

Drum Man Bikitsha A Journalist Supreme

by

James Tyhikile Matyu

I WAS both devastated and saddened to learn of the demise at the weekend of one of the most illustrious black journalists ever produced by this country, Basil Siphon Neo Bridgeman Bikitsha, whom we affectionately called “Doc” or “Carcass”.

He was one of the last few survivors of what we still proudly term the golden age of black journalism in South Africa in the '50s and '60s or the graduates of the Drum school of journalism.

He was a product of an oppressive period in the political history of this country when there were no tertiary institutions to train black journalists and because of the racist laws of the country, white-owned newspapers wishing not to violate the Job Reservation Act didn't employ blacks as reporters.

We two had made a promise to write each other's tribute, depending on who died first.

Bikitsha, a graduate of Roma College in Lesotho, died at the age of 77 at the Tshepo Themba Clinic in Dobsonville, Soweto on Saturday night after he was admitted on December 26.

I was fortunate enough to have rubbed shoulders in journalism with talented writers such as Bikitsha, Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Dan Chocho, Casey Motsisi, Leslie Sehume, Obed Musi, Arthur Maimane, Sy Mogapi, Stan Motjuwadi, Theo Mthembu, Lewis Nkosi, ESKIA Mphahlele, Harry Mashabela and many more who were in the forefront of recording the aspirations, the glory, the sufferings and triumphs of blacks.

I worked with Bikitsha for magazine and newspaper owner Jim Bailey at the Golden City Post and the Drum at Samkay House in Eloff Street towards the end of the '50s and into the '60s, where he became the right-hand man of assistant editor Themba.

Bikitsha was honest, humble and committed to belonging to that exclusive class of investigative journalists brave enough to rock the National Party boat many a time during the apartheid era.

He was on friendly terms with Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, when they were practising as the first black lawyers in Johannesburg in the '50s and boasted that they were "homeboys". Although he was born in Madubulaville township on the West Rand, Bikitsha always claimed that his roots were in the Transkei.

He remembered when Mandela and Tambo came to Johannesburg as country bumpkins and the time Macosa House, the headquarters of the ANC, where the revolution against apartheid was hatched in the '50s, was a reporter's haven.

While working for the Bantu World, later to become the World, as a rookie Bikitsha covered the famous 1956-61 Treason Trial of 156 people, which included ANC president Chief Albert Luthuli, Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Lilian Ngoyi.

Bikitsha still talked glowingly about the brilliancy of the accused's formidable legal team, comprising Izrael Maisels, Sydney Kentridge, Vernon Berrange and Bram Fischer, and could quote verbatim from the Mandela testimony.

He was a walking encyclopaedia of Sophiatown and Jo'burg in general, and a good storyteller about Sof'town, its musicians and its people, some hardened criminals. He was himself a gifted musician and a sportsman.

Bikitsha knew almost everybody in Soweto who mattered and became a source of information for foreign writers, including white South Africans who wanted to write about the ghetto-life of Johannesburg.

As a storyteller he contributed to two books, *From Jo'burg to Jozi*, co-edited by Heidi Holland and Adam Roberts, and in *Soweto Inside Out* co-edited by Roberts and Joe Thloloe.

I remember discussing the movie, *Drum*, with him and he felt it should have been either named *The Life and Times of Henry Nxumalo* or simply *Mr Drum* and the lead role played by an Afro-American, Taye Diggs, should have been made authentic by giving it to a South African. He felt it was romanticised and pointed out some inaccuracies. As a matter of fact, he dismissed it.

Bikitsha was a source of inspiration to many budding journalists, including myself, and always ready to help. But during our conversations, Bikitsha always lamented the current standard of journalism.

Even when our paths separated – Bikitsha went to the *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Sunday Times* – we never lost touch with each other.

We would reminisce for hours about the golden era of black journalism, about the music of Sophiatown, the musicians and I would run out of airtime. Doc loved to laugh and was always interested in my progress, ending always with “Jimmy, mfana wam, keep it up. We are the last survivors.” Now I won't hear again those endearing words and his traditional way of answering the phone by laughingly demanding: “Speak now or forever hold your peace”.

I have in my files an honest critique of my book, *Shadows of the Past*. Bikitsha wrote it when he reviewed my book in his column *Pulse* in *The Sunday Times' City Metro* on May 11, 1999. My book, he wrote, brought back happy memories of the time he was stationed in the

Bay and his heavenly “dog’s meat” (crumbs from the master’s table) days in the domestics’ backyard rooms in opulent Summerstrand.

The last time I spoke to him last year he mentioned he was in poor health and suffering from diabetes. He suggested we should write our memoirs and that he had started on his.

I will sadly miss him.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
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Culture Of Reading Dying In Our Townships

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

Today I lament the dying culture of reading in South Africa, in particular among Africans. I remember there was a time in the ‘50s when it was common to see members of the public sitting at a bus stop and waiting for a bus, enjoying reading a book.

It was almost fashionable to find two or three commuters, young and old, engrossed in books inside a bus or a train on their way to and from work. They even exchanged books and engaged in lively discussions about them. Overhearing them made one interested in reading those very books too.

During my schools days, in the matric class (then divided into Form IV and V) we were forced to read about 25 novels of our choice,

summarise them and bring the summaries to the class teacher for him or her to look at. This was compulsory and helped to inculcate a reading habit which is still there in some of us even today.

The late Moses Siphon Siwisa, our English teacher, would ask questions about the books, and that meant one had to be serious when reading them. He was a man who did not spare the rod.

This meant we had little time to spend wandering in the streets, even during weekends, or getting involved in the wrong company.

I remember the first time Siwisa tasked us to do this reading, I had read four novels all by Peter Cheyney, which were *Can Ladies Kill*, *Dangerous Curves*, *Never a Dull Moment* and *Ladies Won't Wait*, and I thought Siwisa would be impressed because Cheyney was the premier British author of hard-boiled detective fiction.

His books were read by many. I was in fact introduced to Cheyney by the late Thami Chefman who came from Sophiatown.

Siwisa took one look at my contribution to the reading culture and threw them back at me, saying: "This is an American slang and trash" and I got a dressing down.

After that I made a careful choice by reading the works of, among others, Edgar Allan Poe, John Milton, Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, Jane Austen and Alexandre Dumas.

Reading affected style and brought about the widening of one's horizons and one became well-informed and developed an independent mind. We could recite freely from some of the books and our vocabulary was improved.

We had no municipal or community libraries at the time and blacks were barred from using public libraries in the city. They could not afford to buy books because of low family incomes.

As youngsters we could spend weekends reading newspapers such as the *Golden City Post*, *The Bantu World*, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, *The Evening Post* and magazines such as the *Drum* and *Zonk*.

But today I have noted that literary reading is in dramatic decline and the most affected are books in the vernacular. I have at least been impressed by the numbers patronising our township libraries, but they are not enough.

Many young people who should be engaged in reading spend their spare time in shebeens and taverns until late at night and, with adults, watching television – and these pastimes have largely contributed to the decline of reading of literary work.

Many of us have also become addicted victims of this telecommunication device found in our lounges and we watch for hours as we nimbly switch from one channel to the other, or the young keep themselves busy with TV games.

To some of today's youth I have talked to, many well-known black authors, including Archibald Campbell (AC) Jordan, Herbert Isaac Ernest (HIE) Dhlomo, Davidson Don Tengo (DDT) Jabavu, James Ranisi (JJR) Jolobe, Samuel Edward Krune (SEK) Mqhayi, Henry Masila (HM) Ndawo, Guybon Sinxo and Tiyo Soga, and their works are total strangers.

I remember being fascinated by novels by ESKIA Mphahlele, Siphosiphiso Sepamla, Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, Arthur Maimane, Wally Mongane Serote and some of the books were banned in South Africa, but I managed to read them in Transkei. I enjoyed the poetry works of Mbuyiselo Oswald Mtshali, Sepamla, Achmat Dangor, Serote, Lionel Abrahams, Sheila Meiring Fugard, Mafika Gwala and Dennis Brutus.

It is quite sad that the reading culture among Africans is declining rapidly and that really needs to be addressed.

It was, at least, heartening to find last year that local author and former Olive Schreiner literary award winner Mzi Mahola, of Zwide, had a desire to bring back this forgotten culture of reading and writing by helping budding poets from various townships.

A former junior English lecturer at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's Vista campus in 2002 and 2003, Mahola has conducted creative writing workshops at the Red Location Museum for language teachers to inspire teachers who are talented in writing to pursue their talents and inspire their pupils.

