



Lakeside sounds

The vinspired Lake of Stars festival was set up by Liverpool UK club promoter Will Jameson to encourage tourism and aid local charities in Malawi, Africa. Now with top pro audio brands and bands on board, the event has nearly quadrupled in size since its inception. **Andrew Low** talks to Jameson about expanding the concept into neighbouring areas and training a new generation of African sound engineers..

Will Jameson came up with the idea for the vinspired Lake of Stars (vLOS) festival after spending his gap year volunteering with the Malawian wildlife society. He eventually gained the support of industry and media contacts to bring the festival to life when his Liverpool club night, Chibuku Shake Shake, won best UK club in 2004.

Despite the relentless African sun and a 24-hour journey to the remote region, Jameson has managed to gather a crew of UK entertainment and pro audio professionals and a truck load of high-end gear for the festival each year.

"It is a concept that people can't seem to fault. People will happily spend time promoting the festival and take time off work to travel to the festival to help out," he states.

The vLOS volunteers started as people Jameson met through the club and the group has grown bigger and more diverse every year. "As the festival has grown it has gathered more support and we have received a lot more help from companies like Funktion-One, Audile, dB Technologies and Studio Care."

In previous years the audio system for the event was a home-built African PA and a stage constructed from uneven pieces of wood built by local carpenters. While the stage remains the same rudimentary structure, leading pro audio manufacturers and UK rental company Audile have donated high-end equipment for the festival.

Malawian crowds at the 2009 show heard a mix of local and UK acts broadcast through ten of Funktion-One's Resolution

5 loudspeakers and four F-221 bass enclosures. The company's XO-4 crossovers were used, in addition to a rack of MC2 E45 and E90 amps. Monitoring was provided in the form of eight dB Technologies DVX DM15s. Audile supplied a Midas Venice 320 mixing desk, power distribution, outboard, graphics and mics and cables. Liverpool-based Studio Care also sent down seven Pioneer CDJ 1000mk3s, six decks and three mixers, a Pioneer DJM 800, Allen & Heath's Xone 62s and 92s and a Pioneer EFX 1000.

The gear for the festival was arranged by Stev of Audile. "Whatever we took had to be cost and weight effective," he comments. "Line arrays work better flown, and we did not have the ability to fly any boxes on the beach. It is an outdoor festival that can get very windy, and personally I feel that a point source system works better in that situation, and out of all the point source boxes I prefer Funktion-One."

"Tony Andrews of Funktion-One came to Malawi with us and he was amazing. We were working in temperatures hotter than I have ever experienced, and Andrews really got stuck in. We had to build our own PA risers and he was there in the heat of the day banging nails into wood with rocks because there weren't any hammers left. I can't think of any other MD of a loudspeaker company who would do that."

"Everyone who volunteers gets fully involved because the whole vibe is so different to Europe and America because it is not about the money. When you do something like that it

reminds you why you got involved in the business in the first place."

Only lightweight and durable gear would be able to make the trip to the festival due to the arduous journey and weight restrictions. As such, Stev felt that the dB Technologies wedges would fit the bill. "dB's UK rep, David Kelland, was happy to donate the wedges for the festival. I had limited freight that I could take, and the dB stuff is extremely light and very good. It was a massive improvement on home-built African wedges," he comments.

Jameson feels that having a Western name on the bill is essential to encourage tourism to the area. "We have made sure that we have a mixed bag of artists every year. We have had DJs like Felix B from Basement Jaxx, Andy Cato from Groove Armada and Radio One's Annie Mac in the past. We never had a full band at the show because the backline we had was never up to scratch, but Audile provided a great backline this year, which allowed us to have The Maccabees headline the festival. It is a real mixture of artists, which is another thing that encourages travel to Africa."

"We are also looking to expand the festival with satellite events in surrounding areas and possibly start another urban festival in Rwanda. Having people like Tony Andrews and Stev come along and train the locals in sound engineering is essential, because we are hoping that they will eventually handle some elements of the events themselves to make it a bit more self-sufficient. "The vLOS event was supported by The National Young Volunteers Service. We are also hoping to team up with Voluntary Service Overseas charity this year to develop an exchange program where UK sound engineers work alongside their African counterparts and share skills with one another."

Stev furthers: "It is nice bringing that level of gear to a country with nothing. The Funktion-One PA we had is the biggest sound system that anyone has ever seen in Malawi, and for all the African acts that play the show it's like playing main stage at Glastonbury."

Stev explains that the band's were not the only ones who were impressed with the sound at the festival. "We received a lot of positive feedback from the crowd. Between the bands we put on reggae classics and some of the people had never properly heard the bass in a Bob Marley track. There were a group of rastas hanging out at FOH and every time you put a reggae tune on they went nuts because they had never heard the songs at that volume and depth before."

Great sound and premium kit aside, the vLOS has made a significant impact on the Malawian economy, which has grown to a GDP of 12 per cent. "We have generated about two million pounds worth of press for the festival and each year around £100,000 pounds is pumped into the local economy by people attending the shows, in addition to money we have generated for charities like Unicef and the Microloan Foundation. Some one said that we are up there with Madonna for putting Malawi on the map," Jameson laughs.

