

the jazz years

Gallo archivist **Rob Allingham** looked into recordings by the company since its inception in 1926. This is an edited version of the paper, focusing on the jazz recordings to come out of Gallo and its subsidiaries.



the 1950s

are remembered today as the great age of South African jazz. The 1960s and beyond as the era of its decline. The real story is somewhat more complex, partially because the definition of what exactly jazz was and wasn't changed over time.

Of all the major vocalists of the era, perhaps Dolly Rathebe and Ben Satch Masinga (who recorded for Trutone) could be considered fairly straightforward jazz singers. The styles of others included certain jazz elements but these were combined with indigenous influences as well as Afro-American rhythm and blues to produce an original mixture which would come to be called mbaqanga.

Many instrumental combinations played what was referred to as jazz, but their style owed as much to South African sources as American swing.

The Harlem Swingsters recorded for Troubadour and along with the Merry Blackbirds and the original Jazz Maniacs were one of the country's most important bands in the formative years. Many of their compositions - *Majuba* and *E Qonce*, for example, became local standards and from its ranks came such well-known players as trumpeter Gray Mbau, pianist Gideon Nxumalo, saxophonists Michael Xaba and Ntami Piliso.

Ntami later joined his brother Shadrack (on trumpet) to record as the Alexandra All Stars for the Tropik label while doing numerous "underground" sessions for Troubadour using different pseudonyms.

(In the days before the royalty system, many musicians found moonlighting irresistible regardless of whether or not they were under contract to one label.)

Wilson ~'King Force' Silgee recorded for Gallotone as King Force's Jazz Forces and also as the reformed Jazz Maniacs. Eric Nomvete's Havana Swingsters from East London recorded for Trutone's Quality label while producer Strike Vilakazi formed small session groups to play his compositions. (One of these, Little Jazz, later became the melodic basis for *Mama Thembu's Wedding* from *Ipi Tombi*.)

THEN, LATER IN the 'Fifties, a new strain of jazz began to appear which contained a greater American influence. The Father Huddleston Band featuring a young Hugh Masekela on trumpet and Jonas Gwangwa on trombone, made a few sides for Gallotone.

The Jazz Dazzlers, also on Gallotone, combined Kippie Moeketsi on alto sax with Mackay Davashe on tenor plus Gwigwi Mrwebi on clarinet and Darkie Slinger on trombone. (Much of this line-up would soon provide the instrumental backing for *King Kong*.)

But the real milestone occurred in 1959 when visiting American pianist John Mehegan assembled a session group featuring Masekela, Moeket and Gwangwa. They recorded the very first African jazz LP's, appropriately titled *Jazz in African, Volumes One* (reviewed in this issue) and Two, which were released by Continental, a Gallo subsidiary.

These two volumes are included in the reissue *African Heritage* series released by Teal Trutone a few days ago.

The Jazz Epistles session followed with virtually the same personnel save for the substitution of pianist Dollar Brand for Mehegan, then a solo LP by Brand, a live recording of the 1962 Cold Castle Jazz Festival and Chris McGregor's Jazz, *The African Sound* in 1963 (also reviewed) - all Gal releases.