I hope such an example set by Mahola will be sustained and needed help will come from both the arts, culture and sport departments of the provincial and local governments to rekindle that reading culture.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
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Saddened To Hear Of Death Of Veteran Journalist

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

I WAS terribly saddened to learn on Friday of the death of another one of my former Golden City Post and Drum magazine colleagues and a family friend, legendary boxing guru Theo “Black Panther” Mthembu. Newcastle-born Mthembu, or Bra Theo, died on Thursday night after a long illness, and would have turned 80 yesterday.

His death, and that of veteran journalist and colleague Basil Siphos “Doc” Bikitsha in December, have now robbed me of my “Johannesburg communication connection” for information.

As mourners eulogise Mthembu at the Holy Cross Church in Soweto today and bury him, I wish to recall the life and times I still treasure about him.

I worked with Mthembu in the late ‘50s when I joined the Eastern Cape edition of the Golden City Post (GCP) and Drum in Port Elizabeth for a brief stint before I moved over to King William’s Town-based Imvo Zabantsundu.

Mthembu, who had joined the GCP and Drum in 1955 as sports editor, was transferred to Port Elizabeth in 1959 and for 21/2 years he and his family were accommodated in rooms adjacent to the Guide Hall in Avenue A, New Brighton.

It was here in Port Elizabeth Mthembu showed himself as an exponent of non-racialism in sport and he was bitter about the racist compartmentalising of sport into Africans, white, coloured and Indian. Together with people like Dennis Brutus, Essop Pahad and others he had founded the first non-racial sports movement in the then Transvaal to fight racialism in sport.

Once he wrote an article for Drum about the late Spring Rose Rugby Football Club and black Springbok mercurial flyhalf Eric Majola, of New Brighton, claiming he could shame some of his white counterparts.

Mthembu returned to Johannesburg in 1962 and tried to recruit me back to rejoin the Golden City-Drum stable to man the Port Elizabeth bureau. When he learnt that I had been kicked out of Imvo Zabantsundu as a “communist” in March 1964, Mthembu sent me a letter of appointment and cash to travel to Johannesburg.

After spending some time in Johannesburg, I returned to Port Elizabeth and after the Golden City Post closed I joined the Weekend World and World, and stayed there until these papers were banned in October, 1977. Mthembu joined the Sunday Times and in 1975 he received an offer from the Chamber of Mines to start a newspaper, Mining Sun, and stayed there for 16 years.

I remember Mthembu travelling with me to and from work on his scooter to beat the heavy traffic and I was always seated on the pillion praying I did not fall as he swerved between cars.

Mthembu, who was a qualified school teacher, was a credit to boxing in South Africa as a professional boxer, trainer and manager. He could be correctly be described as a “man for all seasons” or named “Mr Boxing”.

He started his boxing career at 16 and turned professional in 1948, becoming a top-class lightweight known as “The Black Panther” in the ‘50s. But he lost a close decision to Gladstone Mahlo for the national title.

Mthembu’s professional career was tragically cut short when in 1951 he was caught in the crossfire of a gun-fight and was badly wounded, leaving him with his head tilted to the left. Once he had recovered he decided to pursue a career as a trainer, manager and sportswriter.

I used to tease him about his condition, saying he sustained it when he was side-stepping a punch from Mahlo and he would as he advanced towards me laughingly say: “Mfana, you talk nonsense. I will knock you out.” I would ensure I kept a good distance.

Mthembu first established a boxing club in Alexandra and later relocated to Dube where he started in 1955 the famous Dube Boxing Club which has produced national and world champions, among them Anthony “Blue Jaguar” Morodi, Levy “Golden Boy” Madi and Jacob “Baby Jake” Matlala, who became the first South African to win four world titles.

Mthembu won many awards and prizes for his contribution to sport and boxing, among them, the Jack Cheetham Memorial, Boxing South Africa’s Lifetime Achievement, the King Korn Meritorious, the Gauteng provincial government’s Special Recognition for Achievement. He was also awarded by former president Nelson Mandela the President’s Sports Award (Ikhamanga) in silver in 2004.

I will remember Mthembu, who was a guest of my family when on holiday in Port Elizabeth, as a man who supported high moral values for human dignity. He was polite, gentle, humble, had a ready smile, a kind-hearted humble and generous person with a good sense of humour.

I remember Mthembu acting as a courier for the ANC in exile bringing to Port Elizabeth education funds for children of Robben Island political prisoners and those in exile.

