

CMHLIVE DIGITAL

Module 1 – Artist Identity

Title: Artist Identity

From Personality Identity to Artist Identity

Presented by: CMH LIVE Digital



Introduction

Imagine if you were attending a meeting full of artists in Kampala, and then you were asked to speak **three words that described who I was**.

For me when it happened, I was shocked to realize that I had no immediate answer. I had never thought deeply about **who I was**, what values defined me, or why I was doing what I was doing.

That moment set me on a journey of **self-discover**.

Some of the questions that guided me were:

- Who am I?
- Where do I come from?
- What are my true desires, fears, and dreams?

Through my work with artists across the continent, from Zanzibar to Durban, Kigali to Kampala, I have learned how powerful the questions of identity truly are. Every time I ask artists to reflect on who they are, where they come from, and what has shaped them, the answers are deeply revealing. Consistently, their identity and personal experiences emerge as the strongest influences on their artistry.

For example, one artist shared that they grew up with speech difficulties and mental health challenges, yet discovered that singing became a gateway to freedom, healing, and self-expression. In embracing this, they uncovered the deeper purpose of art in their lives. Others have spoken about wrestling with cultural misrepresentations, religious expectations, or family pressures, and realizing—often for the first time—that music was their window to self-understanding and truth.

The lesson here is clear: **your art is inseparable from your identity**. Often, we underestimate just how much our personal stories, struggles, and histories shape our craft. Reflecting on them not only gives your art authenticity, it also helps you understand its purpose and direction.

In my book *African Professional Artist Handbook*, I highlight my own experience as an example. Being a restless person pushed me to create countless activities as a way of giving meaning to my journey. Growing up with nothing gave me the drive to build something real—something I and others could belong to. This is what identity does: it grounds your art in truth and gives it power to connect beyond you.

Since then, I've learned that identity is a powerful tool. It doesn't just justify our actions, it helps us design lives and careers that feel authentic.

Takeaway: Your identity is not a weakness or a distraction from your art, it is the foundation of it. The sooner you reflect on and embrace it, the stronger your artistry will become.

As an artist, your identity is the **foundation** of your music, your brand, and your career decisions.

Understanding Identity

What is Identity?

Identity is the set of memories, experiences, values, and traits that create your sense of self.

- **Personal Identity:** Who you believe you are. It answers the question “*Who am I?*”
- **Social Identity:** How others perceive you, often shaped by your role in community, culture, or career.

Why Identity Matters for Artists:

- It guides your creative direction.
- It explains your choices to your audience.
- It makes your art more authentic and relatable.

Insight:

If you don't define who you are as an artist, the world will define you instead.

Case Study



Abigail Chams (Abby Chams) – Tanzania

Abigail Chams (Abby Chams) is a Tanzanian singer, songwriter, and multi-instrumentalist who blends Bongo Flava, Afropop, R&B, and traditional sounds to reflect her identity and heritage. Born into a musical family, she bridges generations through her multilingual voice and mastery of five instruments. In 2025, she made history as the first solo female artist from East Africa nominated for a BET Award, while also championing youth empowerment and mental health as a UNICEF Youth Advocate and Spotify EQUAL Africa ambassador.

What she does:

- She expertly blends Bongo Flava, Afropop, R&B, and traditional Tanzanian sounds—reflecting her multifaceted identity through music

- **Young & Groundbreaking:** Born in 2003, Abby became the first solo female artist from East Africa nominated for Best New International Act at the 2025 BET Awards
- **Social Impact & Advocacy:** Beyond her music, she's a UNICEF Youth Advocate and Spotify EQUAL Africa ambassador, championing mental health and youth empowerment via her initiative "*The Talk With Abigail Chams*"
- **Deep Roots & Broad Reach:** Coming from a musically rich background (grandfather orchestrated, grandmother sang in church), she's multilingual and plays five instruments—bridging generational heritage with modern authenticity

Case Study Structure

Section	Abbie Chams	Supporting Example(s)
Identity Foundation	Musical lineage; Tanzanian heritage; multilingual & instrument-rich	Zuchu's use of local musical forms
Creative Expression	Hybrid genre creation	Bakhita's fusion of Afro-jazz, design, and queer motifs
Branding & Recognition	BET Awards nomination; Spotify ambassadorship	Zuchu's regional milestones
Community & Advocacy	<i>The Talk With Abigail Chams</i> initiative	Too Early for Birds using theatre to explore identity

Reflection Exercises

Take a few minutes to reflect honestly. Use a notebook for detailed answers.

1. Who are you?

Write 3 words that describe you.

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2. What are outstanding elements of your personal identity?

(examples; family, community, race, environment, personal experiences)

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3. What are your strongest influences that shaped your Artistry?

Examples: school, friends and family, social/economic influences, personality

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Tip: Be genuine—this exercise is for you, not for anyone else.

Takeaway & Next Steps

Identity is not fixed, it grows with you. Some traits may help you thrive, while others may hold you back. The goal is to **embrace the positive** and work on the destructive ones.

As you continue your journey as an artist:

- Revisit your identity regularly.
- Let your values guide your brand and your music.
- Remember: *your art is an extension of who you are.*

👉 Next Steps:

1. Complete the Google Form reflection.
2. Book your 30-minute one-on-one call.
3. Start applying your identity to your music journey.

CMH LIVE Digital
Supporting Independent Artists in East Africa