

# Rip-off recollections



BackBeat  
with Cornelius Thomas

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**SUNNY RAY:**  
Street corner  
crooner  
Sunny Kops  
(front) with  
the  
Hollywood  
Stars in the  
early 1950s.

**“I LOVED** to sing the songs of Johnny Ray,” says Sunny Kops, recalling how as a teenager he led his own vocal group, the Hollywood Stars.

“We usually gathered on a street corner and sang our hearts out. For anyone passing by and just to enjoy ourselves.”

This was the 1950s when music blared from every North End home and when, sooner or later, the boys hanging out on Kaki’s Corner and Mr Lee’s Corner would break into song.

In 1953 African Jazz from Johannesburg visited East London. During their performances here, they also looked for people to join their show, then bound for Lourenço Marques — a cosmopolitan city which held an irresistible allure for South Africans.

A flamboyant and flippant Kops promptly auditioned. “I sang Johnny Ray’s *Cry*, Mario Lanza’s *Be My Love*, a Frankie Lane and a Nat King Cole for them,” he remembers. Kops made the cut. He recalls Des Ally, a local chap and a taxi driver who “sang very well”, also joined up.

The group, which included Dorothy Masuka, Miriam Makeba and Ben “Satch” Masinga, travelled to LM in a Golden Arrow bus. At the border post, owner of the show David Frost collected their pounds — to exchange for escudos later.

The first show took place in a packed stadium. Kops, performing as Sunny Ray, sang a Johnny

Ray and a Nat King Cole. Towards the end Ally and Nancy Jacobs — she later composed the anti-removals song, *Meadowlands* — sang a rivetting duet, *You May Not Be an Angel*.

Ally concluded with *On Happiness Street*. The crowd cried for more, but backstage Masuka told him, “Don’t you go back there. Starve them. Tomorrow’s another day.”

After the show, says Kops, “We were treated like celebrities; like Masuka and Makeba.” According to an LM paper, Ally “stole the limelight”.

A few days later, Ally asked for his money (given to Frost at the border).

Frost put him in a car and whisked him off. He dropped the hapless singer on a Durban street at midnight — without paying him. Ally called an East London friend to send him money for a train ticket.

Frost returned to LM. After a few more glorious shows, Kops remembers, “He and that wife of his in the leopard skin clothes disappeared, money and all.”

The group’s manager, Kops recalls, bought him a train ticket.

The two East Londoners sparkled as they related their feats in LM, but they also remembered Frost who never paid them.

Seems it’s an old thing — local musicians being taken for a ride.

But I’ve heard this is rapidly changing.