the event as Simba Wanyika's golden days. During this time, the band's seven musicians were: Wilson on vocals and solo guitar, George on vocals, solo and rhythm guitar, their brother William on vocals and tumba, Tom Malanga on bass, Professor Omar on rhythm guitar, Rashid Juma on drums and Elias John on saxophone. Except for Malanga, who hailed from Mombasa, all the band members were Tanzanians who had been recruited from the ranks of the same group that had given the Kinyongas their start: the Jamhuri Jazz Band of Tanga.

Although nowadays all the important Tanzanian bands are concentrated in Dar-es-Salaam, the capital, the situation used to be different. Back in the '60s the pioneers of Swahili pop, Salim Abdullah and the Cuban Marimba Band, came from Morogoro. The town also produced the legendary Morogoro Jazz, whose member Mbaraka Mwinshehe went on to become the godfather of Tanzanian music in Kenya. Tanga, on the north coast of Tanzania, had a lively music scene too, with two renowned outfits, Atomic Jazz and Jamhuri Jazz.

If the word "Jamhuri"—"independent" in Swahili—is an indication, the group must have been founded around the time of independence. In 1966, the Kinyongas were invited to join the band, Wilson to play solo guitar and George bass. Because there was no record industry in Tanzania, the group used to go to Nairobi to make records. For the brothers it was their first acquaintance with the city that, a decade later, would become their home. By then, Tanzanian "jazz" had superseded Kenya's own brand of Swahili music but in the late '60s, Tanzanian bands had yet to make an impact.

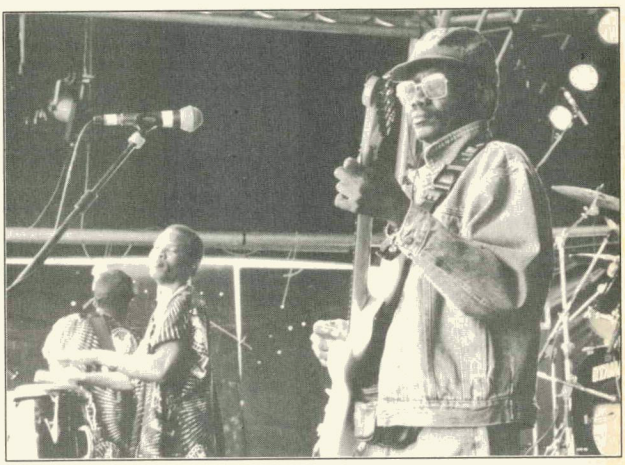
Still, Jamhuri products like "Wasi Wasi Ondoa," "Shingo ya Upanga" and "Oh Masikini" were already selling well. In time, it caused interminable problems between the leader of Jamhuri, who pocketed the royalties, and Wilson, who had written the songs. Fed up with this situation, Wilson quit at the end of 1970. He left Tanga and traveled to Arusha where a company by the name of KilTex (Kilimanjaro Textiles) seemed interested in sponsoring his own group. In the spring, he sent word to George to join him, together with younger brother William, whom they taught to play percussion. With two singers and another guitarist, the Kinyongas set up a new band they called Arusha Jazz.

Instruments were to be provided by KilTex, but that part of the plan did not materialize. When this became clear, in June 1971 the group crossed the border at nearby Namanga in search of opportunities in Kenya. For about a month, they tried to find work in Nairobi but without much luck. Next, they tried Mombasa and finally succeeded: The town became the launching ground of a new career in a new country. Soon it also prompted them to start using a new name, that of "Simba Wanyika," Swahili for "lions of the wilderness." This happened around the time they landed their first contract with Polygram which incidentally brought about another change: Just before the recording session, the singers deserted and the brothers decided that from then on they would do the singing themselves.

For their first records the group was paid with instruments. This gave them the freedom to move about on the south coast and play wherever the best deal could be found. In Mombasa, Sportsview was probably their most popular joint. That is, until 1975 when they decided to pack up and settle in Nairobi.

When George died here last December, public life in the capital was dominated by the elections that were held at the end of the year. During the '92 summer tour, there had been a few heated discussions with Kenyan expatriates about the introduction of the multiparty system. George did not share their optimism. He failed to see how this "luxury of western thought" was going to pull Africa out of the morass of political strife and economic decline.

