

1991

call me MR DRUMS

It's been over 25 years since Louis Moholo left his native South Africa with fellow Blue Notes Johnny Dyani, Mongezi Feza, Chris McGregor and Dudu Pukwana. In this rare interview with Richard Scott, the master drummer pays tribute to his friends and recalls both their early years playing under apartheid and the group's explosive impact on the London jazz scene of the 1960s. Photo by Coneyl Jay.

LOUIS MOHOLO is one of the world's great drummers, up there with Max Roach and Roy Haynes. Whatever the context – South African jive, jazz, free music – Moholo finds rhythm, explores rhythm, allows rhythm its own say, letting it live, breathe and speak.

After leaving his native South Africa with the Blue Notes (Chris McGregor, piano; Dudu Pukwana, saxophone; Mongezi Feza, trumpet; Johnny Dyani, bass) in 1964, he quickly became a mainstay of the European free-jazz scene, playing in key groups with John Tchicai, Roswell Rudd, Archie Shepp, Steve Lacy, Peter Brötzmann, Mike Osborne, Keith Tippett and Irene Schweizer, amongst others. He also detected the heartbeat in more obtuse musical environments with Evan Parker, Derek Bailey and other free improvisers, confounding the dogma that free music is somehow arrhythmic. On the contrary, more than any other drummer or percussionist, Moholo shows us that it is all rhythm, that there is no contradiction between freedom and the pulse, between the sky and the earth.

Today he leads his own group, Viva La Black, featuring Sean Bergin, Steve Williamson and Tebe Lipere amongst others, and we've recently heard him playing with Cecil Taylor in Taylor's momentous Live In Berlin ("Cecil is so exuberant . . . I love Cecil"). He also hopes to soon achieve a long-held ambition to play with Ornette Coleman.

Louis is the only surviving member of the Blue Notes, Mongezi Feza died in 1975, Johnny Dyani in 1986, while last year saw the sad deaths of both Chris McGregor and Dudu Pukwana. At present Louis is preparing a tribute CD for Ogun dedicated to all the Blue Notes which will feature contributions from Evan Parker, Dave

Holland and Keith Tippett amongst others. He is also working on a new Viva La Black album and a solo project.

I asked him to share some memories with me, beginning with his childhood in South Africa . . .

A H N O! My name is this, I was born by the river, you want me to start like that? You want me to do all *that* stuff?

OK, I was born in South Africa in 1940, on 10 March, under the *beat* I was born. And I come from a no-good country, in terms of laws, a very fucked-up country indeed. That's why I split in the first place.

But before I tell you about that, let me tell you about how I started playing drums. It was just from being a kid, touching this and that, I got two sticks and started banging on the sink, and maybe some notes would come out; then scratching a ruler against the fence on the way back from school, maybe that would sound nice. I didn't know that this would be the beginning of my appreciating the notes that come out of a drum.

And in South Africa, the drum is the thing. It was banged all over the place, everywhere that you went some cats would be sitting there banging on the drums. There would be boy-scouts marching-bands coming down the street, and it used to fascinate me the way the cat on the big bass drum used to swing that thing and play, boom boom boom! It used to drive me crazy, you know?

We used to follow these boy-scouts bands until our mothers would come and gather us back because we were going too far

and we would come back crying. We'd get some sticks and things and try to imitate the boy-scouts. I would play on top of a tin can, just imitating the scouts, round and round the house, banging and making a lot of noise, like kids do. That's how I started, though I didn't realise that I had started.

I got into the boy-scouts and then I was near to those kettle drums, the real thing! Ha ha! I was there, playing those kettle drums. But they got taken away, because the scout-master said I was playing too much, I was *unruly*. . . . But I had tasted the real thing now, and I couldn't leave it – right up to now, I'm still on the case, still on it. This morning before you came I was banging away for two hours, *every* day. It keeps the doctor away!

That's how I started and from then on I just went on to play normal dancing stuff for ballrooms, Glenn Miller, Ellington. Then I left that for jazz combos and trios, and that just grew and grew. I played in many places in South Africa, I won a prize for my drumming, they were issuing little gold stars you know, ha ha! Oh man, you're a good drummer, have a little gold star, right on! So I gave it to my father, I don't know what happened to that. Dudu got one too, Mongs, and Chris too got one. I was tied for my prize with a drummer called Mr Eddie Mboza, who died in South Africa, a very, very good drummer. He played with the first Chris McGregor big band in South Africa. One day he didn't make the gig, this guy, and I depped for him and I never parted with Chris from then. This is about '61.

