

Seasoned Visions

Intergalactic Storytelling with bassist Carlo Mombelli (31 March 2015)

The University of Cape Town's College of Music (SACM) hosted an illustrious group of European and South African collaborators at the Jazz Educator's conference of SAJE (South African Association for Jazz Education). Composition wizard, Carlo Mombelli, offered an earful of stories with accompanying sounds, ranging from how he must negotiate ways to bring his electric bass directly on board the plane, to a powerful vibrational song about death from a road accident. His workshop included performances and offered Q & A sessions for the thin but eager audience of music students and jazz enthusiasts.



Carlo Mombelli explaining style

"Creating compositions means being in the same headspace with members of my band," he explained. *"We have a conversation that has to make sense. You don't repeat the same sentence to each other in a conversation, but move an idea along...adding new ideas. I set up the 'glue' that holds the story together, and we converse."*

Boy, did those guys talk! Trombonist Adrian Mears (South African, currently teaching at the Basel Jazz school in Switzerland) and electric cellist Daniel Pezzotti (member of the Zurich Opera Orchestra) along with a masterful drummer, Dejan Terzic from Germany, debated with Carlo's topics musically. *"Compositions are topics,"* says Carlo. *"I invite the band to debate the topic, and thereby add their own instrumental voices and hearts to the song, while sticking to the topic."* There is structure to this intergalactic storytelling, even though the sounds and rhythms of the topics seem to veer around in aural space and time. It becomes headspace, painting whatever comes up.

"As a result, I've developed my style of playing from my compositions." One example of developing a style was when his damaged right hand and wrist were in a splint, but the thumb was left free. *"How do I practice my guitar under these circumstances?"* He used the fingers on his left hand to create the melody on the bass neck strings, while his right thumb strummed the strings lower down. The Carlo sound.

“Sounds have to come naturally,” Carlo continues. “A poet doesn’t make up nonsense words or phrases, but pulls out what he or she wants to communicate naturally. Improvisation means having a deep respect for each other’s playing, and complementing what each is doing.”

Does he sit down to write “South African music”? *“Of course not. Because I’m South African, my music is South African, but I don’t pretend to write ‘South African music’. I’m constantly inspired by the sounds around me and those experiences with sounds are what becomes integral in my compositions. SOUND! ...of the wind through the trees, its effect on the sound of leaves. I get freaked out listening to the insects, and the birds...”*

A whimsical finish to the workshop was a performance of his song ‘Motian, the Explorer’ in tribute to the inventiveness gleaned from the late drummer Paul Motian. *“Paul played horizontally, not vertically, and was a big inspiration to me.”*

Anyone listening to this notoriously creative band, led by Carlo, will also feel holistically touched by the unique improvisation that comes from such a tight-knit group whose repetitive loops spin one into a meditative trance-like state. No wonder my bottle of water shook with those looping vibrations!

Bassist Carlo Mombelli spells out encounters with Angels and Demons: CD Review (5 January 2019)

This is a story about a search and an encounter, a wandering to find a bio-soul betwixt the angelic and demonic offerings in life. Mombelli’s compositions, heard on a vinyl recording released in December 2018, are haunting because of his findings which are emotional mixed with sensitivity, resolving to the sadness of displaced people’s plight, yet suggesting there’s a mutual belongingness that we all can find and build amongst us. His creativity has wrestled with these anomalies for years, as he has travelled, educated, and co-created in many lands and institutions of Europe, America, and South Africa, his motherland.

Now based in Johannesburg where he also teaches at the University of Witwatersrand and mentors students in Switzerland, his like-minded core band members help provide a framework for discovery in his album, ***Angels and Demons***: pianist Kyle Shepherd who frequents Mombelli’s sonic haunts; guitarist Keenen Ahrends; and wispy drummer Jonno Sweetman. The pace is set in the opening song, ‘In Search of the Holy Grail’ with Shepherd’s Bach-ish piano runs and Mombelli’s eerie vocals behind Ahrends’ guitar conversation. Then the ear moves from this spiritual groove to ‘Pulses in the Centre of Silence’ which continues an emotional exploration of sound. It is also the title of Mombelli’s new book which presents how he has created his compositions.

Mombelli likes to creep around the edges. A classical feel emerges as cello strings are bowed in ‘Glissando’ by guest artist, Susan Mouton, behind a head-held-low piano. One listens carefully as this story unfolds oh so slowly and thoughtfully.

Ahrends shows his true grace and style on this album while Mombelli maintains a subtle lower register pace. In ‘Athens’, the piano chips into this repetitive beat held. Mombelli is searching to find his father here, after several decades’ absence. One hears perhaps a hesitancy of encountering, trepidation with the unknown, particularly as his bass maintains a rhythmic drone while Ahrend’s subtle guitar talks throughout.

This reunion of father/son becomes a renewal, of capturing without clinging. I found this song one of the most enthralling Mombelli-styled arrangements. It's also the longest track on the album.

In 'The Spiral Staircase', there's a wailing and yearning as Mombelli's bass sets a steady repetitive hum. But confusion sets in. It's like plunging into a long, deep well of uncertainty, enhanced by a rarely heard bass clarinet of guest artist, Janus van der Merwe. Further questioning follows with 'Like a Mouse In a Maze' featuring Cartwright playing Bach-gone-mad improvised runs that deliberately hit 'wrong' notes, something tolerated in improvised music. Fortunately, that scattered tone doesn't last long as his piano melts into a soulful ballad-type 'Children of Aleppo' with Mombelli's underlying sad pronouncements about a pathetic world gone wrong for children (and adults). One is surprised by the contemplative nature of technique which, because of the subject theme, would expect to be cacophonous and aggressively unpleasant. Unlike entry of the next songs on the album which are almost immediate, there is a much relieved pause after 'Children of Aleppo' finishes, allowing for reflection, deep breathing, and a moment of much needed silence in this expressive album.

Having caught one's breath, the baroque orchestral feel in 'In the End We all Belong', which is a more melodic, less frantic piece, suggests some resolution is finalising Mombelli's spiritual search for those angels to counter the always pervasive demons.

Loop pedal repeats of the bass cast an illusory image in 'The Ghost of Norcia' and its 'Part 2' which ends the album. There is a haunting symbolism here as though those demons, seemingly revisited, are finally outcast. But are they?

This album leaves one wondering. Is the spiritual lost-and-found journey of life real or ever final? Listen carefully.

[add notes re *Planet Earth* album].....

Ancestral routes in jazz – a journey with Siya Makuzeni, Standard Bank Young Artist 2016 for Jazz
(5 July 2016)

This Standard Bank Young Artist for Jazz 2016 started her first concert with an epic vocal scat, the likes I hadn't heard from her previous songs (by others). Thirty three year old Siya Makuzeni, who hails from East London, skilfully fused her Xhosa sounds with some basic other roots of bebop and improvisational contemporary jazz. Her appearance at Grahamstown's annual SB National Arts Festival 2016 offered her a first opportunity to present her own songs, constructed in careful refrains that cut across musical harmonies and genres. Hard to describe, but her adept band of three horns, including her own trombone, and rhythm backline including the talented Thandi Ntuli on piano seems ready to fire boosters into the South African jazz cosmos. I was relieved to see another female artist on stage, too.



Siya Makuzeni on trombone: NAF2016 CuePix/Aaliyah Tshabalala

I caught up with Siya for a chat on 1 July. I wanted to know what internal juju had been working on her creativity, and I think I got some insights.

CM: Your primary school teacher he told me that you were not very musically inclined or active in those young years. Perhaps it was the people you were working with later who gave you a boost. What was that spiritual bone that sparked you internally to blossom?

SM: I knew something was there, but I've never figured out what it was. Music has always been about how I understood life. Even before and during primary school, I was in choirs and learning the recorder. Music was always milling around me at home. My parents had introduced me to such a diverse arrange of music at home. It wasn't called 'folk' or 'rock', but just a variety of music. Maybe that inspired me as a child, wanting to emulate my parents. They were a huge influence on me then.

CM: You were blessed with supportive parents. And what about now? Any other relatives or ancestral spirits that pushed you into some spiritual realm?

SM: Oh gosh! Wow! I'm sure that has existed. I haven't tried to interrogate that. I remember going home where my family had a ceremony. One of my older aunts mentioned that I'm on the 'right path', that what I'm doing is like a vessel, healing as I go forward on my journey as a musician. For me personally, I'm still trying to figure that out. I definitely draw from that 'right path' and use music a lot to draw inspiration in terms of grounding myself, being on stage...

CM: It would be interesting to pursue that, and draw out from the archives of culture the influences on you. Let's talk about your own music which is rooted to your own cultural background. There's something primordial and ancestral about it. What is influencing your choice of song, lyrics, rhythm

of your own making? You've performed others' pieces, but with your own voice and interpretation. Now, you're on your own journey.

SM: I really have to think about it. Many different factors are influencing me. Start on the musical level. Look at my loops: They're very rhythmic and polyphonic and extremely Xhosa-centered harmonically which has helped me to choose which harmonies I want. I studied jazz, but when I was here at Rhodes, I studied ethnomusicology and this spurred me on to adopt a non-western approach to music. So since 2001, I don't believe that this approach has left me.

There was also a sense of needing constant change, pursuing something that keeps going forward, that keeps the reel rolling. If the pathway becomes stagnant, then I become frustrated. Because of that, and as I try to grow my career, I look at collaboration as a huge part of my creativity. It has enabled me to do my own stuff. This ties in to finding and mixing genres that have common grounds, trying to flip things up on their heads.



Siya Makuzeni on vocals: NAF2016
CuePix/Tamani Chithambo_30JUNE 2016

CM: Speaking about genres, there is melody, refrains, and lyrics. There were two songs you performed last night that you were singing which sounded like ... there was a fine line between scatting and the language. I found that quite intriguing. Also, you do a lot of scat in your songs. Few singers want to scat. You've pursued different types of scat and the language fused with it. Where does that come from? Was that deliberate?

SM: Probably. Also, I might not be aware of it because I'm in a space where it's so natural. When I decided I wanted to be a jazz vocalist, I was listening to Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughn. These were my biggest surprises; I'd never heard a voice being used like that before, and I found it completely fascinating. I was also dumbfounded to see how they used their voice like an instrument. This was completely new to me. At that point, as I was transitioning from the trombone to vocals, I could see the similarities between the instrument and the voice. And then discovering these women!

CM: That's what you're doing, going beyond lyrics and into the instrumental voice. The machine you were using – the vocal lyrics pedal – what has enamoured you about that little box? Why are you using that?

SM: Possibilities! Possibilities! Endless possibilities! And as someone who needs constant change, I use it because it allows for this change. I had used a foot pedal for a number of years. I found myself

in situations, also, where it was difficult to collaborate with other vocalists on the same song. I had used it in Prisoners of Strange band of Carlo Mombelli and the pedal allowed me to explore more with vocals. I listened to other avant guard women singers who were pioneering the use of vocals in different ways, like screams and seagulls and that kind of thing. It was already an interesting journey, but when I realized there is so much to add harmonically, in terms of using modulation for effects, things you might not be able to do with your own voice, that's where these explorations happened. So I just said, "I can back my own vocals."

CM: I guess backing vocals and choirs are traditional in some older jazz forms. That little box gives you different ranges of the same note, harmonically.

SM: *It gives a six part vocal harmony so you can really go crazy. You also have the opportunity to put it into the key that you're working with.*

CM: Have you thought about a collaboration with Lwanda Gogwana (trumpeter) since he has pulled from his ancestral roots also?

SM: *That would be quite interesting as we both are revisiting the Xhosa traditional songs.*

CM: I think of jazz as being improvisation on folk music in a society. Everyone has songs.

SM: *Totally.*

CM: Regarding your performance last night, I noted in the 6th song that you seemed to deliver a sense of anger in your voice, in your presentation. You show emotion...I felt there was a protest, a pulse you wanted to get across, maybe a sadness or disappointment you wanted to get out.

SM: *Not really. It was a moment, when spontaneity took place, and I guess I seized that moment. I was emoting, yes, but I was having fun. I think what was interesting about that moment was ...right at the end I was doing the vocal percussive thing... After the growling.... and thinking, geez, I haven't done that [type of vocal] since **Prisoner of Strange**. This was just a revisit to what I had done before, but this time with my own music.*

CM: That's great, then. To take that moment and go with it! That's creativity.

Where do you go from here?

SM: *Huuuummm! Good question. We're all trying to build dreams. I'm excited, but I can't say I 'know' what's going to happen. I do hope to tour with my new sextet as much as possible.*

We'll release an album before the end of this year. But really build on the sound, and use those opportunities, like at festivals, to go and visit other musicians. Or find a way to link up with other musicians around the world as a stepping stone for this band to be around in years ahead. The band is like family; we are all committed. This is my first jazz band.



Thandi Ntuli at NAF 05July 2015: CuePix/Tamani Chithambo

Another band I've had is more of cross-over rock. Now, this is my first jazz band and one where I don't have to fight musically and where people are personally committed. I'm excited for that and we'll see what happens.

CM: Do you still collaborate with Carlo Mombelli and Marcus Wyatt as you were doing?

SM: *I had to take a break. I just didn't have time. Of course, we're all family, but I needed my own time and space to create. That was a very tough decision to take a break from them.*

CM: How could you encourage more women to find their creative talents in jazz?

SM: *It's very subjective and personal. To excel in this industry, you have to have balls. I learned this at a young age by being thrown in to the experiences, like with this Festival which I've attended for a long time. So because of this, coupled with my determination, it has worked out for me.*

I also think that if girls are encouraged at early childhood development stage, you would see a difference, and more activity from them as they grow older and enter the industry. More confidence. There's simply not enough going on to make music accessible to kids at such a young age, so if we could fix that, we'd see a lot more active females.

Let's watch this young lady flourish with future events, festivals, and live gigs! HAVING THE EXPERIENCE/DEEP END + DETERMINATION AND GUTS = success.

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Siya Makuzeni holds her own with orchestras, compositions, and lockdown

Standard Bank Young Artist for Jazz 2016, singer and trombonist, Siya Makuzeni, represents an inflorescence, a flowering of growth, from high school days in East London to her present band leader role and orchestral arrangements. Being used to isolation to enhance her compositions, she admits the Covid lockdown was quite helpful, enabling a shift of consciousness, even listening to how the earth's magnetic field was changing and influencing human emotions and movements. Her commissioned solo piano piece called **Rise** resonates how she was able to work through present uncertainties, to reflect on society, on self-awareness and resilience. It is to rise above fear. To quote her purpose:

"To rise above all obstacles I may face and trust in my inner voice no matter how warped and confusing the outside world may be. This has been an on-going theme in my life, especially during this period we are facing now."

In 2016, her seasoned sextet released ***Out of This World***, an album which includes the Standard Bank's 2017 winner for Jazz, Thandi Ntuli, on piano and keyboard. Besides playing trombone, Makuzeni also uses her vocal lyrics pedal to loop, sing and scat, portraying often wild, emoting sounds from six of her seven compositions. Makuzeni has been known for her vocal acrobatics ranging from howls and high pitched whines to mellow, lower register yowls, which fuse her Xhosa sounds with some other basic roots of bebop and improvisational contemporary jazz. Watch her on [Downtown Jazz Sessions Siya Makuzeni Sextet](#)

From High School and beyond, Makuzeni met and even played with the great South African legends like the late Moses Molelekwa and Zim Ngqawana, Themba Mkize, Nduduzo Makhathini, and others of the early 2000s. Such experience has honed her compassion skills to respond with disapproval for how, for instance, police handled the 2021 riots and looting in parts of South Africa.

“Rise’ means becoming aware of situations we find ourselves in, observing what’s going on in society, speaking to people on the streets, and watching media and how fear has been affecting people, even me. I saw that, and needed to pay attention to it, to rise above fear.”

She is finding peace in her ancestral journey: *“There is a certain unspoken peace when I am in those lands, one that allows me to tap into the spiritual energy of those who came before me, my guides, my ancestors, and go forth into the unknown with an unshakable truth and determination.”*

When not performing live, Makuzeni is a music producer, session musician, arranger, songwriter, and voice-over artist. Her vocals have featured on Phillip Noyce-directed **Roots** and **Book Of Negroes** TV adapted productions, and her compositions have included music scores for Mzansi Magic’s **The Road** drama series, aired in 2015. Most recently, she stands as the lone female arranger, singer, and instrumentalist on pianist Andile Yenana’s Zania Dreaming Big Band album, **One Night at the Market Theatre**, with some 18 musicians.

Makuzeni articulates well her personal musical trajectory in the South African jazz landscape, and deserves being watched as she grows the spiritual and political agency of jazz as a radical healing force, while the pandemic disrupts and changes the speed and rhythm of daily life.

Jazz Singer Ziza Muftic dazzles in her *Shining Hour* album and Life (11 May 2019)

Croatian-born Ziza Muftic stepped into an ambitious musical journey in South Africa when her parents migrated from a war-torn Croatia in 1992. It was terribly cold in Johannesburg that August, as she left her teenage sandals behind in the summery North. Her academic and professional success as a jazz vocalist confirms her gutsy approach to creativity, as she explored what she felt was still missing in her own Balkan musicality: a South African musical expression. Subsequently, she has performed with some of South Africa's top Jazz musicians like Johnny Fourie, Reza Khota, and Marcus Wyatt. She was also asked to sing a finalist piece at the SAMRO 2018 composer's finals, where the composition won in that category.

Muftic is now feeling her shining hour. *Shining Hour* (2019) is her second album, entitled from songwriter, Jonny Mercer's 'My Shining Hour' song of hope and high expectations, and follows on her first album, *Silver Moonbeams* (2015), with its Balkan rhythms, lyrics, and melodies. Her stories shine in delightfully pleasing and thoughtful ways as she handpicks from known songs and her own compositions.

She adds the spoken word to such standards as Bheki Mseleku's 'Homeboyz' and the Beatles 'Norwegian Wood' which continues in a sullen mood started by the opening Mseleku piece. Her low voice register breathes a kind of soft whimsical lullaby sound with inflections from her able band members that make this jazz album enticing and moving. She says on her album cover: *"Music and thoughts collected on a journey from Bosnia and Croatia to South Africa. These tunes found this band and have become a part of our standard repertoire."*

Muftic searches with questions put to English lyrics: in the moody, sometimes sassy 'What's the Colour of my Heart', and in how 'Love is the Drug' tells about something familiar and is skilfully supported by Sydney Mnisi's wailing tenor saxophone and pianist Roland Moses's runs. Then, inventive mixes of Croatian lyrics and Balkan-style vocals with a South African context in 'Kwela/Gontsana (Milena)' reveals hints about the next song, 'Unfinished Story', where drummer Peter Auret holds a steady fast beat while Muftic scats her unfinished story. It seems clear how Muftic's interest and research into Balkan styles are transposed with South African ethno musicality, a theme she is pursuing presently.

Her skills in arranging come through interpretations of the Latin swing, as in the popular Corea/Jobim 'Chega de Saudade', and in her own composition, 'Blue', influenced by Pat Metheny, which has Mnisi's flute solo querying Muftic's unending searching and wondering.

The album ends with an inventive taster for what's to come in the future: 'Bosnian Flute Jam' is just that, Balkan dance mixed with South African marabi rhythms. With a cross-over voice the likes of a Carmen McCrea and Balkan mixes which would excite the Bombshelter Beast's mixed bag, *Shining Hour* guarantees to hold the listener's heart and ears in a tight embrace.

An interview with Muftic explains herself:

CM: You have absorbed so much of the South African experience, from being a teenage immigrant who quickly adapted to the local artistry back in the 1990s.

ZM: *As I grew in this country, I realized that I had much more similarity with the way of living of Black people in townships than the squeaky clean middle class – both black and white – that live in the*

suburbs of JoBurg . This thing of community living, of not locking your door, and going next door to your neighbour if you needed some salt – we used to live like that in Croatia. There, we lived in flats with only one key, and my neighbour was always in my lounge. But now in JoBurg, we have several keys which we are always having to sort out which is for what...and there's an alarm button, and a code for a lock, just to get into your own house! It's like phases, you know....

CM: You came to South Africa after your matric in Croatia, right? And were able to study music right away here. How did you manage with English?

ZM: I had music credentials from my Croatian high school and a respected music school in Zagreb called Vatroslav Lisinski, and studied under one of Croatia's well known divas, Lidija Horvat. It was then that I won a third place at a singing competition among young singers from all over Croatia. So when I arrived in JoBurg, I could enter university here right away. It was hard as I had to learn English just from living, so I just learned as I went along. I completed my BA in Music in 1996 focusing on Classical Vocal studies, and my Masters in Music in 2013, both degrees from Wits University. My Masters was in Performance and Research. My two recitals were late classical to contemporary, a program which covered music from Stravinsky to Django.

CM: You seem to enjoy mixing your Balkan musical heritage with the South African sounds. Can you tell me more? Particularly about that last song 'Bosnian Flute Jam' on your album.