Although he was a great sportsman and never complained when his boxers were outclassed fairly, as an outstanding manager he did not hesitate to speak his mind when one of his boxers was robbed. That Mthembu played a big role in popularising boxing is beyond question and helped to influence the direction of the sport.

Mthembu remained passionate about boxing until the final gong sounded his demise.

He was dedicated to his family and lived for his daughters. On behalf of my family and myself I wish to express our deepest sympathy to them.

So long, Mthembu, we will all miss you.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
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Posing As An Envoy To Get Friends Into Posh Party

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

Can you believe it that I once pretended to be both a prince and an ambassador of Ghana in order to get myself and my newspaper colleagues in to free drinks and snacks at a queen's birthday party in Johannesburg in the 1960s.

It was one of those naughty pranks played by some thirsty journalists to get what they wanted, especially booze, from an unsuspecting victim.

I had been assigned, with veteran photographer Alf Kumalo, to cover the big party which was held in the splendid garden of the British ambassador's home to celebrate the Queen Mother's 64th birthday on August 4, 1964. But when the time came for us to leave the office, we found there were other colleagues who wanted to join us, among them Leslie Sehume, Casey Motsisi, Stan Motjuwadi and Nat Nakasa.

It was obvious they had an eye on the booze at the party. I was informed that the wicked system of apartheid ended outside the gates and it was one of those rare times when all races could mingle, talk politics freely and drink the white man's liquor without fear in a white area.

It was a period when there were liquor restrictions and blacks could not by law enter a bottle store. A white person was prohibited from supplying an African liquor to drink on his premises for fear of prosecution.

We all piled into the company's car and made our way to the party. But since it was an only by invitation affair, I could see some disappointment in the faces of my colleagues, in particular those of Casey and Motjuwadi.

Casey, who was one of my favourite short story writers and columnists of the time, was better known as Casey "Kid" Motsisi. He died in 1977.

After working as a teacher in Pretoria, Casey worked for Drum magazine as a journalist. He wrote a regular Bugs column which was humorous and satirical, and featured discussions and conversations between two bed bugs.

He also wrote the On the Beat column.

His style borrowed heavily from that of Damon Runyon, featuring Americanese and tsotsitaal (local township slang) and his characters included Aunt Peggy, the shebeen queen, and a variety of rogues such as Kid Playboy and Kid Hangover.

Damon Runyon's book, *Guys and Dolls*, became a bible with some of our black journalists at the time. I was introduced to the book by Obed Musi and I still have it.

The invitation to the Queen Mother's birthday, addressed to the editor, created a problem for us at the entrance. Security was tight but as journalists we had our own inventive ways of meeting such situations without raising a sweat.

Since I was wearing a dark striped suit and a tie with an appearance of a professor or some politician, they suggested I should assume the

high-profile position of prince and ambassador from Ghana. For a few minutes outside the premises I was tutored on how to behave like a prince or ambassador.

I should have airs and graces about me and talk less – and speak English with a foreign accent, spicing it with some gibberish foreign African language. I had to speak with authority, something I liked as I made a show ordering around my small staff with me.

They kept on mumbling I should not be carried away by the fake authority.

We all approached the gate and a young white woman came up to the gate. I was introduced to her by spokesman Sehume and then others were said to be bodyguards.

The woman was well-spoken, disciplined and made a curtsy on receiving royalty. It was my worst nightmare because during the party she became glued to me, wanting to learn about my culture, about Kwame Nkrumah, who was the first prime minister and later president of Ghana, and about our seven-year-old independence.

I had no problem talking about Nkrumah as I had read a lot about him. But the woman sticking to me like a leech did not give me room to enjoy myself like the others, who had made a bee-line for the open bar and snacks. They kept on urging me to stay with her and to propose to her.

I decided against this as I had thoughts of the security police watching us through binoculars from a distance in case we contravened the Immorality Act.

We joined in the singing of Happy Birthday and praises to the Queen Mother and the national patriotic British anthem God Save the Queen, which I had also sung as a schoolboy when South Africa was under British rule in the 1940s.

The young woman moved around with me, holding my hand as lovers do, as I painfully took sips from my glass of champagne like true royalty and a gentleman. Before we left she introduced me to her father and mother who were delighted to meet royalty.

The daughter suggested another meeting as she was interested in learning more about African culture and me. She gave me her business card and that was the last time we saw each other.

Seeing that she had kept me away from enjoying the party, the guys suggested I should ask for a bottle of whisky and she obliged.

