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Culture Musical Club

Waridi

Virgin,
Jahazi Media, 2003



["Mpunga \(Unhusked Rice\)"](#)



Some rare forms of music actually construct their own universe, an emotional realm that you enter almost upon the first note, and feel a sense of return, as from a journey, when the music stops. The fact that Zanzibar's premier *taarab* orchestra unquestionably has this power makes it all the more astounding that it has taken until the fall of 2006 for them to tour in the United States. The good news, they have finally come! Culture Musical Club formed in 1958, and as this 2003 recording makes abundantly clear, they remain formidable. The club still has 60 active members, and in this session recorded at club's headquarters in the Vuga section of Stone Town, the ease and atmosphere of their venerable home is palpable throughout.



The opening piece, "Waridi (The Rose)" introduces the orchestra with a lush instrumental, beginning in a stately, slow rhythm, and lifting to a rolling 12/8 rhythm that hints at the genre's African roots. On first blush, the Arabic qualities to the sound are what hit you. A big, gushing string section, backed by an array of hand percussion, conversing with ornamented *qanun* (Arabic zither) and accordion melodies, all with breathtaking grandeur. There is a kind of old world formality about the music, but also, irresistible sensuality, as in the lilting, sultry "Ni Wewe (It Is You)," with its mellifluous vocal by seasoned *taarab* diva, Rukia Ramadhani. This is one of three tracks here reprising her establishing, 1970s hits. The cantering "Kekupenda Sana (Loving You Too Much)" is also a standout.

African earthiness also inhabits these nine exquisite tracks. You hear it in the booming hand drums that underpin the rich, organic mix, in those 12/8 rhythms, and in the searing vocal timbres, especially of the chorus singers. Two legendary male singers take the lead on some tracks. On the cantering "Tumependana Wenyewe (We Have Loved Each Other of Our Own Will)," Makame Faki soothes the soul with his lustrous baritone. Even if you can't make one of Culture's historic debut performances, do yourself a favor and seek out this CD, as a used copy or import if necessary. Culture Musical Club is one of the best kept secrets in African music, but their music is so appealing that to keep them secret any longer seems just short of criminal.

September, 2006 tour dates: