

A Dane's third love

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BackBeat

with Cornelius Thomas



IN EXILE: Arriving in Copenhagen in early 1963 with their manager Jens Elers (extreme left) are South African jazz musicians (from left) Makhaya Ntshoko, Dollar Brand, Beattie Benjamin and Johnny Gertze.

“THERE are two things in life — beer and books”, Danish bookstore owner Lars Rasmussen once believed. But since encountering the music of Abdullah Ibrahim, he has added a third love to his life — South African jazz.

In the 1950s Sophiatown and District Six swung as South Africa's main jazz locations, with a mix of American jazz and kwela and some spice called Cape jazz. But after the destruction of Sophiatown (1955) and the Sharpeville massacre (1960), many jazz musicians opted for exile. By the middle 1960s, the city of Copenhagen embraced South African jazz.

In 1972 the genre had Copenhagen-based rock music lover Lars Rasmussen mesmerised.

Recently he published two books on South African jazz — *Abdullah Ibrahim: Discography and Sathima Beba Benjamin: Embracing Jazz*.

Late last year he established contact with East London jazz lovers, seeking information for his book-in-progress on Duncan villager Johnny Dyani, and last month he visited Cape Town to do research on the 1960s Cape jazz scene.

Of his visit Rasmussen says: “I

stumbled over a collection of very fine photographs taken by Hardy Stockman who was around at that time and decided to make a book of them.” For now, having secured Stockman's treasure trove, he has put the Dyani book on hold for the Cape jazz book, which will be out in May.

Intrigued, I ask him why this passion for South African jazz.

He says: “It comes from another world; it is so unlike anything else that goes under the name of jazz. Perhaps it's an underflow of tribal music, really ancient roots, hard to describe ... I'm deeply fascinated with this music and don't want to listen to anything else.”

After attending a concert of pianist Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand) in 1972, Rasmussen was hooked.

“I have followed him for many years all over the world and can sit evening after evening listening to him.”

After encountering Ibrahim, Rasmussen discovered he had missed a lot of jazz in Copenhagen.

The city's appetite for jazz deepened when American jazzmen Oscar Peterson and Ben Webster took refuge there in the early 1960s.

Then the South Africans came.

In 1963 the Dollar Brand Trio (with drummer Makhaya Ntshoko and bassist Johnny Gertze) and singer Beattie Benjamin first visited Copenhagen, where they played at the Jazzhus Montmartre. Regular returns between 1963 and 1972 made them household names.

Bassist Dyani settled in the city in the early 1970s. There he recorded his jazz corpus with compatriots saxophonist Dudu Pukwana, trumpeter Mongezi Feza and drummer Louis Moholo.

And Cape singer turned New York exile Benjamin added her sublime voice to the scene.

Rasmussen says: “I was immediately struck by her (Benjamin's), natural appearance and the beauty of her voice ... To this day I have remained an admirer of her singing.”

Last year he produced a Benjamin compilation called *Embracing Jazz*.

Rasmussen has a new motto nowadays: “Books, beer and South African jazz”.

• Tickets for the North Sea Jazz Festival, March 30-31, are now available at the Jazz Inn in Union Arcade.