

Feature Article

Madagascar Playlist

Journey to the Malagasy Beat

By [Tom Parkinson](#)



The beauty of travelling in Madagascar is that you're never sure what you're going to hear next. Music is ubiquitous here: blaring speakers in lurching taxis-brousse (bush taxis); slick DJs in hi-tech clubs; grinning guitarists in electioneering vans; dodgy vendors punting MP3 discs; tinny battery-powered radios in remote villages. Chances are that wherever you go you'll find an unexpected tune that comes to define your journey.

The national music scene is booming, with artists from all the major regions turning out serious volumes of quality material. But locals retain a fondness for the usual African favourites: reggae, rap and chart hits. There's also a great affection for French pop, Congolese *lingala* and good ol' country music. The Madagascar music experience recreated here is like Forrest Gump's 'box of choc-o-lates': you never know what you're gonna get...

UB40 - 'Red Red Wine'

There are some constants in the Malagasy galaxy of sound, and if you manage an entire trip without hearing this classic from the world's white reggae ambassadors you can count yourself deaf. This was the first song I heard off the plane, and for once it seemed strangely soothing.

Lucky Dube - 'Slave'

Africa's biggest homegrown reggae superstar, Lucky Dube is even bigger here than the godfather Bob Marley himself. When his national tour was cancelled in November people were genuinely grief-stricken. 'Slave' is another dead-certain tune: every taxi-brousse, bus and 4x4 driver in the country must own this on cassette, and they need very little prompting to stick it in and whack up the volume.

Bob Marley - 'No Woman No Cry'

What can you say? The original Buffalo Soldier is still king here, and you won't meet anyone who doesn't know the words. Of course, it gets distinctly less fun

when you're in a battered Renault hurtling down a dirt track in the dark with a pissed-off Rasta at the wheel and bush fires raging all around you.

Phil Perry - 'Stir It Up'

King Bob's music lives on after his death: the range of cover versions you'll hear is astounding, from straight tributes to Bossa Nova reworks and Malagasy-language rewrites.

Rossy - 'Madagasikara'

One of Madagascar's top-selling artists, this smooth but traditionally influenced singer offers a harmonious ode to his motherland in the form of a Malagasy afropop nugget, complete with ever-popular accordion part. He hails from Antananarivo, so you can impress folk in the nation's hilly capital by showing off that you know his real name: Paul Bert Rahasimanana.

Lily Allen - 'Smile'

Possibly the last thing you'd expect to hear in a francophone Third World country is a pithy urban record made by the streetsmart daughter of a cockney actor. But hear it you will, and a nice bittersweet taste of distant London life it is too.

50 Cent - 'Just a Lil Bit'

Fiddy is more popular with Malagasy ghetto wannabes than with puny white American ghetto wannabes. Truth be told it seems just a lil bit more bearable accompanying a village market or a station wagon full of ducks.

Sean Paul featuring Keyshia Cole - '(When You Gonna) Give It Up to Me'

He may be seen as a sell-out back in Trinidad, but here in the eastern hemisphere Sean da Paul enjoys almost as much airplay as his reggae forefathers, particularly in the kind of touristy clubs where the girls are cheaper than the beer.

Royal Gigolos - 'California Dreamin' (Tek-House mix)

Here's where we step up the pace. This is one of those quirky but dirty tracks where you'll realise just how much the Malagasy love to dance. If you're not a rug-cutter yourself, sit back with a Three Horse Beer and watch all the girls line up and bust their moves in front of the mirror (yes, every club has at least one).

Global Deejays - 'The Sound of San Francisco' (Clubhouse mix)

The obvious (or perhaps inevitable) choice for any DJ wishing to maintain the 60s flashback vibe with another slab of dirty bass. And then, just when you think you've got a handle on 'Gasy clublife...

Glenn Miller - 'In The Mood'

...this happens. Yup, in absolutely any club, anywhere in the country, you can guarantee that at some point the music will suddenly segue into jazz dance and the whole crowd will burst into energetic and clearly practised swing and rock 'n' roll routines. Learn a few steps and you'll probably make friends for life.

Jerry Marcos - 'Lehilahy Mafoaka'

Young Jerry Marcos is one of the new generation of Malagasy pop sensations, but he may have scored an own goal when he allowed President Marc Ravalomanana to adopt this catchy song as his election theme tune. I heard this song, with its brass-stab intro, at least 10 times daily during the 2006 campaign.

Jean-Aimé - 'Andrasako Foana'

A little more soulful than his stablemate Jerry, Jean-Aimé de Bemarivo had

one of 2006's big smashes with this neat slice of *zouk*. It's most commonly heard blaring out of taxis-brousse or plywood music shops (and the occasional campaign headquarters).

Joe Nichols - 'She Only Smokes When She Drinks'

You'll probably wish you were doing both if you're repeatedly woken up on a unnecessarily long overnight journey by a driver who seems overcome with an urge to listen to wistful country songs every time you fall asleep. By rights this track should be followed by Kris Tyler's 'What A Woman Knows', but there's only so much melancholy a traveller can take.

Mon Essentiel - 'Emmanuel Moire/Le Roi Soleil'

Cranking up the emotion to even more epic levels, this French ballad effortlessly unseats Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, not just in the Malagasy charts but also in the karaoke popularity stakes. Sadly, Celine Dion can sing in French, so she's a bit harder to get rid of.

The Police - 'So Lonely'

Back to the classics. And what better way to depart the world's fourth-largest island than in the capable hands of the world's favourite vegan? If you've made it through 16 tracks of Malagasy hospitality, though, the last thing you'll be feeling is lonely - except perhaps when you arrive back home.

Want to see for yourself what it's like to slide from 50 Cent to Glenn Miller? Check out the Madagascar mix at [iTunes](#). You'll have to pay for it, of course, and a couple of the tracks are missing - looks like the world is taking a while to discover Malagasy pop - but you'll be able to load up on the rest.