ZM: I started the 'mixing' during my Masters studies. It was then that I picked up a well known Bosnian folk tune, 'Ne klepeci nanulama'. Everybody knows that song in the ex- Yugoslav countries and everyone in my family sings it well. I added to it a standard South African jazz progression, and you know, long before I performed that song, I would just sit and cry in my studio. Because there was this soul thing I found with South African jazz, it filled something in me that I was missing from my Croatian side. So I put the Bosnian flute jam at the end of this album as a signal of what was brewing inside me and what will come next in future albums.

CM: You wrote your Masters thesis about Balkan music in South African music. Explain more.

ZM: I used to go to Balkanology parties in JoBurg ages ago, where I heard this music that sounded like something from home. I was completely bewildered hearing this in Newtown in JoBurg, and found two DJs from Capetown!! So I chatted to the people that I was trying to find a theme for my research, so I just went back to that. There was no 'soul' connection as such, but there was definitely something like a 'fun' thing in these parties, and their dance was fun. It reminded me of these raucous weddings you'd see in the villages back home in Bosnia and Serbia with that familiar um pah n pah n pah. So going to these parties helped me decide about what I could write for my thesis.

CM: So how did you conduct this research from the parties?

ZM: My Professors were so keen to do research on this because there is so little written about Popular music in South Africa (academic writing in particular). So I focused my ethnographic research on these parties. I took two different parties where you dress up in costumes and then dance to this crazy music of that period around the time of the war. The whole thing was actually a movement. So right about the time of the war, there were a lot of immigrants too – it started in Germany, I think. They displayed this nostalgia thing where they started playing a Romanian music and a kind of Serbian cheezy pop that you would hear at 4 o'clock in the morning from people who were drunk - drunk from the wedding parties. So it became like a trend, you know. And then 'Borat' came out – you know with that Sacha Baron Cohen actor and his character from Eastern Europe who is a bit naïve. So I had these influences growing up. Then there was the film, 'The Underground', that turned the eyes of the world towards our country and culture, some of it ridiculing how naïve people from the village seemed as they carried themselves awkwardly into the city or whatever. You know how it is when people from the Western world will always look for something new to spice up this doof doof doof they have in clubs.

CM: What do you mean? You mean how the Bombshelter Beast emerged as a popular band...

ZM: *What Marcus [Wyatt] has done is genius because that sound is Joburg right now, if you had the energy and it wasn't so dangerous to walk around, like in Braamfontein, to absorb all the sounds. I enjoyed going to the Bombshelter beast gigs because of the experience ...I mean every time I go to his gig [Bombshelter Beast] and hear that guy that raps in Sisotho and isiXhosa and other languages, and the girls that rap, and then there's the umpah umpah umpah that comes out of the songs, and the band all running around in those onesies.....*

CM: Yes, they are quite entertaining. So what was your thesis title?

ZM: *It is entitled, "Hopal: Exploring Balkanology in South African Popular music culture".*

CM: Let's talk about your voice. You've got a pleasing timbre and register in your voice. Who has influenced you in your voice production?

ZM: *I don't listen to vocalists that much, but when I do, I examine things like sound and breath, and how they blend into music and how they phrase. Often, I get disappointed because the singers tend to over-sing those things, you know, instead of really interpreting the phrasing that is what the music is about. I find beautiful voices that aren't doing enough with the music, and then I get a little bit bored. Today, take someone like Cecile McLorin Salvant, and the technique and the colour she has and the attention to the music – you don't always get these details today in musicians. So when I listen to my own recordings, and I see there's a little too much there, too much excitement, then ... But I would say people like Billy Holiday, Joni Mitchell, Janis Joplin, and Carmen McCreia are some of my favourites.*

Ziza has performed with some of South Africa's top Jazz musicians like Johnny Fourie, Reza Khota, and Marcus Wyatt. Her ***Shining Hour*** album features: Sydney Mnisi on tenor saxophone and flutes; Roland Moses on piano; Peter Sklair on electric bass; and Peter Auret on drums

See the YouTube promotion of ***Shining***

Hour: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ud0QSNZkdW4&feature=share>

In July 2020, I wrote about Muftic's performance at the National Arts Festival in Makhanda. This was a 'virtual' stage event due to the COVID pandemic which shut down live events. This one rocked my boat!

Ziza Muftic's *Shining Hour* concert was just that – shining with her clear, crisp vocals and lyrics, speaking of stories from her Balkan past and South African present where she has lived for several decades now. Folk tunes turned into vocal scattings, or what some would call 'jazz', have influenced her own style of compositions that mark Muftic as inventive, thoughtful, and impressionistic. Taken from her second album, ***My Shining Hour***, this performance highlights her various musical influences, like Johnny Mercer and Chick Corea and others who borrowed from other musical cultures. Muftic skillfully flavours her own compositions with twists of Eastern European folk mixed with South African jazz styles. For instance, 'Kwela Gontsana', composed by saxophonist Sydney Mnisi in memory of a beloved late musician, was given a lyrics interpretation by Muftic about her own Bosnian upbringing. The bluesy 'Love is the Drug', a take from the 60s' rock version, finds Muftic's broad lower register voice slinking through these darker toned messages reminiscent of the sassy Billie Holiday or an angry Nina Simone. In '*Unfinished Story*', Muftic inserts compelling bossa rhythms that accompany her intricate scats which, at times, seemed to lose their melodies, but which found resolve with intensive piano runs of Roland Moses. An abrupt finish of the song said it all. Her album is available on all digital platforms. (9 July 2020)

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Ancestral Heartbeats Code the Music, an interview with award winner pianist Nduduzo Makhathini. 13 August 2015

“The greatest moments are when you can’t tell the difference between the piano, or the bass, or the drum, but rather when there’s one wave of sound..... This is consciousness, becoming one with the environment.”

I felt somehow connected with ancestral energies as I drove this youthful bearded jazz pianist to Cape Town’s airport after his weekend gigs with trumpeter, Feya Faku, and local musicians. His performance with Faku’s album launch, **Le Ngoma**, at Cape Town’s popular Straight No Chaser jazz club was a subdued low key presentation of his wider talents. Johannesburg-based Nduduzo Makhathini, originally from Kwa Zulu Natal, is still on a high from being granted Standard Bank Young Artist 2015 award in the Jazz category. I asked him about his philosophy, messages, and what he meant by ‘identity politics’ which he has adopted.

NM: Mine is spiritual, wedded with cultural. I was introduced to music in its religious mode, and later to the business side of music. I grew up as a Christian, going to churches, etc. but I don’t subscribe to any of them. Music moved me into a more spiritual groove. In my youth, I would visit up to four churches on a Sunday just for the music. I loved the gospel messages and sounds. I would leave when the sermons started!

CM: Who else has influenced you besides Zim and Bheki Mseleku?

NM: My mom is my greatest inspiration, and my first piano teacher. I also grew up with the traditional isicathamiya ensembles, or male acapella, like Black Mambazo. I love harmonies which is why this singing drew me to the piano where I can make harmonies myself. I also love harmony in life, which is why I became so close to Bheki who focused on harmonizing things in life. Andre Petersen is also one of my favourites as he expresses inspiration also with Mseleku.

CM: Your three kids are also part of your music journey, aren’t they?

*NM: Wow, I have three kids. What a responsibility now! What can I put out there for them? What is left for me by my forefathers, and for them? So my album, **Sketches of Tomorrow** is for my kids. I fused the Western with the traditional African since I have to deal with both cultures, which meet on this album. And they do too.*

CM: You talk about healing others. What about healing yourself?

NM: I always feel that the music I play has a message sent through me. Sometimes I don’t understand these messages. So healing goes through me, my system. It tries to heal the space that we’re in, our environment where everyone operates. There are different forms of healing, but I concentrate on the traditional kind in my Zulu culture. I want my family to learn that each and every individual has a role to play on earth, and we need to find out what that is. That’s my ‘politics’, that everyone, equally, has a contribution to offer. We are passing the shacks now [along Cape Town’s N2 highway on route to airport]. Without those people here, this process of honouring each other cannot be complete unless we continue the legacy. That’s why I care for everyone, the kids and people on the streets, and even the more fortunate in the suburbs. These people in shacks barely have the basics for living. My music speaks to them more because these people need healing.

My grandmother was a healer who would have water and pray on it. I asked people to bring water to my gigs, and just have it there in their possession. My music, I believe, then allows the water to capture the healing, and this water has the power of coding certain messages. Mbeki and I used to go

to these temples and learn how the spiritual energies were moved by earth elements, and I learned from this. Together, we explored healing as a gift through the language of ingoma or our musicianship.

CM: Regarding your still-to-be launched album, **Listening to the Ground**, I'm curious why you have pulled in the Swedish tenor saxophonist, Karl Martin Almquist, one of my very favourites from northern Europe?

NM: I found him on YouTube, had never met him, but loved his sound. I sent him an email a few years ago, and invited him to join in my latest album. He said, Yes!

CM: Tell me about your album, **Listening to the Ground**.

NM: This is for my ancestors. It's about the African soil, and African environment, which has so much energy and sounds in it. How deep is the African ground, and how deep is the African soul? In spite of slavery, African people continue to smile, continue to have hope, and till the soil.

CM: Your music you say comes from an 'external' force. If you mean a higher Spirit (let's call it 'God'), then why can't this powerful force be 'internal' as well? Your project seems to have integral components working together.

NM: Yes, right. I see God as a holistic view of consciousness. It means 'God' is a complete picture, both internal and external. The deeper you get into the internal mode of self, the more you can go outside yourself. Like those who had 'out of body' experiences... they went so deep inside themselves that they could actually come out of that experience.

CM: You'd make a good Buddhist!

NM: Oh, hah hah! I read and listen a lot to Osho? On Sundays, with my family in our house, we listen to Osho teachings and a lot of music, and learn and discuss. Osho leaves things open for us to look for conclusion. For instance, he observes the cycle of water with this story: There was a stream that flowed for so many years, but then runs into a desert. Osho then panics, wondering how he's going to find water in this dry desert. But he had another thought: If I become one with the desert and dissolve in it, then I'll be OK. It then began to rain in a different place and saved his desert. His message was that sometimes, we must dissolve and not take ourselves so seriously. And this is what the exercise of music teaches. I can just let go and not become so absorbed in my individuality. The greatest moments are when you can't tell the difference between the piano, or the bass, or the drum, but rather when there's one wave of sound..... This is consciousness, becoming one with the environment.

CM: Are you interested in teaching about this consciousness, environmental holistic healing, and ways to save us all?

NM: It's always there indirectly. The music is our greatest teaching. My music is universal, always a means to a destiny. Music has a power, something deeper, for people to reach for. I've been writing a lot, in social media, about what inspires my music. Many people who resonate with my music and its ingoma (musical healing) are not necessarily jazz lovers.

CM: You're on a journey...particularly with your family. With your mom...And your wife?

*NM: My Mom's very special, supports me 100%, even though she doesn't have my belief systems. My wife, Nomagugu, is on all my albums. She's one of my favourite singers. I've got my daughter on **Mother Tongue**. The three children and my wife finish the last track on **Sketches of Tomorrow**, with my children ending the song: 'Oh Nothing; Oh Nothing Again'. I thought what a beautiful message as it came from them listening to the woes about Zimbabwe daughters there, about "Africa's daughters are without names," with a loss of identity. So I think it's amazing how kids can spark this energy in*

the music we play in the house. In terms of healing the space, the kids and my wife heal that house space which becomes charged with so much energy.

CM: What an experience for the kids! You talked about your Sunday gigs just for the three of them. Do you record your family sessions?

NM: Oh Oh. No. What an idea! I should record them, you know. We would talk about the gigs, about what is God and existence, and about what they feel in the music, and how the music connects to God, etc. Other kids would tell them about their church experience, but my kids would tell their friends about the music: "Our Dad does gigs for us!" and explain what we played at home that morning.

CM: So your journey continues...

NM: Like Bheki Mseleku who said he never knew how or where to finish a tune, it just kept going and going, with no real ending... So I think I love the same kind of thing, where music never ends. Durban is a center for guitar harmonies, too, which I love. My father played guitar, so I have been inspired by those traditional sounds. I portray this in the song, 'From an Old Bag of Umkhumbane'. I recently discovered that my paternal grandfather came from this town of Umkhumbane which, like Sophiatown, became a melting pot for jazz and music. There was a whole tradition of guitar culture. This is why I like to explore how to express this guitar on the piano.

I'll be doing my Masters at Stellenbosch University through York University partnership. I'll focus on oral tradition and jazz, and how music has been taught without written music. Similarly, how stories in a song have been orally presented, not written. Written scores present different interpretations, like Winston's song, 'Yakhal' Inkomo', which he authored in a different time. Likewise, I'm dealing with certain things now, but how do I make that song relevant and how do we push this music forward for it to make sense with the generations to come which don't know much about the history of South Africa? But in this music, certain things can be coded and documented, of history and music.

CM: The coding of music...

At this point, Nduduzo had only half hour to check in for his flight. Our chat could have continued forever.... It will.

Pianist Nduduzo Makhathini's voice speaks 'Ntu' through the fires of discontent (1 October 2021)

In preparation for his two live concerts at Norval Foundation in Cape Town on 1 and 2 October 2021, maestro Nduduzo Makhathini spoke with All Jazz Radio about how 'Ntu' can address current fires of discontent facing youth in South Africa.

A philosopher and healer himself, Makhathini's illustrious background as a composer, arranger, and music producer has gained him award accolades, a sign-on to the notable U.S. jazz label, Blue Note, and academic growth that propels his style of improvisation further into the musical portals of African spirituality. See the 38 minute conversation recording below.

In the backdrop of colonialism and slavery, with vestiges still existing today, Makhathini journeys into African cosmology to uncover that Spirit of Ntu which he draws from his immediate Zulu culture. In the context of the riots and killings recently in South Africa, the notion of burning fires which appears as a code for reacting against injustices from apartheid days, still continues in the society. *"In my previous album (**Letters from the Underworld**), this regular burning was presented in the track 'Umlotha' (ashes) as a query about what is left from the post-colonial period. The ashes represent the things we refuse to erase from our memory."*

Regarding the recent burnings and looting in parts of South Africa, travel by members of the Standard Bank Youth Band to East London for practice was greatly disrupted. *"So I talked to them about what sounds would come out of burning fires. I realized that we need to actually go into those fires to elicit the appropriate sounds they make! And to find the voice that speaks through these fires."*

To Makhathini, the post-colonial South Africa is an illusion, anyway. *"We need to question what it means to live in a post-colonial Africa. The fires are symptomatic of people's tiredness, people being promised post-1994 free education, free health care, housing... without these promises being fulfilled."*

We query: Why has humanity lost its sensitivity to people's anger and frustrations?

One answer: *"Ntu is about a restoration, about what vibration can be in our sound that seeks to restore our humanness."*

It's like music therapy, addressed towards mental health issues and strong anxieties. There's confused social and political messaging from youth who are desperate. The trick is: How does Ntu deal with the therapeutic aspects? How does the sound become therapeutic?

"Everything in the universe operates under some sort of logic or equation. Ntu is found in 4 areas of human endeavor: the people – the environment – in time and space – and in aesthetics, like music. These four conventions of Ntu represent the energy, that vital force that connects everything in the sound. A ritual is always toward a unifying energy. For me, it's how the composer or sound producer deliberately aligns this vibration of Ntu which people can experience. Find a way of harnessing this sound in the way we channel our prayers."

The sound. Thinking of jazz as an improvisational format, how would this sound, which acts as a vibration as well as a pleasant melody or rhythm, enter the body and change the listener's mood, for instance? Think of First Peoples who combine sound with dance, rhythm.

“Ntu is a way of determining the essence of all things. So at the core of any composition or any manifestation are the same elements. Sounds and form are driven by a similar vibration. Bodies are listening for that tuning into center, for that vibration. Some sounds help us learn and know our essence. The intention in the sound is for people to go deeper within themselves, to a memory of our own essence. Sound assists this process because sound is the closest to the compositional vibration of any material. Take liquid. There are many experiments on how sound affects the movement or behavior of water. Those sounds are created from intention, and if musicians spend time seeking this clarity, then we end up living in this frequency of Ntu. Positive intention would have positive effects, so our relationship with intentionality is important.”

So take traditional forms of music, specifically the role of chants and chanting. When you're trying to create vibration, is chant entering into your Ntu vocabulary?

“Absolutely. Sounds are reaching this point of resonance, of agreement. If you go to a traditional healer, particularly in the Zulu tradition, when they are divining, they keep chanting. If you are seeking help, you chant back in surrendering. So healing is that moment when we allow ourselves to tap into this vortex of energy that the musicians create. Chanting is beautiful – there's a sense in which the planet chants, and everything around us is in a constant chant. It's like with the chakras of the body – certain vibrations open up these energy points. Certain sounds trigger these chakras.”

Thinking practically, what about this disconnect young people are experiencing globally? There's a cultural disconnect. How do you restore his or her membership, how do you restore his or her essence, by this creative force called 'Ntu'? How does that work?

“We forget. When we were kids, we might act wrongly, and are reminded of this all the time. This essence of Ntu is part of the coding we all have – we define it in different ways, but might call it 'conscience'. We say in Zulu, “I am because of the others.” At my University, a student is killed. Unbelievably negative things are happening around us. Why? Because we have forgotten our communal essence of being. Our (younger) generation is forgetting our core values; there's a forgetfulness amongst us, at different levels – society, community, family levels.”

Perhaps because of a lack of compassion in our lives? A lack of harmony among us?

“Harmony is built into our being. We can see beauty, yet nature can be aggressive. We need to remember how to exercise compassion, forgiveness, and love. That's our pure state. Rituals were for alignment when we go off-tune, which is why our ancestors set up all these rituals that were aimed at bringing harmony back to ourselves, environment, and communities. And sound can take us to that place of memory, to surrender, or re-member, and help us tune in to vibrational states that heal.”

All Jazz Radio flashed: Since we live in a digital age, your work might migrate to developing a 'Ntu' app for cellphones, so that we can tune in to good vibrations (laughter). So that youth could be mesmerized and absorbed by these sounds and vibrations!

“I've been thinking about this technology and what it means to show up on these digital platforms as a sangoma, or healer, and wait for people to come to me. We need to reimagine the field as well. There's a sense that we (healers) need to speak the current language.”

Regarding his concert coming up over the weekend, Makhathini was asked to speak about what he would like to accomplish, and about choosing his fellow musicians from Cape Town for the band. *“It's always tough to select the music, but 80% will be taken from my upcoming album, **In the Spirit of Ntu**. It's a new music, but some songs will come from my previous albums, like **Listening to the***

Ground and Letters from the UnderWorld, since I see the continuum of songs and stories that culminate into my current work. Also, I'm playing with these young musicians, some at UCT school of music, with whom I've recorded. Mine is one long project, don't you think?"

Indeed, yes. The album, ***Listening to the Ground***, was a pioneering work in 2015 that has maintained a continuum of that same spiritual theme in his music. But in terms of reaching the listener, some of his music is highly improvisational, and may not contain 'nice melodies'. Some of it is discordant. *"But that's fine. It doesn't have to be hairy fairy nice music. That's why I move between all of these things with a sense of wholeness, while tapping into all of these frequencies that are available to us. While there are songs I like that are coming from ancient times, I see them as codes which the ancestors wanted us to use to align with the cosmology. "*

Maybe we need to talk about the 'Ntu Swing'..... (laughter)

For the future, Makhathini plans to tour the European Shenghen countries next month, and tour in New York and USA, playing the same concert about Ntu in those places. No doubt, the Ntu 'swing' will predominate and become another important signature in South African jazz!

Nduduzo Makhathini Rituals radiate spiritual sonic adventures: a weekend at Glenelly Wine Estate
(March 2022)

Jazz pianist and prophetic word artist, Nduduzo Makhathini, brings a spiritual sonic adventure that resounds within nature's endowed hills of Glenelly Estate Wine Cellar in Stellenbosch this weekend (March 11-13, 2022). The occasion at 'Jazz and Vines' presents Makhathini's themes of "**Singing as a way of Being in the World**", the title of his three offerings, blessed by nature's fruits of the vineyards. A philosopher and healer, now on the U.S. jazz label, Blue Note, Makhathini delves into African cosmology to uncover that healing Spirit of Ntu which he draws from his immediate Zulu culture. He would like others to benefit from this, too.

To support his musical lineup is a stellar band of notables: Young Robin Fassie Kock on trumpet and flugelhorn, Ariel Zamonsky on double bass, the creative whisks of drummer Ayanda Sikade, and the equally moving Gontse Makhene on percussion.

Makhathini follows upon his latest albums, and talks about what a post-colonial South Africa looks like, and speaks of the continuing burning fires leaving ashes: *"The fires are symptomatic of people's tiredness, people being promised post-1994 free education, free health care, housing... without these promises being fulfilled."*

His thesis: Much healing is needed. One remedy is to sing rituals that evoke African spiritual connections. Hence, a three-part series of sonic rituals, one for each evening this weekend. *"The symbolism of these rituals will be anchored on the trinity that governs an African worldview. We have been told from the wise ones that an African world is made up of the living, living-dead (ancestors) and the ones-not-yet-born as being in a constant counterpoint,"* he explains. *"These rituals are meant to connect people with the spiritual world and the environment we live in."*

Makhathini's concerts on each night consisted of three choreographed presentations:

Concert 1 on Friday evening deals with **Preparation** which explores 'ukuphahla' when a traditional healer is preparing to accept a calling to heal others. The symbolic colour for this concert is red, a symbol of light, and features singer **Thandiswa Mazwai**. *"This performance will explore the language of the spirits there by inviting through ukuphahla to guide us on a journey ahead,"* explains Makhathini.