We were invited to play in a festival in Switzerland, and Dollar Brand invited us to come to a club where he was playing and we worked there and stayed in Zurich for one and a half years. And we came to England. We got out of South Africa to better ourselves, you know? And see the world. With all the *shit* that was happening, there was no space for *nobody* to do anything in South Africa. We have to come over, I mean, we were tired of it. I was working with Chris McGregor and Chris McGregor's a white cat. We were not supposed to play together; we were not supposed to be on the same bandstand with Chris, we were not supposed to play for white people. I mean, I was supposed to play places where *my mother* wouldn't be allowed to come in and hear me play. And they wouldn't only refuse her to come to my concerts, they would also beat her up maybe – so fucked up were those guys in South Africa at that time. And even now they are still like this.

So sometimes Chris McGregor would have to play behind a curtain, and vice versa, I would have to play behind a curtain if we got hired by some white cats. And Chris McGregor used to come to this place where we would drink some beer, in the Zulu quarters, but white people were not *allowed* in here; Chris would paint his face with black polish to come in there. You know, Chris was not even allowed to come into my village! For a long time white people were not allowed to come into black townships at all. And vice versa, we had to get papers to come into white areas. I was arrested a lot of times coming from a gig carrying my sticks home. I wasn't doing anything, but it was an offence just to *be* there, just to be walking in the street.

I had to walk seven miles home, because there are no buses or taxis going to my town and all the gigs were in white areas. And the police would pick me up and I'd be sent to pick potatoes. Straight from a gig to picking potatoes for three months!

And I was sold once, you know. I was *sold*! There was something happening in my township and this guy sent me to get a bottle of brandy in town, which was the only place you could get it. So I got this money, I walked into town and went into the bar and this guy asked me what I wanted and asked whether I was a coloured person or a black person – because there was no way black people could get liquor. So he said 'Come here', and ran a pen through my hair, like that, you see? And it stuck, so I had failed to be a coloured because they have hair that is closer to white people's hair. I failed and was slammed out.

As I was being chucked away from the bar some policemen came and arrested me, saying 'What were you doing in *there*' being a black, you see. So I was arrested and sentenced to four months for being in that house. But instead of just lying about in jail and cleaning up faeces they sold us to the farmers to go and pick potatoes and they were making money out of us, we got a shilling a day. I did that for about two months.

WHEN WE came here I started hearing some other vibes. I was away from South Africa and away from the chains. I just wanted to be free, totally free, even in music. Free to shake away all the slavery, anything to do with slavery, being boxed in to places – one, two, three, four – and being told you must come in after four. I was just a rebel, completely a rebel. And then of course there were people like Evan Parker, whom I saw was also a rebel. From then on I just played free, I met John Tchicai, Steve Lacy, Peter Brötzmann. Me and John Stevens were actually the first drummers to play free music in Britain, if the truth be told, and then after that a lot of other cats came in, but we were the first.

Free music is *it* man, it's so beautiful. The word 'free' makes sense to me. I know that's what I want; freedom, let my people go. *Let my people go!* And that's interlinking with politics, they embrace each other. It's a cry from the inside, no inhibitions. . . . And the colours are so beautiful, there's a cry, there's joy, a joyful noise, there's sadness, there's rain, there's winter, there's love . . . that's why it's beautiful.

We felt very welcomed in Britain. We didn't hold back, we didn't have airs and graces, we were just innocent guys coming from South Africa. And the people liked us. Dudu was liked all over the place, and Johnny Dyani; I mean, the charisma of these guys. And people who met Mongs would just fall apart, you know? We were just a likeable band – ask Mr Keith Tippett about it, ask Mr Evan Parker.

Not everybody liked us. We played at Ronnie Scott's Club but we *never* liked it. We had a misunderstanding with the manager. He started calling us *boys*, and we are not boys. In South Africa we are called boys. My father would be called a *boy* by a boy of about 12 years old just because he's white! At

Ronnie Scott's they would start going (affects public school accent) 'Well, you see, *boys* . . . one should do this, one shouldn't do that . . . OK *boys*?' And I would go 'No no no, don't call us boys!' I'd been through too hard a time to be called a boy in England.

So, we had to fight very hard here too, there was a lot of prejudice. I don't even want to say anything about it, but someone said I should use Brylcreem for my hair! Ben Webster said that. My hair was just natural black hair, I didn't put no Brylcreem in it, but he would, like, make a joke, 'Hey maan, you should put some Brylcreem in your hair maan!'

