

African music in her veins

 **BackBeat**
with Cornelius Thomas

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A NATURAL ACT:
Sathima Bea Benjamin with her son Tsakwe. This picture was taken in Copenhagen in 1972.

She will perform in Cape Town at the North Sea Jazz Festival at the end of March.

Picture by IB
SKOVGAARD

THE MIRACLE of *A Morning in Paris* with Duke Ellington in 1963, featured in this column a few weeks ago, prompted me to delve deeper into the life of Sathima Bea Benjamin.

I found Beattie Benjamin, a gangly kid born in Johannesburg in 1936 but who grew up in Cape Town, conquered the world stage, and eventually received the South African Women for Women Award.

Being of Afro-Eurasian descent, Beattie had the music of three continents in her veins. But Cape Town forged her.

Going to bioscope on Saturdays to watch American films and listening to Nat King Cole and Billie Holiday on the radio was standard fare for coloureds. And for Beattie. As a kid she debuted as a singer during an interval variety show at a local bioscope.

There were the luxuries of the records and swinging at *langarm* dances — and Beattie sang through it all.

As a teen Beattie participated in the resurgence of the music of the 1920s Harlem.

Alas, in 1953 she had to stand outside, listening through a window to her “first real love”, Sam Isaacs, drumming jazz to a white audience at a skating rink.

The United States at this time was stirring out of segregation while South Africa was descending into apartheid.

By the late 1950s Benjamin had toured with the African Jazz and Variety road show and gigged with jazz virtuoso Harold Jephtha and pianist Henry February, singing in whites-only facilities.

As was the case with Harlem’s Cotton Club during

the 1920s, the musicians here too had to hang out with the kitchen staff during breaks.

She sang with Dollar Brand’s Jazz Epistles in 1961. A year later, with work becoming impossible under apartheid, she left South Africa.

Duncan Villager Johnny Dyani gave her the name that stuck.

“It was Dyani who named me Sathima ... He told me it meant ‘a person with a kind heart’,” said Beattie.

In the thirty-six years after the miracle morning, Benjamin married Abdullah Ibrahim, produced nine albums, founded a record company, gave birth to Tsakwe (a son) and Tsidi (a daughter), and kept South Africa on the world agenda.

Early in 1999 she visited Cape Town and, with Henry February and others, created the studio album *Cape Town Love*.

A few months later in Toronto on August 7, SA Women for Women — a forum celebrating Women’s Day and honouring the achievements globally of South African women — conferred on her its 1999 Award.

Benjamin then said: “Doing my part for the struggle was a perfectly natural act. It’s but a drop in the ocean ... My heart yearns still to go home and sing to my people ... I hope this can become a reality soon.”

Well, because Benjamin is billed to sing in the North Sea Jazz Festival at the end of March, the yearning will soon come true, *inshallah*.

* Information for this column was found in Lars Rasmussen’s book, *Sathima Bea Benjamin: Embracing Jazz*.