Concert 2 on Saturday evening deals with **Elsewhere** meant to take the audience on a journey towards the unknown where healing resides, and where the healer finds his/her training. The artistry of singer **Asanda Msaki Myana** expects to deepen this auditory and spiritual journey with the colour green symbolising spiritual growth.

Concert 3 on Sunday afternoon entitled **The Return**, with Makhathini's wife and singer, **Omagugu Makhathini**, *"captures a celebratory spirit and new knowledge of self,"* explains Makhathini. The symbolic colour is white, for purity.

All three singers have commendable accolades behind their artistry.

Thandiswa Mazwai has a long, illustrative performance history ranging from a leading kwaito band, Bongo Maffin, to Afro-pop, to world music and jazz, with two Sama Awards for Best Female Artist and Best DVD (2010), **Best of the Forgotten Free**. She performed at the FIFA 2010 World Cup Opening Ceremony, and at a host of world festivals mixing with such genres as her traditional Xhosa

rhythms, reggae, mbaqanga, funk, and jazz. Born a soul rebel during the youth uprisings of 1976, Mazwai doesn't hide her political activism in her music. She has toured worldwide, picking up themes of liberation from Cuba, West Africa, Black America, and the Congo.

Originally from East London, **Asanda Msaki Myana** combines soulful folk with symphonic movements, Xhosa lyrics, and African poly-rhythms. Her debut album, **Zaneliza: How the Water Moves**, talks about the wave-like rhythms between loss and hope, and was co-produced by Makhathini under her own label, One Shushu Day Artistry, in 2016. Her work in visual design has also added interesting artistic highlights to her compositions and performances, often with stunning costume designs and sculptures. In January 2022, Msaki unveiled her 12-piece exhibition at the Nirox Sculpture Park in Krugersdorp, Gauteng, where she has been artist in residency. In her soon to be released sophomore double album, **Platinumb Heart**, Msaki has produced a sonic and visual exhibition that speaks to themes of protest and love which she threads through this album.

The imaginative **Omagugu Makhathini**, spirit side kick to husband Nduduzo, will end the weekend series on Sunday, no doubt with an energetic, yet soulful singing ritual of joy. Voice coach and choir conductor, singer/songwriter Omagugu has experienced a wealth of exposure with both domestic musicians including national bands and specific jazz groups as well as tours overseas to USA, Europe, and a world jazz cruise. She released her debut album, **Uthingo LweNkosazana**, in 2018, and hopes to release her next album this year. Her contributions are befitting to end what should be a highly inspirational connection with Spirit and Nature as singing becomes a therapeutic way to live, and **Be**, in this world.

As Makhathini explores the depth of Being, the spirit of Ntu arises as a musical therapy.

"As an artist I have argued that my artistic practice enunciates from a cosmological standpoint. In other words, the articulation of my sound is a result of deep mediations and engagements with the worldview described above. Ultimately, the music I will be presenting seeks resonance with the greater ancestral paradigms, spirit worlds, the environment, and all living things."

Those attending one or all concerts at the beautiful Glenelly Wine Estate will have experienced an upliftment and sense of harmony in one's soul from the sounds of this musical Healer with his very capable musicians and singers.

Singer Maya Spector Knows the Honey and the Heartache: A CD Review (12 May 2020)

Need soothing sounds during a Lockdown walk by the sea? Or a lullaby during visual contemplation on a red apple? Maybe you're considering distancing (and not socially this time) from a relationship that hurts. Or just turning off all radios and TVs and listening to your soul sing through someone else's pulses. ***Honey & Heartache*** just might be for you.

This debut album by Capetownian singer and song-writer, Maya Spector, will resurrect memories of a poignant experience you once had with someone, or just remind you about the quirky randomness of life.

Spector voices experience with life's challenges, having grown up with rich international opportunities for wide travels and country residences, thanks to her American diplomat father and musically endowed Capetownian mother. Spector mingles Jazz with Soul, if such labels can be adequately justified, and tells her stories, sometimes intimately, about loves and painful separations. Her earlier hit single, 'Eyes for You', made waves among fans, hinting at more heart-throbbing songs to come on this album.

And heart-felt they are, thanks to Spector's glassy clear vocals and careful pitch that doesn't pierce, but rather convinces one that her stories are true. Hers is a pleasant duo of engaging melody with emotive lyrics that feel, search for, and exude pain and resolve, all carefully controlled by sometimes happy, sometimes sassy, sometimes bluesy inflections in her voicings.

Her official video entices. Like the album, it pulls you into her light-heartedness with a mellow swing and then moves into darker passages as her voice makes melancholic pitches, straining to hold back tears. As the album reaches its middle with 'Anchors Away', she queries: Do I stay or go? Am I losing love and drifting? What is the sky saying? I'm floating. Then, a 'Bittersweet' goodbye. One hears trumpeter, Tumi Pheko, wail in the breakup. The album ends with a formidable vocalizing of the popular South African lullaby, 'Thula Baba', based on the children's story, 'Goodnight Moon', which seems to resolve Spector's quest for who she is.

Band members are well known session artists from Cape Town's music arena. Graham Ward (worked with Paul McCartney, Tom Jones, and Ray Charles, among others) on drums and percussion proudly did the digital mixing through his Wardwide Music. The young pianist Nobuhle Ashanti and versatile bassist/pianist Nick Williams take turns at keyboard, with Williams mostly on bass. The rare appearance of master teacher and Cape guitarist, Alvin Dyer*, is welcomed, although not obvious on the songs as Spector and her own backup vocals carry this album's weight.

As a global citizen, Spector has also performed in musical theatre, with notable performances in 'Langarm', 'Rent!', 'The Silence of the Music', 'The Man of La Mancha', 'Jimbo' and 'My Fair Lady'. Her lyricist talents certainly developed there, as did her exposure to other political and cultural societies in Asia, the United States, and in South Africa.

Her catchy, sing-along tunes will linger on after a seaside walk. Tune up to her album on the various digital music platforms. You won't regret one second of sound!

*Alvin Dyers passed away in 2024.

Jazz Pianist Blake Hellaby blazes into “New Beginnings”: An Interview and CD Review (8 December 2016)

A relaxed Leigh-Ann met me for the first time as she and her husband, Blake, finished their lunch at La Vie Restaurant on Beach Road in Sea Point, Cape Town. I had heard her for the first time at their ***New Beginnings*** CD launch at the Nassau (Groot Schuur High School), as she opened their set with two mellow Christian songs which have inspired both of them in their personal and musical journeys.

In 2013, Blake was selected to be part of the Standard Bank National Youth Band, The Standard Bank Schools’ Big Band, as well as The Miagi Youth Orchestra. He has performed at The Oslo Jazz Festival, The Cape Town International Jazz Festival, the Johannesburg Joy of Jazz Festival, The Grahamstown Jazz Festival, The Young Euro Classic Festival in Berlin, and at the Titties Baai Jazz on The Rocks Festival. He has also toured Burgundy, France with The Delft Big Band.

I spoke with Blake and Leigh Ann about their musical journeys, life together, and what makes them tick.

CM: What do you mean by ‘New Beginnings’? You had mentioned at your concert that your songs were inspired after experiencing some travails of life before your first son was born.

BH: Yeah, I was in a bit of a personal mess in my late teens that caused me to suspend my University studies in music for about 2 years. Family problems, my own smoking and drinking bouts, a child – all these made me wake up and find a path out of a little hell I had created. I wasn’t a Christian at that time, but meeting and marrying Leigh-Ann helped me to see a way towards a higher goal, and find God as my salvation. I started going to her church, and became involved in their musical program. Our first son two years ago struck a ‘new beginning’ for me, and us.

CM: Then you continued with University?

BH: I continued with jazz studies as that’s the type of music I really wanted to pursue, instead of classical which is what I grew up with. I was influenced by so many South African musicians who were making their way with their craft, like Kyle Shephard, whose own spirituality drew me inward to find my own voice. I attended his concerts at Grahamstown a few years ago and was just blown away with how he handled his piano. He is someone who shows great integrity in his music, and discipline. Likewise, I listened a lot to the late Moses Molelekwa who, like the late, great Mbeki Mseleku, died before his time and left such a wealth of creativity behind.

CM: What other musicians have influenced you?

BH: Kenny Werner, saxman Michael Brecker, Keith Jarrett – these all have a very spiritual bent to their playing and thinking.

CM: I often ask to what extent a musician wishes to engage with social activism, at different levels, depending on one’s time and concern about certain issues. Do you have a message in your music about current affairs or social/political issues about which you would like to make a statement?

BH: I try to read a lot, and particularly like my fellow jazz saxman, Buddy Wells, who writes his own blog about economic matters. I am very concerned about ethnic and racial inequalities in this country, as someone who has mixed ethnicity – my father being English and my mother being a local ‘coloured’.

CM: How does this affect you?

BH: I’m curious how other people look at me – am I ‘white’ or a ‘coloured’? Many think I’m white, yet my music is made up of all sorts of South African and African influences and rhythms. I really hate

racism and will work to get rid of it where possible. It has no room in one's spiritual development. My music seeks to attract all peoples, regardless of their backgrounds.

CM: How do you plan to promote yourself?

BH: I need a manager now. I simply can't practice and compose and focus on my art while trying to promote myself in the business. Earlier, I had released an album under a U.S. label, and some songs became quite popular here, and were played on the radio. They were more pop songs. But that album isn't available in this country now.

CM: I wonder if you could develop some Christmas songs that pertain more to South African realities.

BH: We were just talking about that! Yes, there is a need for more indigenous Christmas songs that don't talk about snow and reindeers and Santa Claus! I agree, we should work on that.

NEW BEGINNINGS: CD REVIEW

Blake's CD launch of **New Beginnings** convincingly displayed his own and his band's talents when they performed at the Nassau on Sunday, November 27. One song not on his album was a tribute to the late piano maestro, Mbeki Mseleku's "Monwabisi". This was lovingly presented with its funky groove and listenable drum and bass duet. However, along the way during the well-executed offerings, the sound system's bass amplification produced irritating loud hums which threw off concentration. This is surprising for the Nassau, known as a comfortable listening venue, to make these mistakes.

But the CD itself contains jewels of sound, starting off with reference to his family background in 'The First Hellabies in Africa'. A familiar few bars of Abdullah Ibrahim's famous 'Mannenberg' sets the scene for England-comes-to-the-Cape where his British father fell in love with a 'coloured' girl. The song contains memories and rhythmic changes to connote ethnic realities, flowing between bebop to ghoema, all woven with a bit of salsa. Nice piece. 'Me' has again a salsa feel with horn duets and a subtle piano improv, again in the minor key. Hellaby displays prowess with chord structures as he unrolls his personal statement. One hears some sadness, wandering (by the sax), different rhythms, many conversations. A delectable piece.

Hellaby appropriately honours fellow jazz spirit, pianist Kyle Shepherd, with whom band members grew up during their respective Cape schooling days and professional boost into the music world. 'For Shepherd' is just that, a big 'thank-you' for mentoring sounds. Several songs remind us that God helps fulfil: 'He Who Loves Us' is a clear message of what spiritually rules us. It's in a minor key which one can associate with the interior, hidden, even dark, elements of our soul. A bass solo melodically overrides a piano staccato. Likewise, 'Thank You For Listening' has a slow funky gospel-ish groove with lovely, elevating trumpet, guitar, and sax solos. This is a jewel of a song. 'Take Me To Church' also suggests how to turn one's life around through a spiritual purpose driving the process. This happened to Hellaby so he knows.

'All That Surrounds Me' starts with human activity sounds and moves into a delightful arrangement of guitar tinkling around piano phrases. Drums keep pace nicely with Hellaby's various changing themes. 'Noonku' is a restful lullaby with synthesizer, written for youngest son, Daniel, who reminded his family that 'new beginnings' meant chasing renewed possibilities. One can hear little Daniel's advice.

This album is a gem that needs a following. It's copyrighted by Under the Influence.
www.blakehellaby.com

THE BAND:

Marco Maritz | Trumpet & Flugel Horn

Zeke Le Grange | Tenor Saxophone

Bradley Prince | Electric Guitar

Sean Sanby | Double and Electric Bass

Lumanyano Mzi | Drums

Blake Hellaby | Piano, Electric Piano, Organ and Synthesizers

Pianist Blake Hellaby doesn't want to cheat the listener with long solos: His #Not Jazz album (2020)

(4 February 2020)

"I play what I feel, not like with formal jazz," warns pianist Blake Hellaby, as he explains to his album launch audience which packed Cape Town's Waterfront Radisson Red hotel concert room. Just released album, **# Not Jazz**, explores its title's irony about asking listeners to just chill out: *"Zone out and chill; just allow the groove of the music to sway you!"* We did this night, as we explored what is becoming a 'Hellaby sound' of note.

Composer, writer, and producer from Cape Town, Hellaby has diligently navigated through domestic musical idioms with South African bands (Standard Bank Schools Big Band), musicals (*King Kong: A Jazz Opera*), and festivals (National Arts Youth Jazz Festival), and to international sites (Oslo Jazz Festival, Berlin's Young Euro Classic Festival). During his youth, playing in church and at community events, he sometimes faced a criticism from schoolmates of playing what they considered less serious soft, 'smooth' jazz. His live gig brought smiles and laughter at this reference; yet, the band's execution of Hellaby's version of 'jazz' awakened listeners to his skillful use of hard core funk, be-bop, grungy blues (thanks to Michael Bester's guitar solos), and rock, all loosely packaged in a soulful improvisational style which Hellaby is making his own. His album, he notes, is *"an attempt to find the fun and lighter side of jazz and instrumental music."*

And that's the truth – Songs played live or digitally take the listener on Hellaby's musical journey. The digital album is mostly instrumental, whereas his live performance on Thursday, 30 January, contained vocals, including his singing wife, Leigh-Ann, with whom he cut his debut album in 2016, **New Beginnings**, and vocalist Jesse Julies. *"I wanted to add that contemporary element, to have the lyrics resonate with the pop music."*

In fact, Hellaby cut two digital albums – one instrumental, one with lyrics – and he intentionally mixed the two approaches during the live concert to give variation to what pop-jazz can sound like. Often, album song productions do not match live performances which unearth those sonic vibrations in one's seat, live concerts risking an overabundance of amplified sound compared to the soft and easy-listening reverberations in a digital album. A sound engineer is challenged if Hellaby wants that easy, chill-out, yet funky sound at a live gig. Again, drums can overpower. Just a reminder.

The story line to the album reveals Hellaby's playfulness: *"A bunch of guys get together from Thursday to Sunday. The songs tease out their late night experiences and move into a chill on Sunday afternoon."*

This is a very listenable album producing a mindful, relaxing chill, particularly suitable for go-slow traffic jams. All the band members stand out: saxophonist Zeke Le Grange, currently studying in USA, shines with consistent clarity of runs and expression, particularly in "S.Y.B. (Shake Your Booty)" as does Ryan Truter's guitar solo. Michael Bester's bluesy guitar provides tone, feeling, and sense of purpose as he slides from bop to blues to slow rock. Listen to his twanging 'Call-In' gospel blues. Stephen De Souza's bass guitar and Lumanyano Mzi's drums keep the various rhythms steady with mellow, yet strong supports.

The advantages of digital mixing, as heard on Hellaby's various keyboards in "Come Over" with organ, piano, and synth improvisations, is that percussion can be controlled. Mzi's energetic drumming eloquently exhibits his enthusiasm in live performances, but becomes pleasantly subdued

in the album, while driving the beats. In this, the album excels for its effective balancing of musicians' techniques and styles to produce even outputs of melody and message.

Hellaby's mixing of piano, keyboard, and synthesizer offers sly, whimsical, and bouncy sound journeys, particularly in 'Trippy' and 'Sunday Chillin'. He starts and ends the album with pleasantly punchy but brief groovy solos, stating his storyline honestly and purposefully. Songs in between speak of emotional conflicts, realisations, and maybe, better clarity, as after a long weekend party. 'Jazz' is a chill, a soulful experience that should relax our weary selves in this age of conflicting noise and message so that we can live and love a bit better.

Hopefully, the listener will have been changed a bit.

CM: Let's hear more about the 'Hellaby Sound' journey... Explain your sound. You've got synths and piano overlays... And much more.

BH: All piano sounds were coming from my computer. Then I played a piano on top of the computer sounds... I had connected both keyboards via MIDI into my computer, and assigned them to a patch, so that I could control from my laptop. I have a 500 GIG library of samples patches of sounds on my external hard drive which can give a much better sound than what my keyboards can give. For this live gig project, I wanted to set a tone standard of the sounds I wanted. It's the smaller things that make a big difference. So I had a synthesizer, Rhodes, organ – all coming from my laptop. It was a practice in coordination!

CM: So you seem to be benefiting from the technology out there while adding your own techniques.

BH: It's not that I'm trying to do something new, but no one is doing it in South Africa, outside of the pop music. There's lots of this in pop music in Johannesburg, particularly among the pianists. These musicians are so good at it, they study sound design, and make a lot of money, too. Look at guitarists – they spend so much money on pedals and this and that to get the right sound – but I'm simply inventing, just adding backtracks onto the sound.

CM: It's an interesting concept, about #Not Jazz.

BH: The Title '#Not Jazz' doesn't connote a negativity, but a search for a different sound. Like Reza [Khota] is looking for a physical sound on his guitar. For me, it's preparing backtracks that give that live feeling, along with real bass and drums. A live performance without those backtracks is empty. If you go see Beyoncé perform, it's insane – her performance is filled with backtracks...and the fans go wild! I'm trying to get that overall experience of sound along with the visuals on the big screen.

CM: Some of your songs talk about your childhood and youth growing up with music... A picture of you in your childhood projected on the screen would have been interesting...

BH: I wanted to do this, but ran out of time. I first wanted to make sure my backtracks worked, and the band worked, and that I got the right sound...for the live performance. That took a lot of tweaking.

CM: 'Jazz' is a funny term. It conjures up all sorts of ideas and opinions, depending on one's ethnic and locational background. What aspects of contemporary 'jazz' were you trying to avoid?

BH: Three things: First, elongated solos: Do I really want to listen to long drawn out solos after melodic band presentations in a song? A 12 minute solo? Gosh, my drive in town is only 15 minutes! My listening hours are usually when I'm driving, or late at night when everyone has retired for the night. You take someone like Bob James who, on one album, his band's solos are usually only 16 bars, but the song might take up to 8 minutes. His arrangements are beautiful. I just didn't want my solos to wander off into something else...like over a 12 minute period. Just too long!

*The second thing I wanted to avoid was...the way I designed the album was to leave you wanting more. Like a bait. Some songs are just introductions and short, so they can be expanded upon in a live concert. Then the third thing was what I learned from Bruno Mars' album, **24K Magic**, which blew me away. It just caught me, it was so cleverly done, and musically capturing. But there were no solos! I don't watch his videos, but just listen. He's so alive, his band is like a bunch of Berklee College students! They're super talented and arrange the songs. It hit me there were no solos in his album. With jazz, we do the intros to the song, then break up into solos. I didn't want to do that!! I didn't want to cheat the listener from hearing the whole band, with short solos, and a unity of sound. I felt that the way we are trained as jazz musicians, we get away with reducing a song to a bunch of solos. This is cheating!*

CM: So you think there's too much solo improv...

BH: It's not the solo per se, but I wanted to put together short snippets like Bob James does. The really good producers, the guys that dive into mixing the albums in pop music, the huge amount of effort they put into this... So I'm respecting this craft in a completely new way. This has challenged me to arrange songs that bring out a unified band, and not rely on long solos.

CM: I notice that your songs bring out the talents of each musician.

BH: That's why I wrote everything down that I wanted the musicians to play, so that it would allow for each musician to do short solos.

CM: In telling your story on the album, why did you order the songs as you did?

BH: It's a story from a Thursday to a Sunday, with a group of friends starting off grooving on a Thursday with 'Retro-duction', which is an old-school R&B sound. Then I moved into 'Trippy' which goes from hard core to smooth jazz. I was influenced by one of my favourite songs, 'Tonight is the Night' because it has that old-school happy beat. The idea is that on the weekend, the guys have too many drinks and then start to mellow out. Then 'High Road' is like moments of change during the night's activities, then a wake up to 'Shake Your Booty' which is also old-school that leads into 'Funk Your Life', again an awakening. The break comes with '2-1' and 'Hodge' which gives a transition into Sunday to just chill. 'Hodge' is the official change of mood and is a dedication to bassist Derrick Hodge.

CM: Why Hodge?

