

August 3, 2017 - Bill "Blinky" Sellanga is a Kenyan musician, producer, DJ, and longtime member of the art collective, Just a Band. He's at work on his first solo album, *Everyone's Just Winging It And Other Fly Tales*. He explains: "It's inspired by how one can feel super confident about life one day and feel utterly clueless another and also understanding that no one wakes up in the morning with a clearly programmed way that their day is going to pan out—life generally tends to surprise you." His music is a fusion of African beats, funk, hip hop, electronica, and jazz. He was a 2014 TED Fellow.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2545 words.

Tags: Music, Process, Beginnings, Inspiration, Adversity, Independence.

Bill "Blinky" Sellanga on the challenge of making something entirely new

You said Nairobi is just finding itself musically and culturally. What's it like for creative people in this environment?

In the '80s, and partly in the '90s, there was censorship and artistic repression. It stifled the scene. This also affected how people consumed music, film, plays, etc. There's a whole period where plays, film, and music were banned—authors were jailed.

That doesn't happen anymore, but the side effect is that we have a big part of the population that doesn't believe that art can really have an impact.

I might not know through experience what it's like creating in a repressive regime, but I've seen its effects—for a long time art was stripped of its voice and its power. Now, a sense of creative freedom is exploding. There are so many bands, and bands being formed. There are brilliant bedroom producers with dope ideas, filmmakers getting their ideas out there. We're making so many different sounds, incorporating sounds that we like from here, from Kenya, or traditional instruments but also being very in touch with what's going on around the world.

Artists are producing freely, but mostly funding it from their own resources which oftentimes isn't much. But they're still producing some great work.

There's a big contrast in terms of the history here and other places. In Kenya, something starts and then it doesn't continue. We don't have a lot of legacy musicians.

It's interesting for me to see, because when I started out as a musician, when it came to pursuing ideas that weren't necessarily obvious, there wasn't anyone before us in that mode where it sounded modern but also had a bit of Kenya's traditional vibes. Right now, there are so many musicians doing that. It's nice to watch. Someone visited me in the studio today from NYC, he's a music person who's been traveling around the continent checking out what's going on in different scenes. It was interesting to see his perspective of the music scene here. He felt, and I agree, that there's something going on here, and we can't really describe it yet in a conclusive way as it's still in its nascent stages.

But I wish that the world was set up in such a way that there'd be a free-flow of ideas from places that are not the US, UK, and in some instances Europe, so we could get these gems when they're fresh in their home scenes. Right now what's popular in America is likely to be popular in many places across the globe. How cool would it be if what's dope in Kinshasa or Nairobi was universal in the same way?



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When a large part of the population doesn't believe art can have an impact, and it's tough to find funding, what keeps people going?

What keeps people creating is the love for the craft. There's no guarantee that the work will bring in returns or reach a huge number of people as it could in places with a more organized or structured art scene, but there's the feeling that something is bubbling underneath the surface.

You've been making solo work recently. What's it been like, after performing in a band situation for so long?

Making music solo is interesting because when you're in a band it's so collaborative, and it led me to being very inclusive in how I make my work. But I'm also enjoying the autonomy I have now, where I can put out ideas that are dear to me in the exact way that I want to execute them. I want to make sure that I find that sweet spot in the middle.

Is it stressful?

It is stressful in bits. I've been part of a collective in one way or the other for a big chunk of my artistic life, so the challenge of making things happen as a solo artist is something that I've been keen to take on for a while. You really have to be brave to be a solo artist, for sure—anything I put out now represents an idea that I feel strongly about, and is an extension of me. When looking for collaborators I think, "Where do people fit?" "Do they actually make sense?" When you put stuff out as a group, it represents your ideal as a unit. Right now I'm in the space where I want to present ideas that I love to the world. It's an exciting and scary prospect at the same time.

How do you deal with creative blocks?

I have a DJ side that I've developed, and so when creative blocks hit me I tend to spin a lot more than usual. Also, just trying my hand in other fields. I'm looking at sewing classes the next time I have a creative block.

You find you can overcome creative blocks by being busy in other areas?

That's one of two ways, either being busy in other areas learning some new things that I didn't know about, or taking a break—reading, watching shows, listening to music I like and not being too difficult on myself.



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Do you ever feel like it's a failed project if you decide to abandon something?

The way my process works, overall, is I'll only continue projects I think are interesting. Maybe, if I come back to it and listen after a couple of weeks, I'm just like, "Nah, this is not working," then it's going to be very hard for me to continue it. There are places where I failed, though, because on the new project that I'm working on, there's a song that I started, I produced last year and recorded, everything, and then I forgot about it because I was busy with other things. There's always a new beat or a new idea that I'm working on. So I forgot about it, and then one of the other producers who's helping me put this solo thing together, came to studio and was like, "What happened to that beat?" Using my rationale that I've just described, I'd put it on the back burner. He said, "Why the hell would you put that on the back burner?"

So, there are flaws in that thinking. But overall, it helps me because at the very least, this was a semi-finished project, but for those projects that I don't continue it at all, it probably didn't have a lifeline then, unless someone else comes along, and they listen to it and they like it. Then maybe they can help develop it.

