

A BOW FOR MUSIC LEGEND

Don Makatle

SONGS of Greeting, Healing And Heritage (Mantombi Matotiyana) use of traditional formula gives a clean-cut performance using solo instruments to create contemporary music

It is often said that Africans sing when they are happy; they sing when they are sad; and sing even when there's no occasion too. Mantombi Matotiyana's offering is the sound of the Eastern Cape and offers the musical background to the coloured rural homesteads and scenic undulating hills. There is something real about being in conversation with Mantombi Matotiyana.

She is on the phone to us from Tsolo, the place of her roots in the Eastern Cape. She is as genuine as the same hills and landscape, for which she sings praises when asked about her whereabouts and origins. She is unpretentious. She sings to her interlocutor, beautiful sounds coming from her end of the line.

"This is my music," she says in flawless isiXhosa, "that I began very early in life even while I was a young maiden. I danced to it. It is who I am. It is the music of my people."

She did not countenance a time in her life when the music of her people would "put food on the table for me and my children".

She makes it sound like she doesn't see the logic of congratulating fish for swimming. "I sang; I danced."

It is her way of life. She did not expect it to pay her bills. But then she met with Dizu Plaatjies who says he was greatly influenced by Matotiyana. "He took me in," she says, when it is actually Plaatjies who feels he should reverse the gratitude.

"Dizu calls me to Cape Town now and then," she says humbly, "and he put my music in an album."

A true Xhosa matriarch with no formal education, she says in the telephone conversation that "there's no place overseas where I haven't been, only I do not know the place names".

Her memory and tongue single out Japan. But she is well travelled, taking the music of her people to other nations of the world.

She says when she can, she teaches young people about this music, at the behest of Plaatjies: "The kids love me. Only they are interested in the ways of other people." She concurs that theirs is a music that must be preserved and not be allowed to disappear.

She has only high praise for the collaboration Plaatjies has given to her calling.

She speaks equally highly of Michael Blake: Inene - a decent guy, she calls him. Blake is honorary professor at SU, where the Africa Open Institute for Music, Research and Innovation is seized with the immense task of archiving, heritage and preservation of bow music.

Matotiyana is becoming the world ambassador for this genre. She is of frail health now after being knocked by a bus in Cape Town. "That is why I walk with a gait. But I'm healing, slowly."

She also suffers high blood pressure but is content at the life her musical heritage has made for her, a single mother.

Says Dizu Plaatjies, African music specialist at the University of Cape Town (UCT): "I'm very proud of myself and my roots." Though based in Cape Town, he also hails from Tsolo. His personal music collection spans across the genres, he says, "and it is huge".

This he says by way of explaining his interest in music which includes "close to 18 or 20 years working with Mam' Mantombi".

"I just felt that this was part of our heritage that needed to be conserved for posterity's sake. I wanted her talent to be documented. Many people, even those in my band, had often asked what I was doing bringing her into our fold. They did not understand. Now they know," Plaatjies says of his relationship with Matotiyana.

Plaatjies says although this was her first solo album, Matotiyana has shared the stage and made music with giants from across world capitals.

He speaks of exotic names of artists in Cuba that have featured Matotiyana: "She played with big stars in Cuba. These are people who are well-known around the world, not so here."

Plaatjies is himself not so much a household name in South Africa but his illustrious CV speaks volumes about his musical pedigree. An award-winning performer, Plaatjies has been in the music business for well over 40 years, he says.

He travels widely on music and related academic business where he has taken Matotiyana along and teaches classes at the School of Manhattan in New York and holds regular classes in such places as Paris and Geneva, for example, outside his regular beat at UCT.

He speaks authoritatively on the African indigenous music instruments that feature on Matotiyana's album and mesh well with

her voice.

He says *Umrhubhe* is made from the hunting bow of the San, uhadi is similarly made only it is a bit longer and comes with a calabash while *tolotolo* is made of metal.

These instruments are as ubiquitous in the Xhosa cultural music ensemble as the long smoking pipe dangling from the lips of the tribal matriarchs like Matotiyana.

Academic and novelist Sabata Mpho Mpho, who was on the judging panel, says of Matotiyana: "Through her music, in which she also plays traditional instruments such as *isitolotolo* and *uhadi*, mainstreams that would otherwise be marginal. She normalises Mpondo and Mpondomise cultures, which she carries through the language of her music, beyond the geographical location of her people. This is to some extent reversing the damage."