Khumalo, a teetotaler, suggested that we should leave before everybody got stuck in and started behaving like township drunks.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
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Comic Book Heroes Bring Literature Alive For All Our Children

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

SOME time back as I was watching Batman Begins which was screened on M-Net, my thoughts raced back to the days of the golden era of comics. SABC-TV1 also later screened Batman Forever and Batman and Robin.

What a feast of anti-crime adventures of The Dark Knight and his side-kicks viewers enjoyed.

Yes indeed, comics have come a long way since their Golden Age. I have also watched on the other two channels Hallmark and TCM those classic movie oldies such as A Tale of Two Cities, The Three Musketeers, The Prisoner of Zenda and MacBeth.

I just wonder how many of my peers of that time still remember Casper the Friendly Ghost, Asterix and Obelix and Gabby Hayes.

The indulgence of reading comics in those days was sort of a culture with us while some teachers and god-fearing parents regarded them as evil and as public enemy No 1 to our youthful morals. They were not aware that we read comics to develop a vocabulary and to know certain spellings of words. Further that they helped to improve our comprehension of English.

We also found them full of humour and some with a moral message, and they also made reading more fun.

We also engaged in discussions about the various comics, heroes, heroines and monsters.

Christopher Nolan's young Batman Begins explores the origins of the Batman legend (millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne) which chronicles the crime-fighter's early years in Gotham City.

Comic book stories about the caped crusader who was a force for good, fascinated us.

As youngsters in higher primary school, comic books were extremely popular among us during the '40s and '50s, the same as with cinemas or bioscopes. There was a customary behaviour among comic lovers to exchange the books once they had finished reading them.

This culture of reading comics cut across the gender issue. I remember exchanging comics with a woman who had children and grandchildren in Dora Street. She was fond of comics and would go berserk if one of the grandchildren tore one of the comics into shreds.

I can just mention a few of my peers who loved to read comics – Velile Mke in Ferguson Road, Phindile Norani in Jabavu Road, Wati in Dora Street, Thami Maneli in Nikiwe Street and also Nkeke Vuso in Sangotsha Street.

The comics were cheap, selling each at about sixpence or a shilling and we used to buy them from the Chinese shops in Commercial Road. The favourites were Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, The Flash, Green Lantern, Tomahawk, The Atom, Justice League of America, Tom Sawyer, Moby Dick, 20 000 Leagues Under the Sea and Black Beauty.

I remember after watching a Superman movie, we would run around the streets shouting “Up, Up And Away” pretending we were able to fly like he did. Among the Westerns we had Tex Ritter whose singing was among the best, Tom Mix, Hopalong Cassidy (Bill Boyd), Wild Bill Hickock, Buster Crabbe, Roy Rogers, Gene Autrey, Buck Jones, Gabby Hayes, Durango Kid and Zorro.

All were very popular in comics and on the movie screen as well.

Most of the comics ended with good winning over evil. I remember Maneli always holding us in class spellbound narrating a movie he had seen the previous day and when he could not understand the dialogue he would just say “bathetha, bathetha, bathetha” (they talked and talked) and then there was a fight.

He would throw wild punches to emphasise his point – and if you happened to be very close to him, one of those punches would catch you.

Some parents were very critical and believed that comics and the cinema had a damaging influence or prompted violent action like drugs and were a major cause for crime and vice.

Just like jazz records or stamp collections we kept some of our comics and never threw them away. Here I refer to those Classics Illustrated comics of the '50s and '60s, literary adaptations of books, to mention a few *Les Miserables*, *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, *Knights of the Round Table*, *Last of the Mohicans*, *Oliver Twist*, *Robin Hood*, *The Talisman*, *20 000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Don Quixote*, *Treasure Island*, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Rip Van Winkle*, *Cyrano de Bergerac* and some of William Shakespeare's works, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

These adaptations from classic literature were reasonably true to their original source and helped us when reading the original works.

We also found them easy to understand and an enjoyable introduction to classic literature and to a reading culture which added quality to life.

These Classic Illustrated comics can only be found, if you are lucky, at used book exchange shops and can help in stimulating and promoting a reading culture among school children who should also be encouraged to read newspapers and not only sit glued to play-stations.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
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Praise Singer Captivated Crowds At ANC Rallies

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

THE other day as I was driving to the office I listened to a CD of praise singer Zolani Mkiva, which triggered fond memories of the '50s and early '60s when we were captivated at ANC rallies at eMlotheni in New Brighton by the motivational praise singing of ANC's gifted official imbongi, Bioscope Dayimani.