*BH: I had been transcribing songs to include backtracks for a friend musician, Lwanda Godwana. I had never done anything this hard before. Then I took a look at Hodge's **Dances with Ancestors** album and song on youtube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yOC8ToQJyVw>) which used jazz improvisations that didn't sound like jazz. There was so much overlaying – double bass, electric bass, and a sub bass, with an overlaying of drums. This was so welcome to hear. I thought, wow, this is what jazz could be. It was a confirmation of the journey I was about to embark on. So I took this technique using a guitar for ambient sounds, then bass pedals adding more ambient sound, and the drums were recorded once. The drums had about 12 effects creating chords and streams coming in and out.*

So that transcription started me to do this more and more, not asking what chords were the musicians playing, but what were they doing? Trying to rebuild synthesizers. That's what I tried to do in my own song "Hodge" with layers – it's the longest song on the album and the most jazzy track.

CM: So back to the album story...'Searching, Found, Forgetting' is in the middle. What was that all about?

BH: That was written as part of a Suite which is a classical, gospel Suite not yet produced. This particular song came out as a pop song as I was writing. I was feeling poetic at the time. It was

dedicated to people who craft, yet are not accepting who they are. We search and think we've found what we want. Then we keep searching, forgetting what it is that we are searching for! And this cycle of searching continues, and we still forget what we learnt.

That's why there are overlapping melodies in the song. Then songs '1-2' and 'Hodge' provide a break. That moment goes and we lead into 'Come Over' which means come over to the house, like on a Sunday, and let's party with some smooth grooves. That's where the album ends with 'Sunday Chillin'. You know, have some jazz on in the background, and that's the story. That's it!

CM: So, what's next in your projects? How are you going to market your 'Hellaby sound'?

BH: There's another digital album with more pop lyrics which we did simultaneously. People can buy these on Apple Music, etc. We are doing videos for marketing to create awareness, but not to make money, yet. One video is for a pop song; another video is for a jazz song. I feel the albums need to create awareness on as many platforms as possible, first, so that listeners are ready for the live gigs. This instrumental album is on line to buy, but I probably won't print the CD until if we travel and need CDs for marketing. If we can get the videos out on mass media, TV, etc., they will create the awareness we need. <https://www.facebook.com/gregory.truter.9/videos/471048573576848/>

CM: Any teaching? Further studies in the future?

BH: I love teaching, and had one class at UCT last year. I prefer the University level as I can talk to my level. I want to do my Masters and eventually a doctorate so I can lecture. I don't want to do this for the paper, but to learn more, to push myself more.

CM: What would you study? Who are your musical 'gurus'?

*BH: I want to study jazz piano, particularly George Duke, Kenny Kirkland, and Bob James. Each of them have something I want. Kirkland has that cool, smooth groove, and James is such a cool, calm piano player. I get caught up with my piano playing too much sometimes and rumble on! James plays softly, with so few notes. My favourite pianist here in South Africa has been Bheki Mseleku who's like an African Joe Sample to me. I've only listened to his album, **Coming Home**. Then there's Moses Molelekwa.....*

UKZN Jazz Pianist Neil Gonsalves Celebrates Authenticity in Blessings and Blues (2021) (15 April 2021)

Style and melody characterize jazz pianist Neil Gonsalves' recent album, ***Blessings and Blues***, which journeys through memorable soundscapes and landscapes in his native South Africa and elsewhere. His temperament was celebratory upon turning 50 years in 2019 with a determination to cast compositions in a joyful and authentic light.

Then the COVID pandemic hit! Rightfully, this sensitive composer tweaked songs in order to counteract the negativities emerging from that year-long+ viral safari. For instance, he overlaid some songs with a synthesizer meant to create a mood, perhaps an upliftment from the bluesy sounds. Here is where Gonsalves meets his authenticity. As he reveals on his website, it's time to *recenter, refocus, rejuvenate, repent, remember* and *return to ourselves*. For Gonsalves, the album improvises a journey within. It's time to *reconnect* in a changing world.

Stylistically, the songs begin with phrases which return back to close the song. Look at a row of boxes; they have a similar form and shape and contain and hold their contents. But once you open a box and rummage inside, all sorts of items pop out with life's textures, colours, shapes, impressionistic whims, free flowing beats, and judgmental sounds. Close the box up and it returns to its foundational purpose – to contain and preserve. Similarly, ***Blessings and Blues*** takes the listener inside multi-textured melodies and rhythms ranging from a bit of hymnal, to blues, to bebop improvisation, to African Cape goema, to some gyrating hop, and some Zulu cadences.

Gonsalves doesn't skimp on feeling; his left hand likes some heavy chordal emphasis to energize his versatile trio of double bass and drums that navigate with their own peculiar depth. He allows them, former KZN University students, this wonderful space to explore: Mozambiquan double bassist Ildo Nandja, presently studying in The Netherlands, brings surprises with his solo fingering and bowing, creating the right moods. Durban-based drummer Riley Giandhari adds a gelling synchronicity through conversations with piano and bass that add meaning. Together, the ensemble depict how blessings received are founded on blues experienced.

The opening piece, 'The Calling', sets up the stylistic themes of the album. It is hymnal, but not typically, juxtaposing free drumming, and then strange moody guitar sounds "*overlaying things from my different experiences*", and ending with traditional African ululating expressions. Gonsalves says, "*The hymn aspect of this song is basically a set up for the second piece.*" Gonsalves' keyboard creates a quieter, meditative mood in 'Let's Do It Again'. Such songs activate the listeners' memories of some fondness, joy, or shadow of past uncertainties.

The song that seems to stand out from what social platform listeners have stated – you know, that melody that vibrates in the head for days – is 'Southern Migration'. The remarkable haunting melody jumps around in that box, being repeated, while the bass soothingly rocks back and forth with the theme, not afraid to jump into solo flights with glee. To Gonsalves, the prominence of today's human migrations elicits universal concern and hopes for soft landings.

Another piece that rings in the head for its bounciness is 'African Time'. Here, Nandja skilfully bows his double bass which opens the song followed by a melodic, energetic piano with, again, a heavy chordal lower register. Once in, an abrupt change of pace might indicate some confusion and restlessness. Then back to the root theme. The haunting melody reminds the listener of that soundtrack theme in the 1993 Academy Award film, **The Piano**.

Another example of the piano's heavy bass is in 'The Breadmaker's Blues' with a frantic attitude of drums complimented by the bowed bass which sustains the main sound energy. Gonsalves had visited a bread maker with his brother outside of London. Is there trepidation that the dough won't rise well, as the piano fingers out a ditty about the chemical performance, followed by the bowed bass which seems to give instructions to correct the situation?

As the album is wrapped in textures, the whispering drum refrains in the opening song, 'The Calling' are repeated, closing the album as the last song, 'Qantani' ends. This clever resolve of story perhaps indicates new beginnings? This beautiful composition was inspired by watching scenery changes in the Maluti mountains as hikers and trekkers in the Golden Gate National Park of the northern Drakensberg range absorb these natural beauties.

This and his previous releases are available on Bandcamp and other digital platforms.

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I wanted to dig a bit deeper into what Lecturer Gonsalves thought about where South African jazz is going, how it is being taught, and indigenizing jazz.

CM: Quo vadis? Where is the South African jazz sound going?

NG: *There's more focus being given on uncovering and developing indigenous sounds, thanks to musicians like Nduduzo Makhathini, who has become a flag bearer for this growing platform and trust that is very rooted within South African culture and knowledge systems. His working group is building. Followers may not be so ethnocentric but they portray themselves as being on this side of the 'Black Atlantic', around Black Lives Matter issues. The Orbit jazz club in Johannesburg was a home for this, to offer a sense of how the South African jazz styles were growing, with that spiritual aspect of endeavor.*

CM: I'm trying to understand how to describe, at least in English, this 'indigenous' sound and feeling in our jazz. One can listen to 'indigenous music in jazz' people, like Sibho Mashiloane, Nduduzo Makhathini, Hilton Schilder in the Cape, Blake Hellaby, etc. and the younger musicians from UCT combining hip hop and other modalities. Are they being properly heard?

NG: *My fear is that some of these things can become marginalized. For instance, Nduduzo has had a lot of exposure to this music and knows how this game is played, and how to engage social media. And other South African jazz sounds out there are not any less credible or worthy. In terms of musicianship, craft, or authenticity, there's an amazingly diverse kind of musician that should be getting more press and media coverage, but they're not.*

CM: Agreed. Given this plethora of sounds and ethnicities, when you're teaching at tertiary level, how do you decide what to teach as jazz? What does the curriculum look like?

NG: *My focus tends to be on craft, to get a student from point A to point B. Students come with little formal background, from a pentecostal church background, and already have a sense of the blues feel, have a great ear for music and natural feel for music. This is a typical South African trait, being rooted in this pentecostal environment, whereas other continental Africans come from more traditional musical backgrounds.*

Decolonizing South African Jazz

CM: So, this leads to the 'decolonizing' of our jazz curriculum as musicians, like what Nduduzo and others are trying to do in an indigenizing way. True, you have the church-oriented people carrying a

culture of music. Many of our hymns come from Western hymns, like organ music. How does this link with the art of messaging, of indigenizing?

NG: As a musician, I'm not looking to judge these aspects that link up the sounds or have a political perspective. What I love about jazz is that it expresses freedom, and for me, can help deal with issues of resistance. I grew up Catholic so the religious hymnal kinds of songs are a bit rigidly structured, in musical terms, but I still love hymns which are part of my music making. So in my freedom, I can use a structure to relocate the song, open it up, and infiltrate it with something else. We deal with what we have – a history of colonization. We resist it but we also absorb it. Look at how we have absorbed American TV. We need to work with these colonizations.

This idea of 'decolonization' – I try to make sense of it in my teaching. In my own background I've had lots of different influences, lots of African, Zulu music, Indian music etc. However, recently, teaching practice has changed in that I'm teaching more of my own music, and my repertoire and songs are starting to filter into my students' exam repertoire. My teaching practice and my practice as a musician are not two separate activities.

I teach jazz. For me, jazz is not a way of playing music, per se, but a passing down of its tradition on to young students, in a jazzy sort of way. It's an oral tradition – we learn by listening and watching. It's more authentic for me to pass things on in the first person. Yes, I still teach about Coltrane and the past masters because that's all part of the tradition. But if I'm teaching about myself, then I'm giving my students an experience of getting the information first-hand. This is similar to what Miles, and Coltrane and others did because we all come from the same tradition, and have the same aspirations because we are jazz people. This is tied to decolonization because I am feeling much more confident in my story, having grown up under apartheid, under colonial rule. I was made to feel a second class citizen, not good enough, plus being an introvert. Now, I'm growing much more into myself, not just as a performer, but also as a teacher. This reveals what I mean by decolonial thinking.

CM: I like that. It's a subject that seems to be a heady issue among artists.

NG: What's disturbing, though, about this decolonial thinking is that it puts people off balance. Not that that is a bad thing, but it means you've got to make a move to come back into balance. People can only operate fully, functionally and authentically if they're working out of confidence, and not uncertainty. People want to do the right thing, but they're not sure what the right thing to do is. They just have to find something which is authentic for themselves, and engage with their environment and the people around them.

Lack of Women Representation in Jazz

But for me, the main issue for jazz is not the decolonization issue, but the lack of women in jazz, their lack of representation. You don't see that in Indian classical music, or Western art music or in African traditional music. You see those women artists at international competitions; but when it comes to the jazz category.... It's just full of guys.

In terms of patriarchy in South African culture as an indigenous culture, it's interesting to see those jazz musicians who are rooting their music in the indigenous culture and traditions (which has female participation). But if you look at South African jazz, women are still underrepresented. So, I wonder how musicians are trying to offset this imbalance, finding that male and female temperament?

CM: Yes, that's ironic because there tends to be a balance of female/male students at tertiary level in jazz, but fewer women entering the performance arena after they graduate. If they become teachers, that's great. But doing live performance?

NG: I'm thinking of that typical live jazz scenario of the late night club setup – like a boy's club... In South Africa, we really have to change this situation.

The Pandemic Effects

CM: Regarding the Covid pandemic effects on artists, I'm trying to understand what a viral depression would sound like musically, other than the blues. Is there a certain type of chord, or run, that depicts depression?

*NG: The album was recorded in Dec 2019, so Covid wasn't a consideration when I composed the songs. During Covid, I just added the synthesizer to some parts as I had additional time to do this. I was fortunate to have a paid day job, yet time to work on productions, also. It was actually during this 2020 Covid pause that I recorded another album, **Concert for One**, that reflects my experience with the pandemic.*

*That's a completely improvised album, trying to make sense of this new life – with lockdown, staying at home, staying away from friends, and behaving in this anti-social way. I think we, as musicians, don't think of chords or runs as a direct representation of something you can put into words. So, when I turned 50, **Blessings and Blues** was a celebration of stuff in my life with no Covid.*

CM: Yes, you are sounding celebratory –

NG: The pandemic brings about questioning and a feeling of discomfort. There's also this duality that as we retreat from these blues, other opportunities present themselves more. So I don't think a pandemic album could be completely divorced from some joy or light shining...

CM: What's in the future? Where are you going next, musically?

NG: I've never taken too seriously before about promoting my albums, so I'm spending more time now figuring out how to promote this latest album, how to put it on playlists and use social media. I compose music all the time, on my iPad, so I have lots stored on that. I'll hope to release another album maybe later this year or next...

Pianist Thembelihle Dunjana dreams in debut double album, Intyatyambo (29 January 2021)

When young musicians issue their debut albums onto the fan stage as a double album, they speak with certainty and confidence. How ambitious is that?!

For pianist, vocalist, composer, and teacher Thembelihle Dunjana, her December 2020 released album entitled *Intyatyambo* showcases songs composed and recorded diligently over a 12 month period, but sometimes awkwardly during the COVID pandemic. Her “home” band of fellow colleagues from university days at the University of Cape Town’s College of Music all stuck together in musical solidarity, patient to allow this enthusiastic pianist/vocalist creative space to cast her sonic spell. It’s one of those oxymoronic expressions that the horrible blessings of the viral curse during year 2020 allowed time and [enforced] special lockdown for quiet, methodical song writing, collective revisions with loyal band members, and recordings at various Cape Town studios.

Influenced by kwaito and hip hop, as a complement to her love for the more traditional jazz styles of South Africa’s improvisations and other influencers, such as American pianist McCoy Tyner, her double album seeks this confluence, through vocals and instrumentals. **Album #1** deals with R&B and Soul, expressed through harmonic overlays of her vocals accompanied by her trio of zealots including drummer Tefo Mahola and electric bassist Grant Van Rooyen. **Album #2** resonates with South African instrumental styles of improvisation, with the characteristic “jazz” heard in the 4th and 5th chords in the lower scale register, or what Dunjana calls “trading fourths”.

I preferred **Album #2**, an instrumental album, which showcases Dunjana’s journey with chords, rhythms, and piano runs, all which allow her four band members to express their own wizardry, including two seasoned soloists of note: Tshogofatso Matlou on a lilting alto saxophone and Muneeb Hermans on trumpet.

A wandering bluesy expression in Dunjana’s piano meets a neat and clean concordance with her fellow actors. Her two takes of ‘Ngexesha’ display this along with Mahola’s “talking drum” sizzling with drum rolls which characterize his artistic vigour. In the first take, Hermans’ trumpet leads the tune, with some effective muted overdubbing, whereas in the alternate take which ends the album, Dunjana’s piano runs take over with a sax introduction and more of a “traditional” jazz feel. Either way, Dunjana’s compositional skills display different horn and piano textures, all which thrill drummer Mahola to react accordingly. ‘Emlanjeni’ has a bit of an emotional crescendo affair between piano and drums that drops into a pleasant bebop with melody and some distinct blues sounds. One can tell Mahola and Dunjana have a “thing”, having grown up with tight coordination in reading each other’s soul vibe. This lovely composition of 10 minutes left me understanding better...

There’s a story line to the brief Interlude of ‘I Wonder Where’ with lyrics followed by the longer instrumental Suite which seems to question. It speaks of a freedom. Mahola’s drums chat away and seem to know things. This seems to be his song.

In the trio’s video discussion about making this double album, Mahola admits he tries to include “*that soft, warm 1-4-5 chordal texture*” which, to him, pervades South African music. Van Rooyen likes the simplicity of South African jazz sounds which allows the listener to think about what they’re hearing. One can obviously hear on the albums how both colleagues appreciate working in “Tembe’s classroom” – learning and growing together. Band members concur that in Dunjana’s teaching, mentorship, and performances, she is truly living her dream. This double album certainly confirms just that.

R.I.P. Pianist Andre Petersen: Penny Lane Memorial Haunts Fans with Memories. 12 August 2021

One ironically uplifting outcome from Covid deaths has been the opportunity for fans to get to know their deceased artist better as the Spirit lives on. And the spirit of music lives on, or whatever that dear one managed to 'put out there' in this world of struggles and successes. For jazz and music fans, a few but not insignificant deaths from Covid-related illnesses have added to the continuing series of Lockdowns, all which have hit the music and hospitality industry in monumental ways. But let the music live on as in the recent loss of several favourite artists in the Cape Town arena, namely a local bassist Alistair Andrews and a more internationally exposed pianist, Andre Joseph Petersen. Both musicians were peaking in their career goals, with new albums being recorded and new professional vistas enriching their talents.



Of note was the Penny Lane Memorial for Petersen (1978-2021) held at Cape Town's famous landmark, St. George's Cathedral, on 31 July 2021. The three-hour service can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/PD0v9qzDRU>. All Jazz Radio Internet Radio wishes to honour this beautiful tribute to Petersen, or 'Dre' as he was affectionately known, and carry forward Dre's Spirit to grow his brand of South African jazz to heights still unknown. His planned study and residence in the United States starting in September was, instead, abruptly curtailed with his hospitalisation and passing in July 2021. To add to family woes, Andre's brother, Denzil, had also succumbed to the Covid virus and died a few weeks before Andre's own transition.

A devout Christian, Andre sparked many memories from those who had also walked with him. For most, Andre lived his favourite biblical verse in Romans 8, verse 28 which ran thematically throughout the Memorial: "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose."

The Memorial started with soul singer, Heinrich Franz, and three singers presenting a moving gospel

rendition of 'Life is in Your Hands' and 'Jesus is Right With My Soul'. The sombre piano tones of Mark Fransman, the tenor saxophone reflections of Zeke le Grange, and the soft wispy drums of Clement Benny portrayed the spiritual likeness of musicians who had grown up with or been mentored by Andre. The four singers, led by Franz, further enhanced how gospel and soul styles marked the solemnity of the service, just as Andre would have wanted. The Memorial ended with the band's addition of a sad Jonathan Rubain, a Goema guitarist, who just wanted to burst out loud and play Goema in joy and dance, to lead his mentor and friend to that heavenly home. *"Andre took me overseas for the first time to perform"*, he commented as a favourite psalm was played.

Various pre-recorded YouTube videos were screened, showing how Andre had creatively explored his musicality, migrating faithfully from his early classical music training at the University of Cape Town's College of Music to 'discovering' what was to him a peculiar sound, called 'jazz'. This writer [Carol Martin] met Andre in the late 1990s when he was teaching children music in an after-school program in Athlone. We discussed his interest in perhaps teaching in other youth music programs that were starting to pop up, albeit in very small capacities, in various townships. One in particular had been started by the late jazz pianist, Hotep Idris Galeta, at Turfhall Primary School. Galeta's children were attending this school which was equipped with both music teachers and some instruments. He called the program, 'Turfhall Jazz Music Project' or 'Turfjamp'. When I approached Andre to see if he could join this program, I recall his excitement, but which was punctuated with a bit of humility: *"You know, I'm only now starting to learn more about jazz, and occasionally go to Hotep's house for some tips."* Andre then invited me to one of his classical music recitals at the school he was teaching in, and I became convinced that, indeed, he was very skilled in his classical repertoire. His jazz came later, but with a burst of unstoppable energy as we have seen!

I had always taken delight in watching Andre move his preferences to jazz styles, only now to learn from the Memorial presentation that Andre's father would not accept Andre pursuing jazz at College. Andre was, indeed, a consummate classics buff, and made his mark by supporting and cultivating local Choirs in his Bridgetown area of Cape Town as well.

Mixed with music videos about Andre over the years, and live performances by fellow jazz artists, like Mark Fransman, and some other family member, eulogies were spoken by family members and pastors about Andre's Christian loyalty to family and society, in general.

Older brother, Winston Petersen, reminisced about how Andre could fit into a size 8 shoe box, literally, when he was born in 1978. *"He didn't choose music; music chose him,"* Winston remembered. *"In Grade 4, Dad took Andre to UCT for a music aptitude test (with Nancy Hoffmayer) which he passed. Andre loved working with his hands also, and the teachers were so impressed with an ashtray and match box holder Andre made from wood (it was actually made by me!)."* Andre was a perfectionist: *"If you believe in God, you can go anywhere!"* Winston recalled Andre's joyful hope.