"The process of colonisation involved reforming and unforming the conquered by the conqueror."

This means the conquered people's cultural heritage, language, religion and belief systems had to be eradicated and replaced by what the conqueror deemed to be civilization. As people acquired western education, they also ceased speaking their own languages and appreciating their music and cultural heritage. Little did we know that language and cultural heritage are ways of knowing and bodies of knowledge. In this time of seeking to decolonise our landscape, it is music such as that of Mantombi Matotiyana which mainstreams marginalised cultures.

Through her music, which is often accompanied by traditional instruments such as *isitolotolo*, she reverses the damage of colonialism. Her music comes from a beautiful place, appreciates the unappreciated and helps us find ourselves."

"The empowerment of every language lies in that language being seen and being heard. Matotiyana gives wings to a language and culture that needs to be heard"

Michael Blake says: "When I met Tsoelwana Mpayipeli in Ngqoko in 2009 on the Bow Project Tour with Mantombi and the Nightingale String Quartet, he said to me that he wanted to start an academy for bow playing because he was worried that the music would disappear, especially as the two great exponents Mantombi and Madosini were getting on in years."

But he needn't have worried, because I think music students and young people are learning the instrument and playing it and even using it in new contexts. But I think like any other traditional music, it is important to archive it at regular points, because the music changes over time, but also because the great master players do eventually pass on."

He explains his role thus: "I am the executive producer. I had the idea to do the album, I sourced the funding, I persuaded various people in institutions to assist and provide a studio, liner notes etc without charge, and for several years I kept my finger on the pulse and kept nudging people to get things done until it was released and launched."

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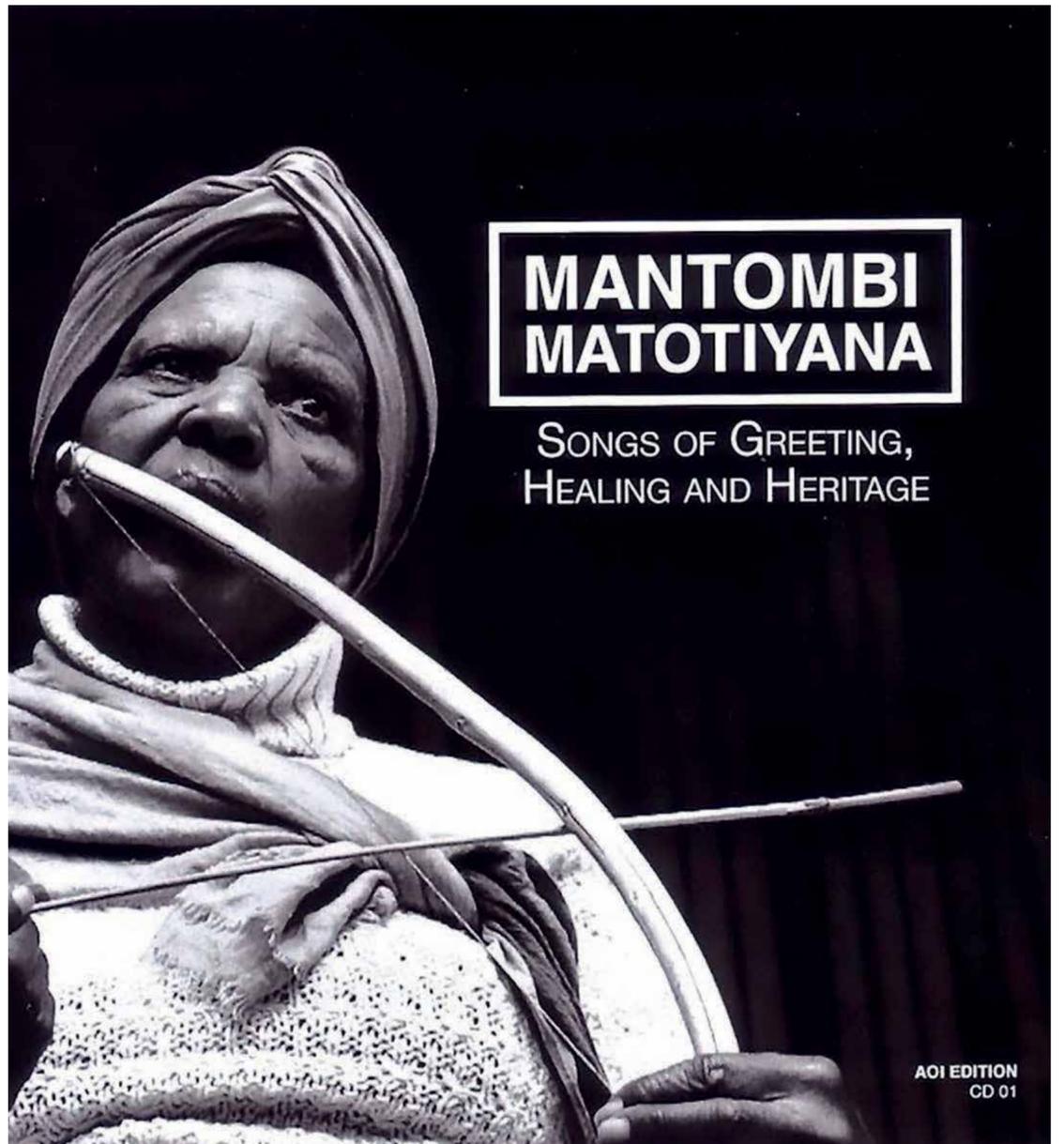
The Africa Open Institute for Music, Research and Innovation plays a crucial role in archiving and preserving such works. Tell me more.