Or we can develop it together. Because now you're looking at it from a different perspective. It's like if you came to my city and you've never been here, so you're checking it with fresh eyes. Sometimes, because I've been in this city for such a long time, some of the things that you'll see have escaped me because they're obvious. But for you, when you're looking at it, it's very different. Sometimes when a fresh set of ears come in, and I play them stuff and they like it then I'm like, "Oh, okay. There's an idea."

Do you need a studio or can you create as long as you're able to record things and pick up sound?

As long as I'm able to record things, I'm fine. But I need the studio to be able to have a place where I can lock myself away and not be distracted from everything that's going on around me. I've been working in that DIY mode for a long time. Now, it's cool that I'm meeting people who are good in stuff that I'm not necessarily good at—the technical side of things, like the mixing and mastering of sound, which, at some level, is important, but then at some level it's also not.

I would never want to be caught up in how well this song is mixed if people don't really connect with it, or if I don't connect with it. A lot of times, the studio just helps me. I have a bunch of things to experiment with and people can be comfortable and they come to play around; we can jam in a place that's not shabby.

The studio's a workshop.

It's a workshop, exactly. I used to have the studio in my house for a long time. Then sometimes you get bored and you go to sleep. But if I step into the workshop I know I need to work; I need to put out stuff.

It was hard for you to make work in the same place that you lived?

It's possible, but there are always a lot of distraction. It's nice to be able to have a space that's separate, so that when you go there you know it's work time. Maybe if you live with people or you have a family and it's like you want to make music in the middle of the night and you start playing music loudly or banging on drums, or whatever, and you're waking people up.

If you're doing experimental stuff and pop stuff and people are responding more to the pop, as an artist, is it tempting to say, "Okay, I'm going to just stop doing the more experimental work and just stick to the pop thing," since that's what people seem to be reacting to?

It is tempting, but then again, what's the role of an artist if not to, sometimes, push the needle? I always feel like that's something that's super important to me, to be able to do something that, even if people will not understand now, when they look back at it in the grand scheme of things, they'll be like, "Oh, wow. That guy was onto something," as opposed to always giving the people what they want. To give the people what they want, financially makes sense. I think that's the conundrum that a lot of artists face.

It might be easier, sometimes, for musicians in the West because there're very few surprises that are going to spring up on the public. It's not going to be like, "Oh, wow. This sound is so radically different. We've never had it before." You've probably had a derivative of it somewhere. Maybe at a smaller scale, but it probably existed. But when you come to a place where it's always been like this, sonically people expect something, or there's a template that's always been used.

We don't necessarily fit that template. There's the element of "What's going on here?" and "What are you trying to do?" Some people back you, but then you end up isolating a whole bunch of people. It's a careful balance of feeding them something they can understand... as you give them something else that's pushing the conversation forward.



How do you get an audience to pay attention when you're presenting them with sounds that are radically different from what they've heard?

Right now that's something I'm really working on-how to execute something properly from beginning to end. If I can't execute it, then who can help me execute it? So that when people see it, even if they don't understand it, they can be like, "I understand the thought process behind it."

Kanye West, for instance, is someone who straddles the line—he's a pop producer and also surprises you every now and then. I didn't really get into Yeezus, but I respected the fact that he was at that point of his career where he could do whatever he wanted. There was a sense of, "I'm a free artist. Take it. If you like it, take it. If you don't, it's fine, too."

What keeps you creating? Just the desire to keep making things?

That, and also, I think I'm partly crazy. Sometimes I ask myself, "Why do I do this?" Because if it's looking for money, there are easier ways to make money, if we're going to be frank.

One thing that makes me want to keep making music is that it's something I've wanted to do for a long time. It was and is a journey. Now that I have the opportunity to do it, I think, "Why not do it and create the best space?" Sometimes, when I look at the global music scene, there are places where you can see a gap... It's possible that if you fill that gap, then something could happen. There's no guarantee that something's going to happen, but there's a possibility that something could. That's what keeps me going.

Also, I love to see concepts that came from nothing. It's like a small seed when you start working, then you develop it until it's ready to go out into the world. When it goes out into the world, and you see the reaction, there's something about it that makes me happy. It's like, "Oh, wow, that was just an idea, and now people are responding to it in this way." I definitely want to keep doing more of that.

Blinky Bill recommends:

Currently Loving the new Chronixx album Chronology, it's really well produced, well written, and a good mix of different styles while staying true to his roots.

I love producer performers (obviously) Some of my faves are The Neptunes, Missy, Quincy Jones, Lee Scratch Perry, Black Coffee, Kanye West.

Favorite vocalists Sly Stone, Bob Marley, Seu Jorge, James Moody, Fela Kuti.

Just did a piece with CNN on my work that aired a little while ago which could help put context into life and making music in Nairobi.

Shoutout to Outkast. :-)

The Nigerian artist Nneka is such a star in my books. We had a dope session where I played her some of my new music and she just went on stage and rified on the mic and gave me some really good takes. Pretty excited to work on them. Not even sure if she is reclusive or just super chilled out.

Name

Bill Sellanga

Vocation

Musician, Producer, DJ

Fact

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