He was affectionately called Wayi Gongotha Ilali (town crier).

I know that most of the present crop of iimbongi would not know of him or heard of him nor were they born at the time. Only veterans of the struggle like Lily Diedricks, Nonthuthuzelo Mabhala, Nondwe Mankahla and Dideka Mhlaba, to mention a few, can still remember him, even his closing trademark line Mantombazana nxibani inkciyo ngantandathu kuba idabi lemi . . . liyeza.

Wayi Gongotha Ilali was simply warning women to put on six traditional modesty aprons, inkciyo (bloomers), made of skin and ornamented with beads as underwear, because there was an impending invasion of their womanhood.

That line used to cause raptures, ululating and whistling, and with some elderly women holding their hands to their mouths as they shyly giggled, while men shouted encouragingly and loved it.

Unfortunately, there are no pictures of him to immortalise him though, if I remember correctly, at the time we had two commercial photographers in the township. They were Velile “Jwara” Tandani, who had a house-studio in Connacher Street, and Zenzile “My Friend” Ntlabathi, uLeta, in Dubula Street, who covered the rallies and sold the photographs.

I have still vivid recollections of the fascinating antics of Wayi Gongotha Ilali, wearing short pants, dressed in an animal skin and head gear, and carrying an assegai. He would stab into the air and gesticulate rhythmically as he pranced up and down the platform, and had the crowd rocking with laughter. Yes, they loved him.

There were times we would think that a notorious stick-wielding Transkei-born police captain, who was nicknamed Sotewu, and regarded fighting sticks as dangerous, would arrest him for possessing a more dangerous weapon.

Wayi Gongotha Ilali magnificently sang the praises of ANC leaders Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Chief Albert Luthuli, Prof Zachariah Matthews, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Vuyisile Mini, Florence Matomela, Lilian Ngoyi, Francis Baard and many others who mattered in the movement’s committed leadership.

Wayi Gongotha Ilali’s praise singing (izibongo), mostly directed at the system, criticising bantu education and calling on the blacks to challenge the oppressive system, used to set the tone of the rallies and masses responded or punctuated with shouts of Mayibuye iAfrica. He was courageous and defiant, and none of the oppressors escaped his biting tongue as he called them izinja (dogs).

We would watch with interest over-zealous young police recruits led by Sotewu collecting the speeches on a tape recording machine as they sat in one of their kwela-kwelas (police trucks) parked nearby. We would be amused watching them demanding translations from their black colleagues who feverishly scratched their heads and

consulted each other for correct English or Afrikaans words to give their baas – an Afrikaans term for sir or master.

It was interesting at that time ANC leaders noticing the problem would invite the black police to sit with us journalists, in the front row. We were requested to assist them with correct translations so they did not write down lies.

During the Defiance Campaign in 1952, with his defiant verse Wayi Gongotha Ilali boosted the morale of the people, and instilled courage and fearlessness in volunteers to defy the country's unjust laws.

As a matter of fact, one felt Wayi Gongotha Ilali was in earnest a politician trying to be an imbongi. He managed to set the mood of a rally, and because of his poor educational background, he called Dr Hendrik Verwoerd by the name of "Velefutha" (if correct, literally meaning easily roused to anger).

Unfortunately, that protest poetry which was composed in performance on the stage to incite masses to demand freedom from the humiliating shackles of evil apartheid will not be found in books, and was never written or recorded for posterity as Wayi Gongotha Ilali was illiterate. Despite this difficulty, he had the ability to compose his praises on the inspiration of the moment and lacked the ability to memorise works of other written poets.

Although in his time, Wayi Gongotha Ilali achieved prominence in political circles, he still remained unknown in the world at large.

As I was listening to Mkiva, known as *Imbongi Ye Sizwe* (The Poet of Africa), I remembered Wayi Gongotha Ilali and that performing imbongi do not prepare their recitations, but are just caught up in some emotions and burst out and praise because of joy or pain or sorrow.

Mkiva's appearance on the scene has given birth to many aspiring praise singers, including women, in the African townships. I will not single any one of them for fear of leaving others whose names I do not remember, but some have still to make their mark.