One telling story proved his craftiness: *"Andre became so enamoured with jazz that he would sneak out of the house when his father went to bed (around 9.30pm), push the family car out of the driveway so as to make little noise, and drive to the Monday night jazz jam at Swingers nearby. Upon returning home, Andre pushed the car quietly back into the driveway... "...so Dad never knew.*

Dr. Michael Rossi, Professor at UCT College of Music spoke about how he befriended Andre over 20 years ago upon Rossi's arrival to teach at UKZN and through the years often asked Andre to join his live tours and recording sessions. *"Andre had profound piano abilities, and more notably, an ability to swing."* Rossi mentioned that even American jazz pianist, Kenny Barron, referenced Andre as a "swing" master during Andre's tours in USA.

Dr. Andile Khumalo of the University of Witswatersrand (WITS) coached Andre during his PhD studies. *“Andre asked students to get to know classical music and become familiar with the jazz masters. I saw an embodiment of kindness in Andre...he believed that kindness would enable one to hear and see better.”* Other academics, like Professor Brett Pyper, Head of the School of Arts at WITS, spoke highly about Andre’s PhD research which Pyper had co-supervised.

A number of collaborating musicians shared tender stories: When 14 year old Darren English, a Capetownian and now multi-instrumental musician, met Andre who remained an important mentor and friend. Legendary trumpeter, Feya Faku, remarked that Andre *“had such a great soul.... And cherished classical music so much.”* Norwegian saxophonist, Morton Halle, a long time collaborator, remarked how Andre was an *“important figure on the international jazz scene...an uncompromising artist...having his own voice but with influences from the whole wide world of music.”*

Of note, South African classical pianist, Dr. Kathleen Tagg, based in New York, had met jazzman Andre in 1996, but only started working with him in 2014, as a duo team wedding the classical (which Andre adored) with jazz styles. They had performed on three continents, at various concerts, small and big, and as she recalled, *“No phone call ever lasted less than an hour.”* They had big plans ahead: *“I was super excited to know I would be joining Andre in a few weeks’ time in the USA for a collaboration. His kindness and brilliant intellect were always deeply rooted in humanity, always present in the moment, his musicianship and technique being his spiritual guide... a consentient gentleman.”* Her accolades were non-ending.

Dr. Maxwell Holland, spiritual mentor to Andre and senior pastor at Kingdom Life Ministries in Johannesburg where the family fellowshiped, said of Andre: *“He wore Jesus so well... I’ve seen Jesus walk this Earth... We don’t need a tombstone for this man because all of his music and life is in our hearts...Andre was going to move to the USA, but instead, he has moved his music to the heavens, for all of us.”*

Mercia Isaacs, Chairperson of the Vuya Foundation which sponsored some costs for Andre’s Masters Degree studies in Belgium, told ‘a little South African miracle story’ about meeting Andre in November 2011 when he needed money to courier his studies application to Belgium, believing in his wishes to complete his Masters Degree in Belgium, and appreciating his staying in communication with her. Andre had continued to shower her with great thanks for her assistance. She continued, *“One morning, he called me to say, ‘I have received my Masters’” ... Up to this May, he would call me every month to check on me, as I suffer from a health condition.”*

Tributes were made briefly by other pastors and family members, notably Andre’s father in law, Denville Willie, who had just lost his own mother to Covid a week earlier. Denville and Andre had discussed earlier: Why bad things happen to good people. Denville reflects: *“I now know... To the end, you held on to God with integrity...We will take care of your wife and Zion, until we meet again.”*

Sister to wife Chantal, Denay Willie read Chantal and daughter Zion’s letter to Andre, about *“our timeless walk together...your love was deeply honourable... your perfect peace and my perfect plan for you...You will always be our Papa.”*

Child Zion could not hold back her tears, as with the rest of us.

Addendum

Andre Petersen, his jazz bassist wife, Chantal Willie, and singer sister, Denay Willie, are known in Cape Town for their undying support for youth jazz education as well as growing South African jazz styles, ever mindful of the musical legends, living and late, who have laid solid musical foundations.

Andre's future with Chantal in academia and performance looked very bright. As educators, Chantal and sister Denay spearhead the Rainbow Academy some ten years ago to offer a range of arts development for youth.

Andre and Chantal's short-lived November-December 2014 'Talk Tones Sessions' held at the District Six Museum's Homecoming Centre on Saturday mornings provided exposure for young musicians to meet, listen to and interact with, leading jazz musicians in their town. See my article in **Amandla!** Issue No 37/38, December 2014, entitled "Talk Tones Sessions: An Initiative to grow youth artistry". Such programs need more funding and arts supports if youth are to 'grow' the music as part of their own livelihoods.

[insert my Talk Tones Sessions youth artistry Amandla! Article here]

Siphiwe Mhlambi sees soul, not just beauty, in music (14 November 2021)

Jazz photographers need to be better recognized - they help us see the artists! I caught up with Siphiwe Mhlambi recently in Johannesburg after his 3rd Expressions Exhibition. Also later at the December 4, 2021 Jazz and Classical Encounters at Spier Amphitheater in Stellenbosch capturing stage performances and off-stage musings.

Those who have an addiction to jazz understand how a photographer, like Pretoria-based Siphiwe Mhlambi, has a life-long addiction to, and passion for, jazz photography.

His childhood was rough and homeless. When a lady took him in off the streets at age 9 and gave him a small camera which took him two years to learn, the healing began. At age 13, he started schooling, walking some 25 kms between school and home.

“Every day I faced bullying and had fights at least four times a day, just to get to school. I would offer my bullies a cigarette just to avoid fights. When my father was released from prison in 1988, I asked him when I was born. He couldn’t remember. I had no ID, no ID number. I didn’t exist.”

Years later, young Siphiwe was taking pictures of Nelson Mandela leaving prison. His hard upbringing is unabashedly explained in his TEDx Talk (see Digital Notes)

“Colour can distract, but black and white photos can capture.” Hence, Mhlambi’s love affair with black/white photos which zoom in on contorted facial expressions, the subject’s muscular movements, the handling of the often shiny musical instrument, the emotional breakdowns of mothers losing their sons to gun violence. *“I don’t want to see beauty. I want to see the soul.”*

His debut jazz solo exhibition in 2008 displayed his archives from 1990 with 90 pieces in A zero and E1 formats. With an expanding archive of 28 years under his belt, Mhlambi launched his second Exhibition in 2020 called “Expressions”, and the third one in October 2021 which was accompanied by live stage performances of six of his chosen jazz bands at the National School of Arts in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

Musicians comment about how Mhlambi displays a rare sensitivity to their playing and to audience reactions as he tries, in a non-conspicuous way, to click that best shot that highlights what the musician is feeling.

“I shoot in an artistic way. It’s not a spectacle. I see beauty when I hear the song. In the past 30 years, I’ve learnt to read the artist, how he’s feeling when playing, if he has problems at home, etc.”

Singer Ziza Muftic says of Mhlambi, *“Just when I feel drained from coming off the stage, to see the photographer gives me energy. I was smiling to someone across the street, and Siphiwe just snapped a photo of my profile and captured my feeling at the time.”*

Trumpeter Prince Lengoasa: *“His way of photographing – he’s less obstructive in his approach. He goes under pianos, but doesn’t interfere with the stage. I ask him, ‘Where were you when you took that picture?’ He’s very sensitive towards the stage band and audience.”*

Legendary reed man McCoy Mrubata applauds Mhlambi: *“He’s highly regarded as one of the best. He knows how to capture artists.”*

Bassist Concord Nkabinde: *“As independent artists, we don’t always have all the resources to capture and package what we do well, so Siphwe has come through so many times doing photo shoots and helping us prepare. He captures new and established artists, and is a passionate story teller. So when he was honoured at the SBJJ (Standard Bank Joy of Jazz) 2019, we felt it was long time coming. We love him for his passion.”*

So, how does a professional photographer survive during these pandemic times? Mhlambi sighs: *“It’s tough. I started as a commercial photographer, made contacts, have a few retainers with corporates, like Anglo American portraits. I engage them, not just stick a light in front of them and click. They like that.”*

Mhlambi also mentors young photographers, and supports those important arts resources, like the National School of the Arts, by hosting concerts and exhibitions. *“I do what government and corporates should be doing. This is my third exhibition and concert lineup with no sponsor. I print my own works for display as well.”*

When the Standard Bank Joy of Jazz 2019 gave Mhlambi an award for his “support through the lens that captured jazz icons”, musicians, in turn, heaped much appreciation for his passion and honesty.

Trombonist Siya Charles takes up opportunities with poise and guts (24 May 2022)

Why do some female musicians take to the large, bulky horn instruments like the baritone saxophone, the bass trombone, the bass clarinet, etc? *"It's their rich, deep, wide sound that holds melody, mood, and a sense of power,"* chirps trombonist Siya Charles, as she prepares to leave South Africa for academic ventures at Julliard School of Music in New York City. *"They're suitable to round out that big band sound."*

"When I was in High School, I actually wanted to learn jazz piano, but my teacher, Graham Beyer, enticed me toward the trombone. I'm happy that now, there's a rise of more female musicians learning the brass instruments in South Africa, thanks to encouraging teachers and music programs."

Charles is a product of Eastern Cape upbringing but with mobile parents as her father found work as a civil engineer in various vistas of the country. Hence, her exposure to different societies, schools, and cultures enriched her now progressive tendencies to build skills in both the jazz music genre and academia. Opportunities came her way, spinning her through exciting artistic collectives, from home music festivals like the Makhanda Youth Jazz Festivals, to international youth collaboration in Norway and Italy.

Thirty one year old Charles is ready to roll, from working hard as a "side" band member to leading her own Sextet of three horns. *"After I finished my Honours at UCT in 2013, I was in an academic space where I loved books, doing research, and I just wanted to keep on going. I could gig on the side which was great for me. Then I went straight into a Masters Degree in Dissertation and jazz performance at UCT. I loved the academic side but used the lockdown time during the Covid pandemic to write my compositions. I was constantly learning from others, too."*

Charles is an avid teacher. *"I grew up thinking I would perform as my primary focus. It's been hard to break into the Cape town networks because much depends on 'who you know' and how you can break into that 'brotherhood' of musicians. I've always wanted to be in that teaching role and work with youth, and see them grow so fast, but for now I'm tending towards performing."*

We talked about social activism required of women artists and how many are reluctant to put themselves out there on a limb. The importance of reaching young students is one way. *"I really want to be a part of the grassroots levels. Like, remember the program of the Norwegian Academy of Music that bought instruments for some township-based young musicians? Three of us taught at the Mannenberg High School with these instruments but it became so difficult due to security issues. Look at how Lorenzo Blignaut, the trumpeter, has forged his career – a good example of growing up in a township band, the Delft Band, as a teenager!"*

As with life's surprises, all may not go as smoothly as one would like in spite of "hard work" intentions. *"I've just been underestimated a lot, and talked down to by fellow collaborators. For instance, as a trombone player, I would be asked: 'Are you sure you can play that?' or about a tempo: 'Is that not too fast for you?' We female trombone players are sometimes seen as a disability,"* she laughs.

So what advice would Charles give to female musicians, given societal attitudes and security issues?

"I had to practice my heinie off to get past all of that! I just want to be seen as a musician, and not be overlooked and undermined." She referred also to her learnings from other female horn

players: *“Siya Makuzeni has shared her stories with honesty – stories about experiencing sexual harassment in the jazz space. Her overcoming these obstacles was a big inspiration for me. Same with Shannon Mowday’s experiences, being harassed because she preferred that larger baritone sax! We really need mentorships for young women artists.”* This echoes the past experience of SAJE (South African Association for Jazz Education) in running a mentoring program which, after 2 months, ran out of funds.

Other blockages? Charles admits there have been payment issues and difficulties in obtaining adequate finances as a young Black South African. *“People find it risky to invest in musicians, so I went the academic route, through scholarships, to make my networks and participate. Also, being away from my family at age 16 to go to school in Cape Town was hard. I got a scholarship to attend Stellenberg High School near Bellville and to sing in their school choir, while my family stayed in Gqeberha. That was difficult and I had to live in a dorm arrangement with the other students. This taught me discipline, but I told the conductor that I’m more interested in playing an instrument than in singing. My mother sang, my society sings, so I did that. I also so missed my little brother, being away from him and not seeing him grow.”*

But Charles has managed admirably, with a seriousness of purpose. The Julliard School of Music in New York awaits her to start her two year Masters program this September 2022. But how did that come about for a young Black South African woman artist? *“I pursued searching for scholarships and bursaries on line as I subscribe to an international network offering scholarships. No-one really helped me. It was through hard research. I found this First Rand scholarship from a philanthropist who had started the bank, the Laurie Dippenaar scholarship. So, I am contracted to return to South Africa for 5 years after completing my academic program. I won’t ‘get lost’ in New York.”*

While that was reassuring that South Africa might not “lose” another creative artist to the other worlds, not everybody has initiative to make it on their own as she did. *“We need to pay more attention to harvesting or facilitating opportunities for young women to grow their skills,”* she admitted, *“rather than have young people rely on their own initiative or networks which may be weak to non-existent.”*

Episode #1: Musically Smiling with Al Jarreau: conversations in Cape Town (2 April 2015)

Humor, fun, dancing, message..... mornin' Mr. Radio, mornin' little cherios.....

A little dream came true when I was called up after Al Jarreau's press conference to interview him one-on-one, on 28 March 2015. As the main headliner at the 16th CapeTown International Jazz Festival, 28-29 March 2015, this American wizard of voice and rhythm in the jazz, R&B, and pop genres blessed me with some 105 minutes of heart and soul talk. Here we go...

CM: You're very African in your rhythms. Have you been to other African countries?

AJ: *I'm embarrassed to say, no! But my ears are bigger than elephant's... I grew up listening to polkas, because the Polish settled in Milwaukee where I grew up. My ears listened to the waltz, and delta blues. At the age of 7 years, I would hear from our Milwaukee, Wisconsin home the late night polka tavern next door pumping at full force, since the area was historically populated by people from Poland and Germany, etc. These songs and beats had a huge influence on me as a child and played in my head then. I listened to church music, since my father was a minister in the church. (He sings) "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land, tell ole Pharoah, let ma people gooooo." "Yeh Yeh..."*

(Al sings a tune with a West African beat, and with scatty lyrics to demonstrate an influence on his own ears and heart.) *You listen carefully and hear these African rhythms and messages which can also be heard in Cuban music...and Brazilian music. That's why I'm interested in making music for others to hear. That's what I did. I listened to and felt those sounds in that music because that's the important mission I have in life, to make music for others to enjoy! And maybe find a little Africa in my music, and a little Poland in my music!*

CM: I was just interviewing Basia who has the same influence from the Cuban and Brazilian music influences, but she's never been there.

AJ: *So you don't have to be IN a country to hear the music. But if your ears are really listening, and you're listening with your heart, you get it!*

CM: Here in South Africa, the lyrics of songwriters are sometimes weak in talking about the social, political, and economic transformations out of the past. Can we talk about your song lyrics? Here, there's always the struggle...

AJ: *What do you mean by 'struggle'? ... the struggle to do lyrics or...the 'great struggle'?*

CM: Yes, the 'great struggle' – the struggle for 'freedom' which is a continuum... But the lyrics by musicians, particularly jazz musicians, and song writers are weak in reflecting these issues. Do you write your own lyrics? And how can jazz musicians be encouraged to write their lyrics addressing these transformation issues?

AJ: *Yes, I write many of my own lyrics. My answer I think is to find the people who are doing 'it', which means people who are writing about the times they live in. Also, find a sense of humor in the music you write. As well as a sense of fun and dancing. We tend to emphasise too much the latter, and too little about the art of survival – on our planet earth, and in our communities. How are we taking care of each other? Some combination of these messages are important for me. So a lot of my songs are the 'mornin' tradition –*

*mornin' Mr. Radio
mornin' little cherios
mornin' sister orio*

*did I tell you everything is fine
in my mind
in my mind
everything is fine.
how you think is how you are....
Find a way to think properly and you'll be OK.*

Now this involves finding a way of knowing we are OK. I don't care how many mistakes we make on this planet. I don't care how much radiation destroys the planet. We are OK. We are immortal. From the rib of God, we DON'T DIE... We're the greatest lesson in the world, 'cause we don't die... Stop mourning, and celebrate the 'morning' –

'thank you father, thank you father.... Thank you for giving me LIFE, and eyes to witness, and a mind to understand that YOU are forever, dear Father, and I have come from you. Therefore, I have immortality and forever-ness in me because of you. I've just stopped here (on earth) to learn a few little things from you. '

We're on loan... and un-learning!! Hah hah.

Episode #2 The Sweet Divinity of Life: Musically Smiling with Al Jarreau.... (15 April 2015)

"Down South in Africa," sings Al Jarreau. He explains: *"where the little bougainvillea winds around the big jacaranda tree as they become one with us, sun, and nature."* This masterful singer emphasized, *"And this is YOUR story, class"*, as he waved his lyrics page at us journalists (who were given copies) during his press conference at the CTIJF a few weeks ago.

"I should have named my album 'Jacaranda Bougainvillea' rather than 'All I Got' after my visit to South Africa in 2001, when I saw this transformation taking place It excited my band and I to write this piece." To Jarreau, it's a *"lavender dream, the envy of orchids, when it's dressed in a pink and fuchsia twine"*. He launched this song at the 2002 North Sea Jazz Festival in Holland which also had a 'South African' stage. See the lyrics at the end of this article.

Listening to this beautiful song on YouTube, one becomes mesmerized with the sweet divinity Jarreau attaches to the smallest of beings. As we chatted in his hotel, I discovered a deeply spiritual and compassionate Al Jarreau that could defy his otherwise contorting body and face when masterfully delivering his stage performance.

CM: At your press conference, you handed out the lyrics of your 'Jacaranda Bougainvillea' song. Talk about that.

AJ: *You know, I was hoping some journalist would ask me some questions about this song which I and my band wrote after our South African performances in 2001. For instance, there's this verse: 'Oh Mandela, that garden that you made is a vision of the prayer you must have been prayin' every day.' What did you mean there, Al? And I would have replied, "Way down South in Africa. Look at the jacaranda tree huggin' the Bougainvillea." That song is thick with message. It was a very important song about what you can export from your past experiences – the political transition out of separate-ness and towards one-ness. That's more important than the friggin' gold, or the DeBeers Mine. I should have shouted it out when I was at the conference table.*

CM: You performed the song at the Festival, but I think it went beyond people's heads at that huge stage with several thousand howling people!

AJ: Yes, the sound on the stage was not good for my repertoire this year. The stage needed more of a listening crowd. I think the song is too subtle, too. It needs more exposure.

Jarreau is a Seer: His reflections about 2015 CapeTown, noted on his website blog, say, *"Here there's something more relaxed and comfortable but far beyond that is the friendly and joyous spirit of the people. And if you look closely you can see an infectious kind of joy and hopefulness of the mind and heart...."* Even though he considered himself 'late to the party' of the 16th CTIJF this year, his first appearance, he is convinced: *"these [Capetownians] were brown skin people just like me who have found something special...some joy and gratitude for life and breath at the moment and big expectations about the future."*

Well, while many Capetownians might dispute this rosy announcement by an enthusiastic outsider, Jarreau's own evolving life story seems to also reflect a joyous continuum. But it hasn't always been easy for him....

CM: You had mentioned how you have gotten off your addictions to attend to your health.

AJ: I had to get out of the Whiskey and Bourbon drinking. Now, when I'm close to a bar, there's a horrible smell...from those alcohols! I drank and smoked a lot, but had to let them go for my general health. And boy, am I unhappy!! (Hah Hah!) So ask me if I'm doing better? NO!! (Hahahaha) I only quit five years ago and boy, am I bored!! Hahahah!

CM: Has your creativity been compromised at all?

AJ: The creativity continues with different stuff to consider. We're part of this surviving thing. It's called being-ness, it's called life, and presence ... what we see and what we comment about out there in the universe and on our planet. My vision has cleared a bit more in that way and I'm moving towards this immortality, and feeling more strongly about immortality, and about who we are, and there's no such thing as death, which is a misnomer. We just move on and we're part of this continuing thing which gets better.

CM: Perhaps you're talking about the 'past life', or re-incarnation...?

AJ: Yes, yes. I don't know much about that or studied the Hindu and Asian religions, but all those little influences coming into my life from time to time make sense to me. It becomes clearer to me that there is a 'first cause', a first something out of which everything came. And today our scientists and cosmologists are beginning to point at it. We talk about it as God. It doesn't exclude God when cosmologists say 'it began with a big bang'.

CM: Which leads me to a point: Is jazz as spiritual as it should be? Or is it going into another sexy, material, money issues, gain-what-you-can world?

AJ: That is the danger of all human activity, and jazz is part of it. Song and music writing used to have more soul in it, at a point where it was really connected to survival-ness. Like, early jazz musicians were very close to the soil, to the earth, to growing crops. Raking and picking crops for 'survival-ness'. As we move away from that sort of society, where the work is done more by machines, we lose that connection to survival-ness. Music is successful because it is the spoiled brat of the arts. Dancers don't do as well as musicians, never have and never will. Also, painters....and sculptures in the arts. Billions and billions of dollars are made on music and on what musicians have created. And why? Because music is real close to the heart beat. 'Do don, do don, do don...'[mimicking a heartbeat]. You felt the beat before you even got here, in the wound, real close. And hearing the blood go 'whiss whiss whiss'. We listened to those sounds before we got here. That's got to be why music is so close to us and captures us immediately.

