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Sublime Sathima for North Sea Jazz Fest



BackBeat
with Cornelius Thomas

JAZZ singer Sathima Bea Benjamin is back in South Africa this week. The New York-based exile is however not here to perform but to attend to family matters.

But take heart. She's also checking out the mother city scene in preparation for her performance at the recently announced North Sea Jazz Festival in the Good Hope Centre on March 30-31.

In the course of her sojourn abroad (1962-), Benjamin occasionally visited South Africa, but it had never been easy to get her here and impossible to keep her.

Her forthcoming performance at the festival is owed to the resolve of organisers Rashid Lombard and Clarence Ford to bring South Africa only the best jazz artists.

While Benjamin has been on the world stage four decades now, she is largely unsung in South Africa. Some few know of her albums *Southern Touch*, *Love Light*, and *Cape Town Love*.

However, the release in 1997 of a long lost album sparked new interest in Benjamin.

By February 1963 the Dollar Brand (later Abdullah Ibrahim) trio and their vocalist Benjamin had been performing at Zurich's Africana Club nearly a year when the Duke Ellington Orchestra breezed through.

The South Africans attended the Ellington concert, where Benjamin promptly convinced Ellington to

come listen to Brand, who was then soon to become her husband.

Impressed, Ellington invited the trio to record at Barclays studio in Paris. The product of this engagement, *Duke Ellington Presents Dollar Brand*, introduced Brand to the world.

Ellington also invited Benjamin to record. The next day the trio (and on some tunes Ellington and Billy Strayhorn) backed her. Later when Ellington presented the tape for production it was turned down as Benjamin was unknown and did not sound "commercial" enough.

Benjamin kept asking for a copy of the tape. But apparently it had been lost. Years later it turned out that Gerhard Lehner, sound engineer at Barclays, had made an extra copy. This led to the cutting, 34 years after the recording, of *A Morning in Paris*.

This historical album presents twelve ballads in Benjamin's sublime voice.

Now she's coming to serenade South Africa at the North Sea Jazz Festival.

As a bonus Benjamin will bring along an American backing trio. It has not been confirmed yet, but a reliable source reckoned that the baddest bassist from America, Buster Williams, will be in that trio.

Tickets are available at Computicket at R235 for a day pass and R360 for two days.

