This is the perfect year for Maalim Idi Abdalla Farhan to win the Festival of the Dhow Countries Lifetime Achievement Award, for on the 1st of July 2006 this great man turned 80 years old! He has had a lifetime of giving – giving to the culture of Zanzibar, Tanzania and East Africa many hundreds of works as a celebrated painter, poet, composer and multi-instrumentalist in the taarab tradition, and giving as a teacher of fine art and music.

Maalim Idi was born 80 years ago at Chukwani, Zanzibar, but he soon moved to Kokoni in the Stone Town where he lives to this day. His father was also an artist and music lover, and watching his father paint island scenes, and listening on gramophone records to the music of great singers from Cairo and Zanzibar’s own legend, Siti binti Saad, Maalim Idi absorbed techniques and developed an enthusiasm that would persist to this day.

At the age of 16 he was given his first ‘ud (lute). He taught himself to play a few Siti binti Saad songs, and together with a couple of local friends began playing informally for fun. In 1944, at the age of 18, the famed Ali Buesh heard him play and suggested he join the taarab orchestra of Nadi Ikhwani Safaa. Practicing the ‘ud for hours every evening, he soon became a proficient player and key member of the orchestra. A few years later, the club’s president brought a qanun (zither) from Cairo. The club had no one to play it and the instrument sat in a corner for months – until Maalim Idi said ‘Let me have a go!’ He taught himself to play the qanun, an instrument he now considers his first love. Maalim Idi has remained an active member of Ikhwani Safaa ever since, seeing the club safely into its 100th year, celebrated in 2005.

In the 1960s he was called upon to become the Director of Music for the first taarab association, which later became Culture Musical Club. For over 10 years he would attend Culture Musical Club rehearsals from 7 to 9 pm, and move straight on to Ikhwani Safaa rehearsals from 9 to 11 pm every week night. There can be only very few taarab musicians in Zanzibar who can claim never to have been taught and influenced by Maalim Idi at one time or another.
In the 1970s he was trained (partly at the Kenya Institute of Mass Education in Nairobi), and employed as a TV producer and programme manager at TVZ where he worked until his official retirement from the civil service in 1979.

During this time he began to undertake his own research: he has listed and provided biographical notes of many of the island’s taarab musicians, including songs they have composed or sung. He has documented all the lyrics of Ikhwani Safaa songs, including authors’ names and the keys songs are played in.

Maalim Idi has always been the first port of call for scholars researching taarab, and through their work, his knowledge has been transmitted to all corners of the world.

In short, Maalim Idi Abdalla Farhan has spent his whole life participating in, influencing, developing and documenting Zanzibar’s cultural heritage. He is a true cultural archive and encyclopaedia, besides also being a painter and musician of the highest order. It is with hearty congratulations and respect that we offer this Lifetime Achievement Award to Maalim Idi Abdalla Farhan, a most deserving recipient.

(Written by Dr Janet Topp Fargion, researcher of taarab music in Zanzibar and Curator of World and Traditional Music at the British Library Sound Archive in London.)
Legendary director Melvin Van Peebles, the ‘Twentieth Century Renaissance Man’, was born in Chicago, 1932. He is an accomplished novelist, director, producer, composer, playwright, actor, stock market specialist, astronomer and former flight navigator.

Van Peebles has been named the ‘godfather of Independent and African –American cinema’, as his controversial landmark film, ‘Sweet Sweetback’s Baadassss Song’ in 1971, sent shock waves thought the establishment. He was driven by his rebellion against the way in which African-Americans were being portrayed on the screen. His classic and daring film revealed the existence of a vast and previously overlooked and ignored audience, and went on to become the highest grossing independent film of that time. He had single handedly unshackled filmmakers, with no pretences at being refined, from the constraints of the dominant cinema.

Melvin Van Peebles has inspired the filmmakers of our time, including Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino, and others. Among them is his son and best friend, the actor and director, Mario Van Peebles, who turned the story of his father’s struggles into a feature film, giving a raw and honest
depiction of his father’s life.

Melvin has earned a total of eleven Tony award nominations, three Grammy nominations, and an Emmy Award. He has been honoured with awards from the Acapulco Black Film Festival, the Underground Film Festival, and the French Legion of Honour.

He is also the first African-American floor trader in the history of the American Stock Exchange, and has written a book on his analysis of financial strategies in ‘Bold Money: A new Way to Play the Options Market.’

ZIFF was most delighted to have had such a successfully versatile man as this year’s Chief Guest, and honoured him with one of this year’s Lifetime Achievement Award.