

Mhlongo does maskanda



BackBeat

with Cornelius Thomas

Daily
Dispatch



URBAN ZULU:
Busi Mhlongo in
a live concert
last year.

May 11,
2001

Picture by
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LAST March she braved a freak electric storm and took the only flight out of Johannesburg to perform her set at the North Sea Jazz Festival.

At 3am — because the programme had been delayed — Mhlongo took the stage. It was just after the populist Hugh Masekela had enthralled the Kippies crowd with mbanqanga.

But even then Busi dug to deeper roots. She sang and cajoled the audience to dance to maskanda songs, the words of which they did not know, but which they subliminally understood.

"Busi's stunning hybrid (of) Zulu-English vocals takes the distinctive flavour maskanda and creates Pan African pop with a western twist," said *Big Issue* magazine.

The magazine referred to the maskanda music of the KwaZulu-Natal midlands and KZN and South Africa's foremost practitioner of this style, Mhlongo.

Mhlongo's career started in the lovely hills of Inanda where she was born some fifty years ago. A member of a musical family, she sang at family occasions, at school and church, and traditional Zulu weddings — and the hills came alive.

She left school and joined African Jazz — a jazz and mbanqanga roadshow that had been in demand since the mid-1950s — in Johannesburg.

From there music took Busi around the world.

Starting with theatrical pieces in the 1960s with jazz and mbanqanga artists, she graduated to perform Zulu and English songs on an extended cabaret tour in Mozambique — Lourenco Marques was the place to be those years.

Angola and eventually Portugal followed.

In Europe's second African-European melting pot —

Italy having been the first — she found music lovers did not listen to words' literal meanings, but to the emotions they carry. This encouraged her to sing her Zulu songs.

In 1972 the diminutive Mhlongo took London by storm and also recorded with Port Elizabeth's most famous exile, Dudu Pukwana.

She guested on other albums, recording on three continents in the 1970s.

In the 1980s Mhlongo divided her time between the Netherlands and South Africa.

Mhlongo recorded her debut album, *Babemu*, in 1993 in Holland. Critical concert successes in the 1990s included the Grahamstown Arts Festival and the Outernational Meltdown concert at the Africa Centre in London.

But all along Mhlongo offered the music industry deference — doing session work in the shadows of Julian Bahula, Salif Keita, and the Gambian group Ifang Bondi.

Stewing while on these tours and sessions was her declaration of independence — a corpus of urban Zulu songs offering no compromise.

The result was her critically acclaimed *Urbanzulu* album. It suggests jazz and kwaito, but it pulses maskanda.

She is currently doing gigs all over South Africa. So maskanda is here to stay.

Mhlongo has the past two years followed a long line of strong women who had declared their jazz independence — Miriam Makeba, Sibongile Khumalo, Hazel Leach, Dee Dee Bridgewater, and Sathima Bea Benjamin — and the South African jazz scene is the richer for it.