Happy lavender dreams to all! Here are the moving lyrics of 'our story':

“Jacaranda Bougainvillea”

Oh what a dream, Oh what a story.
Don't have to weep, Come and enjoy a smile.
Opening scene is just like a doorway.
Here's a story, in rhythm and rhyme.
There is a tree on the street and in the forest.
Lavender dream whispered a poet.

Bright potpourri. The envy of orchids,
When it's dressed in a pink and fuchsia twine.
Jacaranda tree and the Bougainvillea vine.
Oh Mandela, that garden that you made,
Is a vision of the prayer, you must've been prayin' everyday.

Sweet Azaleas, every color every kind.
And the first and the last are all divine.
There is a dream of the trees and of the flowers.
There is a season of peace at the borderline...
Where we're redeemed and history will crown us.
Jacaranda tree and Bougainvillea vine.

Oh Mandela, would you say that it's alright?
When the children play they always say, they say that we were like
Cinderella, in your garden there's a shrine,
To the first and the last they're all divine.
One and all, big and small, a common birth.
Each and every child for all his worth.
Take the one who's always last and make him first.
Take these seeds. Seed the earth.

[OUTRO:]

Comin' along,
Oh what a long way we have come.
Comin' along,
Makin' a home for everyone.
Comin' along, way down South in Africa
Look at (Study) the Jacaranda tree huggin' the Bougainvillea

[REPEAT OUTRO X4]

Ear Candy -A Review of Al Jarreau's "My Old Friend: Celebrating George Duke" (30 April 2015)

"I took my first voice lesson a month ago," beamed the 75-year old multi-Grammy Award singer, Al Jarreau. "Yeah, I'm studying voice now! In the rush of things, I had picked up some bad habits in my singing" Well, I wouldn't know! This announcement during his press conference preceded his stage appearance the next evening at the recent Cape Town International Jazz Festival held end March 2015. He was also plugging his latest album, ***My Old Friend: Celebrating George Duke***, which does just that – honours a musical dynasty of invited artists who, together, stamp their own soundprints on the song legacy left by the late Duke who passed on in 2013.

Read the excellent interview by Smooth Views about this album's evolution. Had the Duke lived to hear his 10 songs on the album, he might have called it 'ear candy'. There are some sweet, some sour, sassy and sarcastic, but always soulful renditions of Duke's tunes from the artist heavyweights who joined Jarreau.



George Duke with Al Jarreau

An old classic with Duke on piano and Boney James on tenor saxophone, 'Bring me Joy' brings back romantic memories of this past song about another day. Duke's cousin Dianne Reeves (another multi Grammy award winner) and Jarreau swing into another samba rumble, enhanced by Lenny Castro's percussion, in 'Brazilian Love Affair/ Up from the Sea It Rose and Ate Rio in One Swift Bite'. Characteristically, the song moves into a funky rap scat Jarreau is so noted for. Dr. John rattles his 'brain salad' in the last song on this album, 'You Touch My Brain' as each instrument skilfully lays out its own phrases like a tossed salad.

As Jarreau said to me during our interviews: "We brought in a lot of people to cover his music. We laughed so much doing that record. I thought: 'George, I'm sorry, I'm having a good time.'" And joyful, it is! So isn't Jarreau's aging voice.

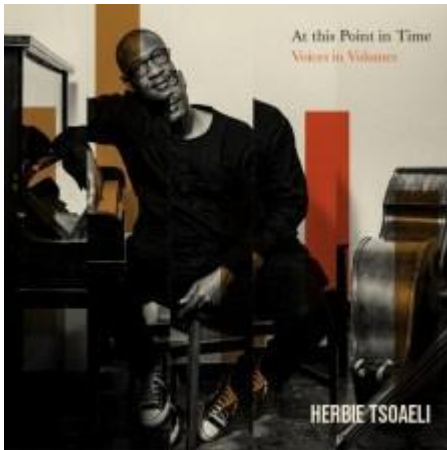
The album was released in 2014 by Concord Music Group.

Bassist Herbie Tsoaeli Mince African Timing with Ancestral Voicings (5 January 2022)

Self-taught bassist, Herbie Tsoaeli, hails from Nyanga East, a Cape Town Location, where he grew up trying to find musical instruments that suited his 'sound' needs. He studied at music schools in Cape Town, like Nyanga Art Center, MAPP and at the Merton Barrow Jazz Workshop. Much experience was gained from the 1990s onwards as part of the Live at the Market Band with the late Sibongile Khumalo, Khaya Mahlangu, Themba Mkhize, Prince Lengoasa, & Vusi Khumalo. Other bands included Mahube with Steve Dyer.



His ancestral calling resonates around musical concepts of 'African Time', his debut album by the same name winning him a SAMA award for best jazz album in 2013. This recent album just launched, ***At This Point in Time: Voices in Volumes*** (2021) strikes lyrical cords as he laces his compositions with pentatonics, ballads, a bit of bebop, then some swing here and there, all seemingly spirit-driven with ancestral overtones. He talks to All Jazz Radio Internet Radio about his concepts of Time and the Now, influenced by some Covid Lockdown blues with contemplation on how to voice hope for the future. It's a very thoughtful and appealing album for those who enjoy the 'jazz' genre with improvisational character and changing time signatures.



The album opens with 'Wozani nonke Sizothandaza' ('Come all we will pray') with a distinct drum accompaniment of Ayanda Sikade's drums, Tsoeli's bass solo, all layered with his raspy vocals, and horn harmonies carrying the tune. One can forgive Tsoeli's sometimes off-tune vocals which adds emotion to his different voicings.



Ayanda Sikade-courtesy: Music in Africa

Voicings and timing go together. We talked about the 'art of slow' which Tsoeli immediately could identify with. *"We all struggle with our voices as we go thru the Lockdowns. Lockdown is just a continuation of my African timing, coming to your Art of Slow, telling us to just slow down! Some people say, ugh man, you're just old, slowing down anyway. But yes, wise move."* In the album notes, he talks about voicing against societal malfunctioning: *"inequality, unemployment, gender-based violence and mismanagement"*.

Timing

The tenor saxophone genius of Sisonke Xonti shines as he gives visual movement to the amorphous concept of 'timing'. In 'Alone on Your Own', he seems to depict a child softly skipping along, not in any hurry. Then the sax becomes frantic as though life is too slow. Time to catch up... The song ends with the bass and drum having a boppish tete-a-tete sealed with the sax approval.



Sisonke Xonti

The Samba beat appears on several songs, like in 'Abadala Baholo' ('elders'), which bring out tight three horn harmonies, with men's voices giving an *"appreciative gesture to elders who shepherd young ones away from criminality and gangsterism in located areas"* (album notes).

Tsoaeli likes free jazz. But what is it in the African context? *"Free jazz is the same as avant-garde. African time has its own timing. When I was young, I was dabbling in all genres of music – rock, pop, TV hip, etc. It's what I call the 3Gs – 'Genres Generic Genes'; there's pop and rock elements in my 'African time'. The 3Gs is my blood heart & soul as I have apprenticed with so many different sounds."* Here is an example of why writer Attiyah Khan calls Tsoaeli a "neologist", someone who creates new words or concepts. *"There's structure. I tell my students they must learn structure when learning music."* One hears those chordal structure changes in 'Umntu', for example. A free improvisational piano of Yonela Mnana in 'Palama' ('come, let's leave') speaks to our hurry to get in that idling car after spending hours visiting family or friends, and then saying the goodbyes. The impetuousness of contemporary life. Then, there's that sometimes frantic but impressive command from Xonti's sax in 'Backyard Background'.



Yonela Mnana

So, are no filters that harness the essence of a 'free' jazz? *"All my songs are composed randomly, but I know what notes to give out. I like that – doing things on the spot – composing 'improvisingly'. When*

meeting my band members for a rehearsal, I call it ESSMG: Energy Scanning Screening Meeting Gathering – but without instruments. Just a few notes.” (Neologically said.)

Compositional Creativity

“I don’t write scores anymore. I used to.” So how does Tsoaeli teach structure with his students? It’s about African Time: “African Time is from the garden, the soil. After planting those carrots, in time, they will mature and become something useful, like to eat. You gather your hands in the soil and pull out that carrot. That’s the way I teach my students.”

But then one remembers that the younger ones are in a hurry, and aren’t interested in the art of slow. Computer software is there to quickly compose, edit, transcribe, etc They don’t want to take time to grow that flower, or carrot, right?

“I told my son recently to take a picture of that building that housed the Jazz Workshop where Milton Barrow gave me free lessons. That building had a particular time structure to it, during apartheid, as I was finding my way with music.”



Herbie Tsoaeli at Blue Room, CapeTown Dec 2021

Young Tsoaeli grew up frustrated that he couldn’t learn saxophone, or play guitar like Grant Green or Wes Montgomery. Then he found the upright bass. *“I remember with my uncle, we used to listen to all the Blue Notes, the Stanley Turrentines, the Brotherhood of Breath, the trumpeter Blue Mitchell, and that sound of Jimmy Smith on organ. Then mix that with the Mbaqanga in that house. The sound then escalates with my neighbours who were church people, and then there was the Zion church, and in the back were the traditional healers. On Friday and Saturday were burial stuff, and sounds that go with that.”*

This mixture of influences with tight horn trios comes through in Mbaqanga-styled ‘East Gugs Skomline to Khaltsha’ about a commuter train route through Cape Town’s townships that leaves many passengers behind. This song remembers township residents being bypassed during Apartheid – for housing, or left on the tracks, or lined up in job queues. This song cries out for healing.

Ancestral Healing with Hope

One hears in several songs a low register male repetitive chant followed by higher register vocals, such as in 'Palama'. But could not ancestralism have bad blood as well?

"For me, when I do music, people are talking spirituality. I don't say I'm a spiritual healer, so people can't say that I am a spiritual musician. People may find it in my music, but I never pronounce it on paper that I am spiritual. I'm just making music for my inner healing. That's beautiful, if it also heals others. My sounds come from different formats; they may be coming from the rock, or from the swing, or from the mbaqanga." One result can be enjoyed in the contemplative 'Woza Moya' ('At this point in time') which portrays a sense of joy and purpose.

Yet, there's a yearning hope in 'Siwa Sivuka' ('straight to the point'), a song meant to convey how our human Spirit can rise and triumph. Tsoaeli demonstrates his compositional interplay with bass, horns, and piano announcing a better future through soft female vocals. One just sings along, gleefully.

'Siyabulela' ('thank you') concludes the album very peacefully, with female vocals closing out the volumes of voices that puncture Time. Yet, the volume of voices still need to protest against the immediate injustices and other society ills inflicted on the marginalized. One hopes it won't take another ten years to hear Tsoaeli's next album message, no doubt, geared to Youth.Speaking of the Art of Slow.....

Awards-winning flautist, Khanyisili Mthetwa, promises to please at Jazz & Classical Encounters Festival, Vol.4, 26 November, 2022! (22 November 2022)

"I'm a perfectionist," chirps 37-year old flautist Khanyisili Mthetwa who performs as a duo with pianist Peter Cartwright at the Jazz & Classical Encounters Festival, Vol. 4, on 26 November, at the popular amphitheater of the Spier Wine Farm Estate in Stellenbosch. Boasting a stellar musical career with humble beginnings playing a recorder as a child attending a Soweto music program, her flourishing perfectionism took hold. Music was her jol; even flirting with the clarinet. But it was this mystical wind instrument - the flute - that gained her awards to study overseas and to win more awards domestically.

Khanyisili Mthetwa was the first African awarded the prestigious Myrna Brown Scholarship by the National Flute Association of America in 2019. Back home in South Africa, she earned the 2019 Mbokodo Award for opera/classical music, which recognizes women who have shown leadership and excellence in the arts. By 2022, she landed a SAMA (South African Music Association) nomination for her debut album, *African Bird*, from which she will offer songs during her Spier stage concert. SAMA also awarded her the category for Best Classical Instrumental Album and Newcomer. As a result, Mthetwa admits these awards inspired a flurry of correspondence and well-wishes from young women artists and musicians who found a mentor and exemplary in her.

Besides being the principal flautist for the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra, she holds a fellowship in flute performance from Trinity College of London and has joined the newly formed Mzansi National Philharmonic Orchestra which will tour South Africa this December.

"It's hard to get a good sound out of the flute", Mthetwa pined humbly, as she explained her persistence, thanks to her committed mentors.

"After freelancing, and playing with various ensembles and orchestras within South Africa for a number of years, the scholarship I took in America allowed me to tour that country and to perform only South African works of music. That's how I was able to perform Mbeki Mseleku's 'Angola', which predominately features the flute, and other jazz and classical works of our artists."

She realized that our local musicians still lack helpful outlets to transcribe all their works for distribution.

"In order to play their works, I had to ask musicians back home to send me their transcriptions! And also if they knew of pieces written for flute! This became tedious, but I managed to perform various South African works, including opera, musicals, jazz and blues pieces, to American audiences who responded with glee. I wanted my program of works to be inclusive, and this made me search for South African women composers, in particular, which became quite difficult, from afar. "

This became a long discussion, for another topic, for another time: *"We need an online space for musicians to post their transcriptions."* One is left thinking: But who in the industry should be promoting such a handy space for artists?

Mthetwa is an activist, her compositions calling for more socially responsible acts of mercy on earth's environmental fragility. *"I don't see boundaries,"* is her mantra as she incorporates spoken word, and

poems mixed with some progressive jazz and blues in what one might call 'urban classical'. Her debut album, ***African Bird*** (2021), speaks to her collection over a ten-year period of messages - about Black histories from transatlantic slave roots, women's civil rights struggles, climate change, and other contemporary social causes. Her colleagues include American women activists, like flautist Valerie Coleman, who founded Imani Winds in 1997, to provide role models for young African American wind players.

Mthetwa promotes a fierce mission to develop musical talents in youth, and has served on the jury of the National Youth Competition. *"Good parenting is key to developing a child's artistic enthusiasm and talents. Also, fund raising is badly needed in order to improve the participation of marginalized children in townships in the creative and musical arts."* And what about attracting more musicians to play flute in jazz? *"This is hard. I use 'doubling', that is, playing more than one instrument during a gig. I would switch between the clarinet and the flute, thus offering a more diverse sound to the concert's repertoire."*

Saturday's performance will feature a mix of songs from Mthetwa's repertoire including her own compositions and familiar ones to the music fans over the years! 'Nough said! Her next album in the making will explore South American rhythms and sounds, but again, with that sense of correctness and perfectionist spirit which has punctuated all of her music offerings through the years.

Her performance at Spier promises to please! Watch her videos here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V20Jjf3dLf8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vvvyAUaGzE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JuGgtbS0qUc>

(Also posted on Facebook, 23 November 2022:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/4024211567804456>)

Reedman McCoy Mrubata – a life with jazz accents made visual (3 June 2021)

Petite in stature, but ferociously melodic on stage, he blasts a soprano saxophone entry with his able quartet, then mellows into a tenor sax ballad, switching adeptly into a flute solo that rounds out his first set. By the end of the evening, the audience would have danced to a mbaqanga jive or a ghoema ditty, all very South African in tone and intent.



McCoy Mrubata, a son of the Cape Town soil, never fails to deliver what rhythms and sonic pulses have grown in his bones for almost 60 years, as he turns a youthful 62 in June. And he's videotaping just that!

"I drink green tea, always, in the morning with slices of ginger, some honey and lemon in my cup," he smiles, proud of this steady ritual, which (he says) helps tone down some hand arthritis creeping in. One would certainly not suspect such an affront to his seasoned dexterity.

Based in Johannesburg for most of his life, and raising four children there, McCoy greets multitudes of fans when he travels to perform in Cape Town. Sometimes, hiding is in order! Thanks to hosting by Jazz in the Native Yards, his three performances end of May brought the hordes: to the cozy (but far too small for this gentle giant) basement whiskey bar of the Athletic Club & Social and the Alliance Francaise, both in central Cape Town, and then to the outdoor Sunday afternoon hustle at Gugulethu's popular Kwa Sec. Indeed, maintaining Covid-19 protocols were strained amidst the lack of larger economical venues, but fans will be fans. *"I am very careful with the protocols for myself,"* McCoy admits, *"and I encourage others to do so."* His quartet swung, soloed, and supported with amazing facility, delivering some of the best and tightly executed performances for many: the improvising wizardry of pianist Lonwabo Mafani excited many; the energetic 'talking drums' of Tefo Mahola cast spells; and Wesley Rustin's expert plucking on double bass – all well synced with this wind and reed man. <https://youtu.be/E6lrOyNPk8o>

Photo: Pianist Lonwabo Mafani at Alliance Francaise May 2021

But what is jazz to McCoy? See his interview with John Perlman at <https://youtu.be/aNt38hyF6s4>

McCoy boasts a large repertoire of his own jazz compositions performed over the decades, beginning with his early days growing up in Langa learning the flute, and then saxophone, under the tutelage of Madoda Gxabeka, the Ngcukanas brothers, Winston Ngozi Mankunku, and many other Langa musicians. *"It's important to always include songs by our earlier jazz legends where I grew up. You see, I was just a few blocks from Ezra Nqucana, then down the road was Winston's house, and over there lived Louis Maholo!"*

Living under Apartheid and faced by the 1976 uprisings in the country, McCoy made music his passion and travelled to Johannesburg to join the other early greats during the 1980s, forming his own bands, like the Brotherhood in 1989 with guitarist Jimmy Dlodlu and the now late pianist, Moses Molelekwa. In 1992 he began touring with Hugh Masekela's Lerapo band and formed a decades long friendship with pianist Paul Hanmer with whom many recordings have emerged. Other stints with Norwegian groups, residencies in Switzerland and tours elsewhere produced a list of albums. In 2015 *Brasskap Sessions Volume 2* won the SAMA's best Jazz Album category.

That same year, his stint in Switzerland with three different bands resulted in a double CD recording in Basel: McCoy Mrubata *Live At the Bird's Eye*. Gobble up McCoy's experiences at <http://mccoymrubata.com>

McCoy's cultural philosophy focuses on intergenerational learning, in society, family environs, and with his musical collaborators. The *Brasskap* sessions series is a platform for the young, the old and the legends to interact musically and draw positive energies from one another. When asked how *Brasskap Vol 3* differs with Volumes 1 and 2, McCoy replied, *"Not much different. I don't want to dig around to try to find something else new. I didn't want to go the Marrabenta route of music from Mozambique in the song, 'Xhai Xhai', for example, but preferred to add a Caribbean twist with Andy Narell on steel pans playing that song with South African young musicians."*



How does he filter acceptable quality from the many young musicians coming out in the last decade? How does he choose whom to groom, to capture? "So many are coming to me! Brasskap 2 featured Sisonke on baritone sax, then Vol 3 with Mthunzi Mvubu on saxes and flute. Then, when I heard drummer Lumanyano Mzi, who heads his Unity Band, he knocked me out! My producer Luyanda said yes, get him on! I love Lumanyano, he's a great band leader, has a wonderful sound, and is very proficient to work with."



McCoy Mrubata with Unity Band 2017

Baritone saxophonist Gareth Harvey is another young gun McCoy employs to arrange his compositions occasionally to ensure excellence in output. *“When I was recording in Cape Town with his Unity Band earlier in 2018, I asked Gareth to arrange my songs as well as Unity’s compositions. It worked out well.”*

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These days, one can see McCoy more often with a Sony video camera on a tripod than with a saxophone. He’s making his own documentary, a selfie, with a self-taught approach including learning and using Final Cut Pro, his editing tool. *“The purpose is to show my upbringing in an urban township of Cape Town, even though my ancestry comes from Heuwu village in the Cala area of the Eastern Cape. Then explain the musical journey I’ve had, again focusing on intergenerational relationships.”* For instance, during his recent studio recording session in Cape Town with the legendary ‘Mama Kaap’ singer, Sylvia Mdunyelwa, also a long time resident in Langa, he filmed her with his tripod setup. *“It was so emotional: she was crying as she sang, because the lyrics of my song were written by her own son who works with me!”*



CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA – 1997: Nelson Mandela singing and dancing with South African jazz singer Sylvia Mdunyelwa at his staff party at Green Dolphin Restaurant, V&A Waterfront, Cape Town. (Photo by Gallo Images/Oryx Media Archive/Getty Images)

Inspired by recent tours within the United States, McCoy was able to share his music as therapy. In 2018, he told this writer: *“Paul Hanmer and I are finishing 30 years celebration of working together, touring USA just as a duo for 3 weeks in different cities. We did a live recording in Princeton which includes a video and DVD and produced it on Paul’s and my respective labels. We, also, gave short courses, workshops, and master classes. “*



Paul Hanmer and McCoy Mrubata

McCoy returned to Philadelphia in 2019 to contribute to a conference on music and trauma. He admits he was writing his story of how he grew up, the trauma of the 1976 uprisings and violence during the Apartheid era. *“My songs are with spoken word and instrumentals. Also, while at Berklee, we were doing music therapy sessions.”* Other tours have taken McCoy to Kuwait (in 2019) and Algeria with Greg Georgiades, a South African who comes from eastern Europe and plays the oud and different guitars. A master performance with other South Africans brought McCoy together with the Jazz at the Lincoln Center in New York in September 2019 which kicked off with a composition by trumpeter Feya Faku followed by other South Africa Songbook specials.

