

# Songbird, farewell



BackBeat  
with Cornelius Thomas

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**E**AST London's songbird of note is silent.

Queenstown-born jazz vocalist Veliswa Komani died of meningitis in Mdantsane last week.

Veliswa has become a household name in local jazz circles over the past several years. She is a product of Queenstown, which has produced many jazz musicians. She sang in local venues, doing gigs and set work, until she spilled the sounds of Natalie Cole and Sarah Vaughn into the public ear in 1999 when she sang at the opening of the HAEL housing project in Belgravia Crescent.

Thereafter, Veliswa became a regular at CD's jazz cafe where she was billed in her own right and fronted for the house band, Another Level, as well as for other visiting groups. She sang at other clubs and events also, most notably the Old Mutual Millennium Jazz Festival.

Always she brought the enduring anthems of the Eastern Cape, Ntyilo Ntyilo and Lakutshon iLanga, for a long time not heard before the people again, doing her bit for the African Renaissance.

Veliswa could not wait for the first opportunity to try her talents up North, to sing in the Gauteng



VELISWA KOMANI

clubs.

For the past six months the East London Jazz Society thought of securing funding for Veliswa to create an opportunity for her to sing in Cape Town or Johannesburg.

And Cape Town-based master jazz pianist Hotep Galeta told me at the North Sea Jazz Festival in the mother city, "I was waiting for word on Veliswa, about her com-

ing to Cape Town. Then I heard the shocking news."

The songbird fell ill and never made it to the big city. Never even got to sing in a function at the junction, her birthplace Queenstown.

However, she paid her dues alongside other Queenstown greats, to wit Pat Matshikiza and Stompie Mavi, to enliven the East London jazz scene again.

And those who had the privilege to listen to her will not forget her sweet voice and ready smile.

Yet, like that other Queenstown diva, Margaret Singana, Veliswa too died penniless.

To help the Komani family in their time of bereavement, a benefit concert featuring Ikhwezi, Another Level, the Gawulana Quartet and Friends will be held at Duke's in the Mdantsane Hotel this Sunday from 13h00 to 17h00. Admission will be R10.

On October 28, the last night at CD's, Veliswa sang a songbook of Nina Simone and Natalie Cole. She closed with *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*.

The audience lamented the closure of the club, but little did they know they had been listening to the last of the songbird.