"This is the first album on the Africa Open label, and more are planned, but African Open's scholars are involved in digitising, archiving and preserving all kinds of South African music - jazz, popular, choral and traditional. You can check them and the projects out at www.aoinstitute.ac.za

He says further: "This is a project I was keen to pursue, because I wanted to learn some basic skills myself, but then Mantombi decided to move back to the Eastern Cape a few years ago. It is something that could be pursued as a short course or at a summer school, if we were able to persuade Mantombi to come back to the Cape again for a while."

And what does winning the HSS Award mean for the effort of curating and preserving this music?

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Songs of Greeting, Healing And Heritage - winner of the South African Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) 2020 Awards - Best Musical Composition. The works features Michael Blake, whose bias for the preservation of traditional African bow music moved him to involve a team of musicologists and industry experts from Stellenbosch University (SU).

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His relationship with Matotiyana is well documented. He says on the sleeve of the album:

"I first encountered Mantombi Matotiyana in 2003 when she took part in the pilot Bow Project event at the New Music Indaba during Grahamstown's National Arts Festival. This project resulted from encounters in the 1990s with performances by the legendary Nofinishi Dywili, and their subsequent influence on my composition and my decision to invite other South African composers to transcribe and reimagine uhadi songs from her repertoire, for string quartet. As a way of bridging traditional and new music, Mantombi presented Dywili's songs as a prelude to each new string quartet composition, in performances in 2002-2006."

He adds: "Mantombi and I collaborated again on the Bow Project Tour in 2009, giving concerts on six university campuses around the country. Nishlyn Ramanna wrote of the concert in Durban: "The Bow Project addresses music's capacity to bridge the chasms that seem to separate modern and traditional, spiritual and secular, or Western and African/Asian cultural spaces". Mantombi's performances made an indelible contribution to bridging that chasm."

"In 2013, I was commissioned by the *Festival d'Automne* in Paris to compose a new work and was able to realise a long-held wish to make a piece for electronic tape and live *umrhubhe*, featuring Mantombi as soloist. Over a period of six months we worked regularly in the recording studio at the Stellenbosch Conservatoire of Music, creating material for the electronic tape."

We spent another month rehearsing the completed work, *ukhukhalisa umrhubhe* (meaning "to play the *umrhubhe*" or literally "to make the *umrhubhe* cry") and took it to Paris in November 2013. The success of the piece owed as much to her taped and live input as it did to mine, and I dedicated the piece to her."

"During the course of our collaboration, especially when people encountered Mantombi carrying her uhadi they often asked us where they could find her CDs. She had never recorded a solo album, and this prompted me to initiate the present project. In 2017, Africa Open Institute sourced funding to record and release this CD."

For the first time I heard the full range of Mantombi's glorious voice along with her virtuoso skills on the *uhadi*, *umrhubhe* and *isitolotolo*. A bonus track on the disc is Mantombi talking about her life, and the album overall contributes to the archiving of a unique and under-recorded aspect of South Africa's musical heritage."

Blake says Stellies has previously done projects involving Madosini, working with the German-South African cellist-composer Hans Huyssen.



Mantombi Matotiyana alongside Michael Blake during a 2013 performance in France. Blake is executive producer for Mantombi Matotiyana compilation titled: *Songs of Greeting, Healing and Heritage*.