Back home, his project with bassist Lex Muchana, called ‘The Summit’ operates in Soweto to bring ‘home-grown’ sounds into various communities, homes, centers, and local venues. *“We host ticketed concerts in our houses.”* This strikes a similar chord in what Cape Town’s own Jazz in the Native Yards is trying to do in communities to reach various audiences around this large city. Another local project McCoy started to support youth musical development is the “Strings Attached” program involving young string players from Daveyton, a quartet of 1st and 2nd violins, viola, and cello playing with a backline. Currently, he is an ambassador for a number of youth development causes, including the Kasi Angels Foundation which provides shoes for children and youth and other items that encourage learners to attend school.

“I will continue to record in video form my performances with musicians, record my travels, workshops, how I and my family live, my neighborhood, and my life in general, so as to educate people about my passion for music and its role in inspiring a wholesome personal development.”

This major musical Legend has loads ahead to offer. Stay tuned at <http://mccoymrubata.com>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ltrDL6Q-oU>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOJxZmgnpkA>

Reedman McCoy Mrubata Meets Strings in the Sonic Chambers of a Pandemic (9 June 2022)

Unholy alliances emerge from the lockdown blues, it seems, while we tend to listen to our own noise and seek redress from unpleasant pandemic restrictions. Reedman and eclectic jazz artist, McCoy Mrubata, decided during 2020 and 2021 to just be quiet, reflective, and continue the creative bent that has characterized his unending career in music. Two albums later, we revel in his generous offerings.



Quiet Please (2021)

Speaking to SABC Morning Live one day, Mrubata was adamant: *“We talk too much, there’s too much narrative, and not enough sitting back and listening to the youth, the musicians, with each other. We need to listen more.”* **Quiet Please**, a compendium of long-worked compositions over time, represents his thoughts and tributes towards many musicians he has worked with, including pianist Paul Hanmer on 4 tracks and bassist Lex Futshane on 2 tracks. With clever finesse during those quiet days of the pandemic, Mrubata decided to throw in four stringed instruments into his repertoire, thanks to assistance from arranger Gareth Harvey.

“The real influence was Andile Yenana. He was in KZN, me in JGB. We went into Studio in December 2020 face-to-face after sharing notes on songs.”



Andile Yenana

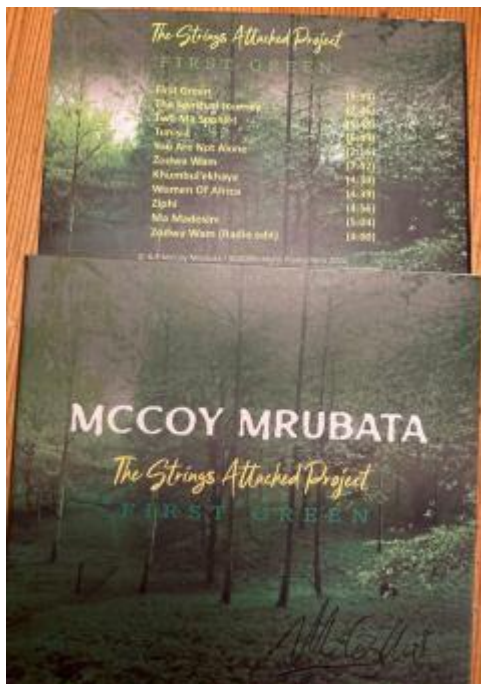
Four short ‘Lockdown Suites’ were assisted by Yenana and Hanmer and feature 2 violins, viola, and cello, with soothing flutes of Sydney Mnisi and Mrubata in a rare harmony. The bouncy mbaqanga ‘Ndlelantle’ breaks the previous soft ballad mode, as though the pandemic was finally breaking up and freeing us all. Yenana’s own ‘Saka Ke’ brings back the ballad with stunning piano runs.

*“This is the first time I brought in strings. It was challenging in a studio setting, but Gareth Harvey did the strings arrangement. “ **Quiet Please** intended just that: “Let’s pause and listen to the young ones. It’s nice to zoom, but at the end of the day, we have to work. There’s too much narration.”*

Quiet-spoken, 63 year old Mrubata, known for his subtle on-stage jokes and stories behind his songs, has yet to ‘take a break’, pushing his desires and intentions to produce more strings in intergenerational collaborations.

The Strings Attached Project – First Green (2022)

Mrubata’s Strings project had been long in the making, thanks to collaboration with excellent chamber musicians based in Daveyton near Johannesburg, and skillful arrangements by composers Viwe Mkiswana and Gareth Harvey who also had his hand in producing **Quiet Please**.



Honouring women, an important cross-generational hum through Mrubata’s musical and ethical veins, runs thematically through the album starting with Swedish vocalist, Eva Rune’s ‘First Green’ composition about spring in Sweden. This is a soothing chat between soprano sax and cello, mellow with intention to entice. Gradually, the songs swing into familiar rhythms without strings domination. Continuing with the melodic ‘Two Ma Sophies’, one hears the steady percussion and bass rooting the song. Familiar South African chords and choral structures take over in ‘Zodwa Wam’, a tribute to Mrubata’s best love and partner, his wife. To the glee of Norway-based saxophonist Shannon Mowday, Mrubata presents her ‘Women in Africa’ as Track 8, written as a tribute to the brutal death of Mrubata’s daughter in 2006. Mowday says on her Facebook page:

“When experiences like this come into your ‘inner circle’, you are reminded of the harsh reality of SA having one of the highest rates of abuse against women and children. A fear that ultimately saw me leave my country. A song in her dedication flowed out of me- whilst upbeat and seemingly ‘positive’ – honouring women for the gift of life and nurturing mankind, overcoming all obstacles thrown at them with positivity; it also asks in return, how is it then that they are treated so unkindly, alluding to rape and murder.”



Mrubata tosses between orchestral chamber sounds and jazzy arrangements, switching instruments between his lilting flute in early songs to broader temperaments of his saxophones, ending off with his expressive, jivey tenor sax. His influencers and co-producers, bassist Viwe Mkiswana, arranger Gareth Harvey, and others add weight. He enjoys mood ranges: the rhythmic 'Tunisia' with drums, darbuka, and percussion which reflect co-composer Greg Georgiades's own style of middle eastern cadencies, followed by a thoughtful duet between soprano sax and cello in 'You Are Not Alone' composed by Mkiswana. Ziza Muftic's vocals in 'Ziphi' add texture and strength along with Godfrey Mgcina's drumcussion, another 'McCoy' special.

More mbaqanga with strings follow in the homey jive in 'Khumbul'ekhaya', a danceable tune skillfully arranged by Harvey. A tribute to Ma Madosini with younger musicians, vocalist Thandeka Dladla and fugelhornist Marco Maritz round out the feminine touch to this unusual album.



Stephen de Souza, bass; McCoy Mrubata sax; Marco Maritz trumpet

What's next? More Quiet? Strings? Intergenerational collaborations? YES!

Sibusiso Mashiloane Moves Jazz Closer to Home: CD Review (4 November 2018)

I always thought this Durban-based jazz piano composer, teacher, and performer, Sibusiso 'Mash' Mashiloane, was already pretty glued to 'home' ethnicities from which he derives his pride in studying and presenting South Africa's musical demography.

In his most recent album, *Closer to Home* (2018), we hear how each hill that he traverses exudes its own musical dialects and landscape colours. Mash draws on creative spirits like the late greats of Winston Mankunku and Moses Molelekwa, and from other communities with whom he has stayed and shared, himself being a mix of influences among Ndebele, Pedi, Zulu, and Swazi, among others. Heritage and a place for safety and truth is 'home', as verbally announced in his first track. One starts with the indigenous longings. The album flows towards deeper identities, breaking any molds for specific types of jazz that has developed from past masters. Mashiloane holds truth with his chordal harmonic fifths, so prominent in the musical landscape.

Mash calls for relevancy and accuracy, which are essential criteria for him to choose the musicians featured on his album. He has done this masterfully, with the likes of spirited Nigerian guitarist, Kunle Ayo, percussionist Tlale Makhene, drummer Paki Peloeole, and bass guitarist Qhubekani Mthetwa. There is the brass section as well: Mthunzi Mvubu on saxophone, Thabo Sikhakhane on trumpet and Thembinkosi Ngcobo on trombone.

Elegance of tempo and message mark the delivery of this composer's songs. 'Naima' simply and softly conveys what's hopeful and free, through the spoken word. Renditions from pianist Moses Molelekwa are evident throughout, as in 'Molelekwa Spirt' and 'Ke Mashiloane' with lots of chord structures and traditional sounds. Mash honours the jazz giants, as with Mankunku's famous 'Yakhal' 'Nkomo', and 'African Heart' with shades of Zim Ngqawana's spirit-bending. It's Makhene's percussive presence that hits the heart, as in 'Umthandazo', another spoken word song with Mash's soft chordal backing, and in 'Naima'. Even a twisty 'All Blues' honors Miles Davis as Mash uses the higher register of his keyboard to mimic Davis' trumpet blues, with honesty and pride.

It is no wonder that Mashiloane will soon receive his Doctorate which focuses on South African music, and jazz in particular. His first two albums set the pace for digging deeper into those home roots, as in this third album. *Amanz' Olwandle* (2016) received two Mzanti Jazz Awards as best Contemporary Jazz Album (decided by a jury) and Best Jazz Album (voted for by the public). His second album, *Rotha – A Tribute to Mama* (2017), Mashiloane eloquently combines tradition with more universal jazz styles. What might his fourth album portray, one wonders? The roots wander far and wide, and his music will thus be endless and highly educational.

Album musicians:

Sibusiso Mashiloane – piano & keyboard
Kunle Ayo – guitar
Tlale Makhene – percussions
Paki Peloeole – drums
Qhubekani Mthetwa – bass guitar
Mthunzi Mvubu – saxophone
Thabo Sikhakhane – trumpet
Thembinkosi Ngcobo – trombone
Backing vocals.....

Sibusiso Mashiloane's Solo Piano Unveils Native Hymns about Origins (12 February 2021)

Unlike his previous four albums, jazz pianist Sibusiso 'Mash' Mashiloane's new album, *iHubo Labomdabu* (released this January 2021 by his own record label, Unlockedkeys Records), exhibits how solo piano can pull out layers of rootedness as he explores what nativeness means musically. This exploration continues his journey articulating stories of 'home', following themes begun in *Closer to Home* (2018), his third album, which was nominated for a SAMA Award for Best Jazz Album in 2019. Mash seeks to understand the rudiments of South African musical identities in order to decolonialize his own (and certainly the listener's) mind about Africanness. For this, his current Ph.D. study focuses on 'home' music, and what constitutes the fundamental roots of musical expression in his African context. It's about soul, rhythm, and emotion rippling through a divine connection.

The album cover suggests this connection by showing Mash sitting with other dark figures, but all highlighted with yellow halos around their heads, presumably realizing their human meaning and purpose blessed by the Divine. His pursuit of nativeness falls also during the now globally recognized annual Black History Month of February celebrations which incorporate not only the historical realities of the early American slave societies but from this, the emerging global call to address all forms of Black colonialization and liberation still operating in our contemporary world.

Solo piano often means pure 'heart' playing, configuring sounds driven by feelings in the 'now', often reflective and whimsical, but always 'in the present moment'. To Mash, therefore, no song can be repeated in quite the same way. Which makes this album very textural and even ephemeral, each song touching the listener's soul and emotions directly, like a contemplative oracle. The tracks in the album cause spikes of alertness, calm, care, and wonderment, about that daunting wilderness we all face at times, and particularly in the time of the COVID pandemic.

'Sabela Uyabizwe' starts off the album with an aggressive, repetitive left hand phrasing that holds tight the somewhat auspicious undertones expressed by right hand chords that fall into each other. This is not something subtle but alerts to what is to come. Like the post-romantic impressionist painters Monet and Renoir, who experimented with form and colour, Mashiloane paints his songs through the senses, with textures familiar to such impressionist composers like Saint-Saens or Debussy who would please at his rhythmic African twist. One hears in his songs a tidy wind, the forest of chirps, rain cascading on rocks, or sees a foggy window obstructing nature's beauty, or the stumbling of people wearing torn shoes (reminiscent of his days witnessing township living). There's images of child's play or dance (in 'Ihubo Lasekhaya') and dissonance (in 'Uthando Olunameva') to arrive at my favourite piece on the whole album, 'Colour of Peace', a masterful song, so thoughtful, with calculated notes, and a highly meditative and soothing progression of chords and runs. Here, one can see how Mash considers himself multi-ethnic in the African sense, having grown up with influences from different parts of South Africa. That Peace is universal.

In 'World of the Free', there's a familiar liberatory message as Mash starts and ends with a harmonic melody, but in between is a restless piano scurrying in and out of discordant runs, accompanied with a bluesy attitude. All resolves into "Choices of Life" as the album ends with caution, returning to that left hand which fingers a query: Is there hope imbedded in Mash's future, one wonders? He winks a 'yes'.....

Without knowing the songs' translations into English, one can simply hear and imagine, with eyes wide closed, how sound connects with the visceral, with rootedness, and then with Spirit which is

Beauty. Mash intended this. He speaks to a spirituality he is experiencing through his sometime one-note finger play on the keys. He is known to carry this spiritual thread into his teaching and mentoring, namely at the University of KwaZulu Natal in Durban.

Clearly, such mastery on the keys can only continue his climb to musical gianthood. His album can be bought on all digital platforms. Follow his journey at <http://www.sibumash.com>.

Pianist Sibusiso Mashiloane offers communal sounds from his people (1 February 2022)

Durban-based pianist, composer, arranger, Sibusiso 'Mash' Mashiloane, has moved from trio stage in earlier albums, including a solo piano album, into vocal chanting and other communal sounds of horns and percussion, including three tenor saxophones and a flute. This is Volume 1 of ***Music From My People***, recently released, portraying music from Sibusiso Mash's home ground. But he is far from finished. *"Due to lockdown, my band had to record online and I didn't have access to a long piano – the Yamaha – which is what I wanted to play on,"* he laments.

Mash's music is to be performed in the living flesh, in an acoustic setup, on a stage with that eager listening audience. As the Covid viral safari subsides somewhat, only now can he find solace to play live with his band, while still using a studio setting where he could record this latest album. *"For live, I might do without the drums and just stay with percussion. Tlale* knows the sound. My wish, also, is to play with the singer, Siya Makuzeni, because her musicality transcends; she knows the nuisances of what sounds I want."* So there's more to come.

Fifteen instrumentalists feature in the album along with three vocalists, giving varieties of texture, breath of sound, and instrumental melodies to Mash's foundational expressions, especially in his left hand's lower register which firmly grounds the harmonic vocals. The theme of 1976 Youth protests to freedom days of the 1990s onward are spelled out by these intergenerational musicians, including the younger Linda Sikhakhane on tenor saxophone, and the flute of Tseleng Mkhata, who trained at the Moses Molelekwa Foundation school in Johannesburg.

The album's creatively pictorial cover and inserts, designed by Elashna Amruthlal, show stick figures of people reacting to those 1976 shootings of youth in protest, giving a haunting reminder that 'home music' was also surrounded by violence and tragic fatalities of young leaders. There are suitcases of people leaving, portrayed in 'Umagoduka' (always leaving); *"people visit you, then quickly say they're leaving now, suddenly. The door means we are going now, we are leaving now."* Little circles on the cover design depict the communality of people.

Stylistic texture comes across, for example, from Bheki Khosa's guitar in the bouncy 'Sabela Uyabizwa': *"Bheki makes you respond to a call, like when your Mom calls you, you don't hesitate to come inside to her!"* Similarly, his guitar maintains that intimate rapport with Khaya Mahlangu's tenor sax in 'Between You & Me'. Mash's wish is that the younger ones must listen carefully to the older musicians, like Bheki and Khaya. *"I draw a lot on experience, like visiting a village. I want to visit Goema music and hear it. What is that 'bokaap' sound? In Europe, I want to hear how they hear our South African music. During my visit to the Sauti za Busara festival in Zanzibar, the most beautiful thing for me was to listen to a variety of musicians from the African continent. In my album, there's lots of bass rhythm motion which is what I picked up from those African guys. Like in 'African Communal', you can hear the African rhythms in it."*

Mash's doctoral studies, like for many actively engaged musicians, are challenging his energy levels. *"Researching is at the expense of the music; there's no time to align with playing music. When I write, this one [playing music] stops. While I was in full time research for several weeks, when I went to the piano, I made so many mistakes in my playing!! My notes slip. I got worried! A B flat became a B,"* he moaned.

Are they mistakes, though? *"It took me long time to get my ankle rhythm [wearing ankle shakes] and my hand rhythm just right. I'm afraid to lose that."* Mash's honesty and trepidation perhaps makes

him the fine teacher he is, as witnessed in some interesting videos he occasionally posts, and his passion to groom younger players.

Sibu Mash – piano/synth/composition/production; Mawande Kunene – Rhodes; Qhubekani Mthethwa – Electric bass; Shaun Johannes – Double Bass; Bheki Khoza and Keenan Ahrends – guitars; Xolisa Roro Dlamini, Nomthandazo Madiya and Wandithanda Makhandula – vocals; Thabo Sikhakhane – Trumpet; Thembinkosi Khumalo – trombone; Khaya Mahlangu, Buddy Wells and Linda Sikhakhane – Tenor Saxophones; Tseleng Mkhata – flute; *Tlale Makhene – percussion; Billy Williams and Siya Xulu – drums. Mix and Mastering by Jonathan Eato, Deep Bit Audio. Recorded: Unlockedkeys Studio. Overdubs by Moyasound, subflora studio and Maltre Productions. Artwork direction by Mzwandile Ntsele. Design by Elashna Amruthlal

Pianist Sibusiso Mashiloane gives Gratitude for his Journey finding 'Home' (16 May 2023)

His 7th album, **IZIBONGO**, culminates in what for pianist and soon-to-be Dr. Sibusiso Mashiloane considers a time for 'gratitude', a celebration of his edging closer and closer to what it means to be musically and personally 'home'.

He's worked hard at this, his last 3 albums: **Closer to Home** (2018); **Ihubo Labomdabu** (2021); and **Music From My People** (2022) exploring various traditional, contemporary spiritual, and improvised chanting in predominately musical idioms of this African continent, specifically from his home landscape in South Africa with mixed roots in Zulu, Swathi, and Ndebele cultures.

For International Jazz Day (30 April 2023) weekend, Durban-based Mashiloane pleased patrons at Cape Town's select jazz venue of Kwa Sec in Gugulethu, and at the in-town Blue Room and Athletic Club & Social. He proudly wanted to vet his new songs due to be recorded in late May as his newest album, entitled **Izibongo** (Gratitude).'



I carefully watched this enigmatic piano player whose treatment of his instrument glues the eye, particularly to his physicality of rocking on his seat. Mashiloane's signature beat uses his left ankle shaker which he wears along with bare feet. His harmonic approach starts softly, setting an emotional pace of thoughtfulness, with single finger runs, and often times with a steady left handed chordal drone driving the beat. Gutsy crescendos mount as he pounds the keys for emphasis, narrating a bluesy or mentally celebratory message, all meant to exude joy and appreciation to his Creator. One could call him the 'Keith Jarrett of South Africa', as a contemplative state can also embrace muscular contraction that ease into the music. Resultant energetic waves of musical expressions gush over one's being as well as felt emotions. His song then falls back to a breathable resolve, and settles into a peaceful state of thanks. One hopes the pianist has a large enough piano able to absorb the broad range of his instrumental modalities.

The album songs touch on his love of Creator, with two hymns to God, a fitting beginning in describing his gratitude for getting this far in his musical (and, albeit, personal) journey. He continues with tributes to loved ones, particularly aunts and his sisters who raised him and helped him through his schooling. Deference is given to his father, Ntate Mashiloane, who was mostly absent, yet cared when he could for young Sibusiso's growth. Other home musicians, like the late Moses Molelekwa and pianist and mentor Andile Yenana, are honoured for their indebtedness to local jazz styles and harmonies. Mashiloane's orchestration of the horn section (an alto and a tenor sax, preferably) seems a highlight in passing stories on to listeners, both in meditative and gregarious styles.

Mashiloane refers 'home' to one's identity. *"For me it's familiarity, it's what I relate with, and that is what I call home. But because I relate to it doesn't mean that it is mine, just because the concept is so diluted. Now, if we reverse and try to find what exactly is 'home', we might not find it's meaning in our lifetime. So my take on this is doing what I feel should be done at the present moment or what I*

feel I relate with. That transcends colour, country, different identities. In my music, what I refer to home, is what I grew up listening to around my parents, listening to the record player and the music they played.”