George once remarked that "politics and soccer are two things we have never sung and will never sing about." Still, if the social commentary expressed in some of their songs was in any way inspired by political ideas, they harked back to the



On stage at the WOMAD festival, Reading, England, July 1992.

days of independence and the principles of unity and brotherhood. After 30 years, these ideals might seem more remote than ever but to Wilson and George they were always there as an inherent part of their Swahili heritage. Moreover, it was their job as Swahili artists to see to it that this tradition would be carried on. Thus, George sang to a traditional beat on "Baba na Mama" ("Father and Mother"):

We, the people of Wanyika, are here to make sure that our tradition will continue, and also Swahili, the language of our nation.
Wanyika stands for music and here, with us, people are not separated by tribe or color. Here, we are all children of God.
Our work involves tradition, the tradition that was passed on by our grandfathers and grandmothers. I will sing with my companions and we will pass on this legacy to our children, so that the traditional beat of our grandparents will go on.
Whether you are fat or thin,
you will dance to it.
Whether you are white or black,
you will dance to it.
Whether you are tall or short,
you will dance to it.
Dance until you sweat and you will feel happy.
If there are problems at home,
come to Wanyika and relax.
If there is a funeral, with Wanyika
you can calm down.
Even if there is a war, with Wanyika
you will find peace.

Another track on the *Haleluya* album that borrowed from Swahili folklore is "Mama Nyange," the story of a stepchild who gets blamed for everything that goes wrong. George recalled that as children the brothers used to sing it with their mother. Her name was Mariam, a Muslim from the Kigoma area in western Tanzania. Their father, Peter Kisaka, came from the same region but was a Christian. He worked as a truck driver, a trade he had learned when he served in the colonial army during World War II. Wilson, the eldest Kinyonga, was born in 1947; George in 1950. When exactly, he never knew, but he always stated Feb. 22 as his birthday: As second born, George liked twos. William, the third brother, followed in 1953.

A few years later, Peter Kisaka met and married a young woman from Rwanda. He then decided to move to Tanga with his new bride and the three sons of his first wife. The day he picked up the children at their mother's house signified a traumatic change in their lives: They would never see their mother again.

The boys did not get along with their stepmother and with their father gone most of the time, they began to stay away from home. They hung out on the streets of Tanga and eventually got involved in music. By the early '60s, Wilson had already left school but George managed to continue his education until he and his brother became professional musicians with Jamhuri Jazz.

George was just 16 at the time. Since then, his working life revolved around bars and dance clubs, with gigs usually lasting until dawn and the bottle always at hand. In the late '80s, George began to suffer from various ailments. During the 1990 tour he had a problem with his leg, and last year he had pneumonia, which in the end affected his voice. He found it difficult to sing lead and the band stopped playing his songs. Only for their final engagement, the WOMAD festival at Rivermead, did George perform two of his songs, "Pamela" and "Daina."

The next day the group flew back to Nairobi where George checked into a hospital. He was discharged four weeks later and in early October he sent a letter, writing that "the treatment has taken almost everything out of me—only rumba is left." He hoped he would recover soon but instead his health changed from bad to worse. He was hospitalized again and at this point his condition proved to be terminal. On Dec. 23, George returned home to be with his family. He passed away the following day.

In 1991 George recorded a new version of "Pole Jobiso" with Simba Wanyika. Because it would also be a Simba Wanyika release, the old title was dropped in favor of the song's chorus: "Pole Pole (Nimatatizo ya Dunia)"—So Sad (These Are the Problems of the World). When I received the news of George's death, the old melancholy tune sprang to mind again, especially the cryptic lines:

Waliosikitika walisikitika sana
Mungu alisem no, je ne sais pas
Wanyika sikuanguka: kuteleza sikuanguka
Mungu akisema no, binadamu si dawa

The ones who grieved, grieved very much
God said no, I don't know
Wanyika, I did not fall: to slide is not to fall
If God said no, the son of Adam is no cure.

["Pole Pole" is one of seven tracks on Pepea, *Simba Wanyika's latest release, now available in the U.S. on Stern's. Peter Toll is a freelance writer based in Holland.]*

The two brothers in Holland after recording *Pepea*, August 1991.