Then me and Mongs asked him if we could sit in with him and he asked us where we were from, we said South Africa and he couldn't believe we could play *anything*, because maybe we were from the jungle. He goes, 'You come from South Africa, my man? No, come tomorrow'. And we *did* come tomorrow because we were that serious, *desperate*. Then after two weeks he gave us a break, Mongs played so beautiful . . . and Ben Webster *adopted* Mongs after that. Right there on the bandstand, he goes, 'Man, you're my son!' He wanted to go through it all, legally and everything, *really*, ask . . . I was just going to say, 'Ask Johnny,' I was just going to say 'Ask Johnny' man . . . In the end it was just a verbal contract, 'Okay, I'm your son'.

When Stuff Smith died we were consoling Ben Webster, he came to us — me, Mongs, Johnny and Dudu — he was crying and we looked after him for one day. We gave him respect, the respect that we came with from South Africa, he was our father, and he liked us for that, he liked us. He used to look after us very well, Ben . . .

Do you ever regret leaving South Africa?

I sometimes think that if the music had been explained to me, what it would do to me in my life, this heavy duty demand it makes, I don't think I would ever be interested, now that I know what music can do to a person. I like music, but the life . . . if I could be born again and know that I'm going to come to be in exile, then no way, because exile is a fucker.

Sometimes, a *lot* of times, I heard Dudu say that he would have preferred the difficulties of South Africa than to deal with the music over here. Because in South Africa, although there was the oppression and all that, we still played *innocently*, we didn't know who the bank manager was! Over here you have to deal with him, and VAT and all that shit. In South Africa at least the music was yours, and the people of South Africa, they recognise that if you are gifted in something, in anything, then you *are* that, and you *are named* that. You are respected, and just innocently too, no big deal, not because you have a million pounds in the bank; you are just the village drummer who makes his people happy. I would be called *Louis Who Plays The Drums*, my surname would be *Drums*.

And here?

Here? It's just another crazy drummer, isn't it? Here there are so many other things, forces which have *nothing* to do with life. But I thank God that I came here anyway, you know, because

at least there's one South African drummer who knows how to play free music, to play avant-garde. Because in my early days I thought I didn't want to have anything to do with avant-garde, free music or jazz; I wanted to pay my rent, and it didn't pay my rent so well!

Could you talk about the Blue Notes?

I thank God for having met up with these guys. Like Dudu this guy was a *ton* of music, you know? Mr Dudu Pukwana, he used to compose about four songs a day, even in the hardship of South Africa, and he practised *every* day. Dudu was just the pillar of the Blue Notes. Dudu the blessed light, he was special.

And Mongs was the *darling* really, the sweetheart of the band. Everyone loved him, Mongs would knock us out, everybody! Then in South Africa we had this other guy called Nick Moyake, Nick was the older guy to us, and we respected him, he had more knowledge of music — indigenous music, music of the heart. He was just music and he pulled us together in terms of strength. Everybody had a part to play.

Then, of course, Johnny — every song that we played Johnny would cream it and make it so beautiful. Johnny was so musical, anything he did was . . . he was kind of like a godsend for us, he had some magic about him. And we knew from the start, when he was a young boy with a singing band and I was playing drums backing them, he was such a fantastic singer — singing the high notes with such ease. Then he switched from alto-singing to bass-playing, and he played it so well. He just fitted like a glove, he was in the same vibe as us, and he put the music of the Blue Notes where it was at. He was a gift from heaven.

Then Chris. We would naturally get into songs, we would take them lightly, like kindergarten songs, and Chris, maybe typically of a Westerner, would leave no stone unturned and he saw the gold, which we didn't because we were *in* the gold. He saw this beautiful music, and did something about it. He organised it, put it into perspective from his musical knowledge. So we had everything in there. Chris was very broad-minded, a very, very clever cat. In the end he was very proud of us, and we were very proud of him, secretly.

Now this is a secret, but we were very proud of each other, and we really kicked each other's ass. And we were so together too; if anybody said, 'practise', under no circumstances were we to refuse. We did not play games with each other, we did not play buddy-buddy, even though we were buddies. If I fucked up Dudu would just go, 'You fuck off man!' No buddy-buddy. If I'm out of line or wrong, there was no bullshit.

We were strict and really very concentrated on this music. It was like something very urgent we had to do, and our first record was called *Very Urgent*. It was just like a flower that burst open.

What happened to the band when you all split off to do your own things?

We came to understand that blood is thicker than water. Even

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