His views, reflections, musical attitudes about “home” are crystalizing, yet still incomplete, as he explores concepts, emotions, and physicality in his music. *“The latest album is saying: ‘Thank you to God for helping me complete these 7 albums.’ I have a lot to say about this album..... to highlight the signifiers of South Africa’s important cultures and traditions that are embedded in our people. To me, that has brought me the most success in these past 6 years.”*

Mashiloane embarked on this journey without any ideas on how it was going to go. *“It’s like an improviser takes us on a journey.... we don’t know our tomorrow. Yet, my goal of completing 7 albums up to this year never had any hiccups. I have gratitude!”*

So, who will be featured in this album? *“Drummer Sphelelo Mazibuko, Khagiso Ramela on alto sax, Sisonke Xonti on tenor sax, bassist Dalisu Ndlazi, and Siya Makuzeni on vocals. And possibly Mpumi Dhlamini as singer. Mpumi understands tones and is socialized in that community from whence I hear the music. There are lyrics in this album, to be written by Natalia Rungan. She has written 4 of my songs so far. But sometimes I feel lyrics can disturb.”* He is contemplating having Zulu phrases, with poems of Gcina Mhlophe. *“I talked to her about telling stories about gratitude and what it means to her.”*

Mashiloane has become a musical chameleon....*“put me in an environment and I will come up with the music from that environment. I know if I can listen to goema, and be absorbed in that music, I will start hearing elements of goema in my own compositions.”* That’s why he wants to travel through Africa as much as possible. *“I want to arrange those nuances in the music as they will be coming to me spontaneously.”*

I commented: You’ve been exposed to many things outside of yourself – even though what you are producing is coming from within you. So it would be interesting to see your attitude towards gratitude. I think you’re still hanging about what ‘home’ means, not sure yet what it means. I’m even grappling with this.

SM: *“Hugh Masekela connected with ‘home’ from his exile. Perhaps, this concept of ‘homelessness’ means you can’t take ownership of anything.... Perhaps this means we should not hold onto things and claim they are ‘ours’or ‘my home’don’t touch it. This my ‘home’, type of thing, you know. We can’t say this is how we should look, forever, cause life changes.... Look at how covid has taught us, that we are just an existence of human beings, and are part of the evolution of everything that exists, So I think of the concept of home as we must just be, of being, and to welcome the ‘other’ to what we associate as ‘home’ for all..... Because we all are just being. So that’s why we must show gratitude.... To just be being, we are being....”*

So how does Mashiloane put all that into music? *“It’s when I’m being in the music. Not trying to please, or be something I’m not. But I’m capturing the current moment, with this **Izibongo**, and giving gratitude to diversity as well.”* And for this humble maestro, even his gratitude extends to being able to write and complete his Doctoral thesis!

Interview with multi-instrumentalist Siphó “Hotstix” Mabuse, performing at CTIJF (27 March 2015)

On Thursday, 26 March 2015, one day before the opening performances of the 16th annual Cape Town International Jazz Festival in Cape Town, I was privileged to have a short interview with Siphó Mabuse, nicknamed ‘Hotstix’, a SAMA Lifetime Achievement Award (2005) musician as well as an entertainer and businessman. A drummer at age 8, Siphó went on to learn and play on other percussion, wind, and brass instruments. This youthful 64 year old is passionate about reaching the wider young ears with his ‘music’. During his press conference at the Cape Sun Hotel, he was questioned predominately by eager students pursuing what makes artists tick. He insisted, *“I don’t play jazz. Probably, I’m pretending to play jazz, but my music is quite basic and allows young people to interact with it.”*



“Try not to be something that you’re not,” he advises. *“Be honest and focused.”* A youthful voice commended Mabuse for his energetic (albeit ‘elderly’) approach to life. *“I get motivated and inspired by the audience, and I embrace an attitude of inspiration,”* replies Mabuse. *“I’ve always believed that each generation has its own space and expression, so we must hope to be able to enter that space and advance with it. I listened to Beatenberg in Soweto– they are, like wow! We cannot cocoon ourselves to believe that only our generation had the ‘best’ music. We elders must appreciate this expansion of expression....”*

Mabuse and I started our interview session with some history. I was working in newly independent Botswana in 1968 as a teacher trainer when I listened to a lot of South African music of the townships. He said his new band was playing at the Gaberones Main Hall then. Maybe I was there!

We talked about how my jazz soul emerged while attending the world’s largest jazz festival back in the 1950s-60s (still operating today) at the Newport Jazz Festival in USA, as a teenager. *“Yeh,”* he says, recognizing the familiar, *“I was there, too. I saw Miles – he was in retirement for a while. I was working in New York, then.”* I told him I saw the greats, too – Mingus, Charlie Parker, Brubeck – because I grew up as a teenager just a ferry ride away from Newport in those glorious, jazzy days. We shared our histories.

CM: Our concern with youth – There’s a desire to honour the legacy of South African elders and deceased artists and their contributions to the jazz world here. How do we encourage this honouring amongst the youth?

SM: *Unfortunately, most jazz musos have operated within an insular framework. For instance, they try to play like Miles, and interact the way he did. Rather, we ask young people,” Show us what you*

can do.” Then we can interact with this and the whole ‘them/us’ impasse goes away. They begin to understand music in a particular way, and ‘we’ allow it. Barney Rachebane’s grandson, Oscar, has great sax skills, and plays pop. I told Barney to allow Oscar to play kwaito if he wants to. Don’t turn him into a Charlie Parker yet, but allow him to listen. He will listen, but if you try to channel his thinking... My advice was not heeded and I think this young talent is now messed up because he wasn’t encouraged to hear and learn from those early maestros of modern jazz.

CM: Should improvisation be corrupted by pop music?

SM: *Improvisation cannot be corrupted by pop music, because improvisation IS what it is. Let’s first ask ourselves, what is jazz, historically? What were people doing before they decided to improvise? It was a development within a pop environment, maybe not the same as perceived today. There has always been pop music happening in a certain era which people related to. If you listen to Charlie Parker, for instance, some of his music was dance music. What he found in dance was the jazz.... He allowed the improvisation to happen within that dance style and this was a way to expand his jazz. Maybe, we’re missing that point. Did the guys create jazz out of nothing? It’s a feeling, from the soul. Improvisation wasn’t just created out of a vacuum. Jazz should not ‘scare’ youth. So Parker managed to make pop culture ‘jazzy’.*

In Soweto, we have ‘Jazz Sessions’, I don’t know if you have something similar here in Cape Town. Coltrane – he has a song called, ‘Spiritual’. It’s a bouncy, poppish song, but he improvises. It is a very repetitive piece, and could be boring. But because he improvised on it, you don’t hear the monotony within the chord structure...because it’s Coltrane. You take the name and his reputation and it’s no longer ‘pop’. it can survive...

CM: Jazz comes out of a folk history, like in the USA, the African Americans sang their gospel folk music. Folk music is ethnic, expressing a society’s history and culture. In South Africa, with its many different ethnic groups having their own folk expressions, don’t you think there should be more jazz coming out of these groups? Coming from the Afrikaaners, Anglos, Africans, etc? Is this happening? Maybe folk is jazz.

SM: *Educationally, we South Africans suffer from myopia. We don’t research on ourselves. We believe something else. What can we offer, we say? Mbaqanga music has a complex guitar... just like in jazz. There’s also the Maskandi of KZN. There are different styles we have not been able to tap into and create. And yet outside people say, wow! Courtney Pine was very avant garde in his improvised West African music. We shouldn’t look down on our African music which is jazz just because it doesn’t sound like American jazz. Look what Jan Garbarek did in his Norway. He went to the mountains to discover and research the indigenous Sami music, and brought it to us.*

Yonela Mnana's piano is the people's instrument! (5 April 2021)

[In December 2020, pianist Yonela Mnana premiered his newly composed children's mass with his Vivacious Sounds choir in their concert, **Regenesis: A New Beginning** at Soweto's Morris Isaacson Center for Music for children. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3K7_MFiRdQ Here, he offers how a bebop and swing solo piano in a R&B vein can enhance African choral harmonies.

The piano, throughout its history, has remained a social instrument, a means of conveying purpose, beauty, and message around it, from its European origins to South African townships. A pragmatist in curating his musical realities, jazz pianist Yonela Mnana exudes a profound confidence as he proves that piano harmonies and song can move listeners from quiet reflections to bursts of joy. His recent live concert at Gugulethu's Kwa Sec jazz venue outside of Cape Town did just that as previously locked down fans welcomed his not-too-frequent visits to their village.

Blind at birth, Mnana has moulded his delicate fingers to express musically what freedom means to him. Well versed in South Africa's apartheid history and how the piano played a role in developing the Black township sound of *marabi*, principally in the mining communities of Johannesburg and surroundings, Mnana continues to seek outlets of expression with his chosen instruments – his piano and voice, particularly in pursuing his PhD degree at Johannesburg's Wits University in South African Solo Jazz Pianism where we can expect further clarity about this captivating instrument.

Born in the Transkei 37 years ago, Mnana schooled at Polokwane's Siloe missionary boarding school for the blind, and furthered his life skills in Pretoria's Mamelodi, absorbing a wealth of different linguistic and cultural influences along the way. Adding exposure to African and Western choral styles of music, kwaito, R&B, soul, and other popular music, Mnana's grooming for local and international stages had found purpose. Currently, he navigates the Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban jazz club circuit with fellow musicians and friends such as Ariel Zamonsky, Sphiwe Shiburi, Sisonke Xonti, Mthunzi Mvubu, Nhlnhla Mahlangu, Lindiwe Maxolo, etc.

Besides some collaborations with overseas groups, Mnana continues to perform, compose and teach choral works with various youth groups, including Soultee, the South African School Choral Esteadford and with Ezibeleni's Vivacious sounds at its school for special needs in Katlehong.

Baba was his first album released in 2016 to wide acclaim with mixtures of various soul, gospel, and jazz styles learned over time.

Following his journey, one discovers his admirable traits: his love for the common person, the grassroots, and the power of choral works to inspire the social collective to care and find identity. Careful focus on solo jazz piano, the subject of his current doctoral research, also indicates his curiosity with improvisation, but in a very personal way, attending to honest fundamentals attached to the South African musical idioms. Just as Chopin dared to take the elitism of the piano of his day out of the higher echelons of European society and into the more social salons of the serious listener and commoner, Mnana's piano explains its arrival in the shebeen raves of South Africa's townships where song and dance flourished along with whiskey and other antics. The piano became 'the people's' instrument, moving from the Euro-centric Grahamstown of newly arrived settlers in the 1830s to mining communities of African workers in the early 1900s who sought a collective musical release from the drudgeries of underpaid and often dangerous work.

I wanted to know more... about what makes Mnana tick... We chatted during his brief concert tour in Cape Town end of March 2021...

CM: Why 'jazz' ??

YM: *Freedom is struggle. Improvisation or jazz wants to free us from the establishment, that which holds us from moving. So jazz is about struggle; it is freedom.*

CM: How does piano contribute to this freedom struggle?

YM: *A century after settlers carted their pianos to Grahamstown, the piano became the proponent of marabi music in the 1930s in South African townships where it became a household item and personalized as a means for entertainment in the most radical version. We have given it, rather, a purpose which reaches the ordinary person, I think. The other thing is that people like Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton, the way they used the piano in the bars in America, is the same way we use it with marabi.*

CM: Yes, the boogie woogie and marabi were similar, weren't they, in how they grew up?

YM: *Not only in the corporate business but, in fact, these players were the hosts. The pianist was closer to the shebeen Queen who could hook you up to a drink or any other delicacy you wanted. Just the placement of a piano in the ordinary house, and the wretchedness surrounding it, was like a pilgrimage, trying to get back to our older self in a way. As students, there is a tendency to look first to the American music, those DVDs and CDs, and study those documentaries, rather than taking that music as a barometer of good music. They might mislead themselves by holding that American music as a standard, rather than looking inward, or being interested in our own people close to us, that have walked in those spaces where we have walked. They become colonized in their thinking, are taught ways of thinking about the content, and end up judging themselves as less competent against those foreign standards. So, we have to change these lenses and perceptions of ourselves through our teachings.*

But, in contrast, the piano is a geographical thing, and not like a wind instrument that is very mobile. The piano is something you go TO ... In the same way you would go to the temple, or to the bedroom. There's a specific psychology which you have to assume when you sit at the piano. You can pick up your wind instrument and blow any time. But for me, 'going TO' is a way of adapting because you get to play different pianos in different spaces, while remaining as the same person. You improvise, not because you play the same notes but because you have to find and be comfortable with whoever you are. For South Africans, there is the intent to cope with whatever comes their way, in whatever regime is happening. I've been to other Universities and theaters with different pianos and I like to reimagine other persons that have gone through that vibe. So pianists have to go where the piano is. There's a wrestling, a battling, a desire to own it and make it ours.

CM: That's an interesting way to look at it. But doesn't the piano seem a bit elitist, restrictive as to who can go to it? Is it really social?

YM: *I think we've taken away the elitism and brought the piano back to the people, like into their houses and communities... I don't even think our houses were solid at that time. We had been taught that piano was something people had to learn in school. But for it to be played in the marabi shebeens was like a DJ going with his CDs and playing in these houses. The piano became the instrument of the people!*

CM: Talk more about this social aspect, and in the African context ...

YM: *I'm curious to hear more stories around that because we can begin to understand the kind of identity we've always had versus the hope we might have with this piano. The pianists now are trying to craft their way forward ... The old cliché: You can navigate when you know what happened in the past.*

CM: Along that line, the social nature of the piano, you've done a lot of choral work with choirs, and

even human rights and struggles involving women's issues. Let's just talk about the choral. How do you see the piano enhancing choral work in the African context?

YM: You know, the voice is the oldest instrument of all time. Choralism comes from our ceremonies, although the kind of humanity that subsumes it now is not the same as in the past, so it becomes another version of ourselves.

We've always had choral groups throughout time. But there a distinction – taking the themes of Black Mambazo – between a 'vocal group' and a 'choir'. I know my harmonic understanding stems from my being in a choir during school. I've been a voice WITHIN those voices. If you think in terms of harmony, playing with chords on the piano, it's all about voicing. So it's harder to separate the piano from the voice, or voices, and choir. Abdullah Ibrahim took the harmony from the African Methodist Episcopal Church and played it as it is, without having to do all those voicings that Americans tend to do. It was like hearing the Church in the piano. So it was dualism between the piano and choir. A 'vocal group' is separate from that.

CM: Like Stevie Wonder and Paul McCartney's 'Ebony and Ivory live together in perfect harmony' ... and the piano has the advantage of not just playing one note, but two plus.

YM: Yeah. Choirs plus piano equals harmony. That's the common factor, really. And because most pianists tend to be composers, that's why they tend to voice on the piano and voice for the choir. That's just one dimension I can talk about.

*A second point is that some choirs tend to sing a lot of Western stuff, with orchestration. So now, I prefer to re-orchestrate, that is through a kind of 'reductionism' of the piano. Most of the choirs here in South Africa that I have worked with get to hear just the piano, meaning they rehearse just with the piano chords. But when they rehearse with the orchestra, they wonder, what is this strange sound? So when I accompany the choir with my piano, I get to better hear the person singing, even if singing off key, and concentrate on helping that person rather than disappointing them. So now that I get to know the music, it's easier for me to try to transpose and voice with them. **Drum** magazine journalist, Todd Matshikiza, of 'King Kong' fame in London was always being commissioned to write choral music, even a piece for Queen Victoria when she visited the then Rhodesia. Gideon Nxumalo and Chris McGregor also wrote for other instrumentations. I think for me, the choir is much more available to me than other instruments whereas other artists maybe found inspiration in writing for different instruments.*

CM: I was wondering about your use of the term, 'solo' piano, because I think of the piano as being a social instrument where you play harmonies WITH others. The 'solo' again strikes me as being for your upper echelon of society in the European context where one plays for certain Nobility, etc.

YM: You say you studied piano privately, right? Alone. I see playing piano solo is the highest form of communicating with yourself; it's a testing point of destiny. So it's 360; we start by playing for ourselves, in the public which is the hardest, because you become exposed. Like with the marabi pianist, he never played with a lot of instruments; he played with himself. Like with the choir, when you play by yourself, you've got a lot of sounds on your hand. You have time to consider, and the chance to harmonize, to use your range, and you have the chance to be as silent or as loud as you wish. Without having to work towards specifics, like 'We're going to retard the music now' or 'we're stopping briefly here', or ... Solo gives a carte blanche, like an open blank canvas, presenting a big big challenge. But this time, instead of playing for the King, we play for ourselves. I think with solo, it's the best way of re-appropriating ourselves, to find our identities, to say "Today, I'm going to give myself my own time, my own freedom!"

CM: It's often said that pianos cannot 'bend' the sound, like a guitar or other stringed instruments can. But when you played on the keyboard – now I'm shifting to digital – you could bend a sound

electronically like you did yesterday at the Kwa Sec performance. What's your take on digital or electronic music and what it can do, keeping to your love of the original sound of the piano?



YM: For me, it's really more of experimentation than anything else. I'm not a 'piano perfectionist' or purist in that sense. We South Africans don't really have the luxury of choosing. But we have the ability to adapt to the situation we have. So, if the keyboard is in front of you, just see how far you can go!! For me, it's a question of experience.

CM: So do you see hope for the keyboard? Would you like to experiment more with it?

YM: I haven't thought about it like that. We're forced to deal with what we have. For instance, some say we don't provide our children with good nutrition. But our parents don't buy lousy food because they wanted to kill us. They buy what is available at a cost they can afford. And yet, we still live on!

CM: I'm thinking of piano and dance, like when pianist Sibusiso Mashiloane dances or stomps with his feet, giving rhythmic beats when playing the piano. Do you dance when you play?

YM: I don't think of it that way. There's a thing with the pianist and their bodies. What happens with the body is...there's no specification... but there's an unfolding relationship with the piano as we play it all the time. There's times when you're quiet; other times when you really have to move. I saw that with Bra Andile (Yenana) and can hear it with Art Tatum because they play by themselves. That tapping is also another kind of freedom – not only the freedom to harmonize but the freedom to dance with it, stomp, bend your body. I mean, what Keith Jarrett does with his body is amazing! It's beyond playing. You come to understand how you feel by looking at your body. So you find watching the pianist moving lends credibility to what the pianist is playing.

CM: You said you enjoy teaching children in the township.

YM: At the school I was with, the students are mostly singers. So I had to get them to see there's more to music than just singing, and give them opportunities to explore musical styles, scales, etc. Many had finished school and were active in their Churches, singing more as a stylistic living and less as an art form. Already, these students are great observers, so I show them the status quo, the basics, and try to inspire. I think my presence is enough and the way I play. You have to be clear – you can't teach people something you don't know. But they tend to believe you better when you're on the stage performing.

CM: When you finish your doctorate, you'll continue performing, but will you be teaching at tertiary level?

YM: You know, I prefer to stay at school level. University students are chasing their own degrees, are arrogant (chuckle!)...whereas at school level, in the township, students concentrate more because they are limited in what they have to work with. They're not privileged. So I have to enrich them with what they have. I wouldn't mind having one or two lectures at University level as a staff member – I might have to go there because I need the money!

CM: Actually, I can't see you there either. I see you more working and enjoying the grassroots level.

YM: Yeah yeah, I like it there! You see, the system – at tertiary... You've got 45 minutes, and you've got to sign the register.....and go to staff meetings! No no no. I prefer teaching in the townships.....

CM: Where is this school?

YM: Outside of Alberton, in Katlehong. The schools around us come for instruction in afternoons. Our space offers much more a sense of community rather than an 'academic' environment as we encourage students to learn more from each other than with a top-down kind of education.

CM: Your social causes, particularly work with women and gender-based violence, have featured in your activism. What about the need to work with men around these GBV issues?

YM: For me, it's not the issue of working with men per se. Rather, we work on important issues with the male students informally, outside of classes. We talk and laugh, then challenge, like "If you must fight, then why not fight among yourselves, rather than beat a person less stronger than yourself?" Practical stuff. At my school, we try to be less 'top down' in our communications; there is less of this 'othering' among students, meaning the way they relate to each other in the two genders. I think it's much more balanced than what happens in society. If we can just foster these good behaviours, it might spread to others. Instead of being political and spewing manifestos, you know? We are encouraging the students to rise to their best levels of themselves because many come from squatter camps and from other horrible conditions. They learn to relate to each other as fellow humans and less as coming from different levels of society. Music brings a type of cohesion – like Ebony and Ivory, standing side by side!

CM: But a lot of that has died off, unfortunately...society is very different now...

YM: Yeah, but I think consumerism has caused that. You have a desire to be successful for yourself, to be higher than someone else. To have something that someone else doesn't have. So these are the causes – we've lost that communal aspect of surviving and growing with each other. And even praying for each other.

As I thanked my musician friend for his time and thoughts, he concluded gleefully: "We can now use the hybrid chat by phone...and even go "beyond the masked" conditions facing us!" Indeed, there will be the beyond...

DIGITAL REFERENCES

Yonela Manana: Vivacious Sounds choir in their concert, **Regenesis: A New Beginning** at Soweto's Morris Isaacson Center for Music for children. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3K7_MFiRdQ