In conclusion, let me use the praise singers' traditional concluding formula: *Ncincilili*.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
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Going Back To The Streets Of One's Youth

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

It was going back to my roots when on Christmas Day I revisited Jabavu Road in New Brighton. I was also responding to some people who kept asking me what was now going on in that street and whether Christmas Day was still the same as it was in the '50s and '60s.

This was one of the first streets to be built in New Brighton, and where I grew up after my parents and scores of other Africans were forcibly removed by the Jan Smuts government from Korsten, under

the guise of an outbreak of bubonic plague. They had been living in an integrated society and were resettled in McNamee Village in New Brighton.

They did not know that the government was, in fact, implementing the Group Areas Act which set aside certain areas where only a particular race was permitted legally to live or even to prevent mixed marriages.

This was, as history records, perhaps the first forced removal in South Africa and there was absolutely no resistance as the police and army were armed to the teeth. There were also no bulldozers to flatten the houses which were taken over by the coloured folk.

The other day I visited Zosa Street in Korsten and I spotted one of the rundown houses which looked much the same as the one my family occupied.

I am today certain if some of those people who were removed were still alive, they could have made their land claims on portions of Korsten because some were freeholders.

Our fathers and mothers who moved into McNamee were bamboozled by the white man's magic world of transformation from the smelly night soil bucket system to flush toilets, neatly built brick-and-mortar two- or three-roomed electrified houses each with a Dover stove using coal or wood. They were a far cry from the dilapidated wood-and-iron houses in a slum.

Jabavu Road then had a colourful character, a close-knit community, based on African tradition and cultural norms which resisted influences of the western culture.

There was a spirit of ubuntu prevailing and residents knew each other, joked together, loved and made love, conceived, laughed, shared bowls of sugar and salt. They even addressed each other by

their clan names of Radebe, Jwara, Dlamini and Ziduli as it is done in the rural areas.

This spirit is sadly lacking in the former white suburbs and I have experienced this when visiting black friends in these areas.

People still struggled in Jabavu Road to make a decent living under the yolk of apartheid. During their leisure or spare time they frequented shebeens and threw all care to the wind by dancing to swing or mbaqanga music, sometimes at fund-raising tea-parties.

I fondly remembered all this as I walked into Jabavu Road. I noticed the only upgrading Nceba Faku's metro council had done was the construction of a rough pavement on the left-hand side while the concrete-street in which I used to play with Phindile Norani, Boyana Soyaya, Mncedisi, Tololo Pikinini, Zinki Faku and Sighuba was still in need of repair or reconstruction work.

I also noticed the houses, except where those tenants had done some improvement, were an eyesore and not painted as in the past. Just before Christmas the municipality would come around, paint the houses and repair damage.

There was no longer the fanfare which used to greet Christmas Day – the early morning chants of “happy-ee-ee Christmas” or amusing sight of craned necks gazing upwards to the sky through tinted glasses to catch the sun dance-ritual and the merry-making happy-go-lucky piper on a donkey cart playing a rickety piano.

I missed the sight of children moving from house to house expecting to be given delicious Christmas dishes and finding a tickey or a shilling in the food.

As I journeyed through the street, I stopped at 25 Jabavu Road where I grew up and where my uncle's two sons still live.

Thereafter I decided to spend my day quietly at home listening to the music of the '50s and '60s which used to blare from gramophones, vying for a place to be heard as it noisily filled the street.

Songs such as Emsengeni and Beer Club played by Grahamstown's veteran musician King Jury Mpehlo and his Band, the Manhattan Brothers' Ibhayi Lam, Kilimanjaro and Lovely Lies, the Skylarks' Holilili, East London's Four Yanks with pianist Tete Mbambisa's Ubuhlungu, East London's Havana Swingsters' Emaxambeni under Eric Nomvete, Father Huddleston Band's Ndezeni Na?, Dorothy Masuka's Ngihamba Ngedwa, Dolly Rathebe's Tlhapi Ke Noga, Nancy Jacobs and her Sisters' Baby Are Yeng and Solomon Linda's Original Evening Birds' Mbube.

As I listened, I remembered the dress code of the era consisting of palm beach trousers and shirts or panama shirts, stetsons, bell bottoms, sharp-pointed two-tone shoes, snap brim hats and zoot bottomed trousers.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
Wednesday, February 1, 2006].

When The Top Musical *King Kong* played in Port Elizabeth

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

Reminiscing about South Africa's All-Africa jazz opera, *King Kong*, and listening to the CD of the original cast 46 years later, has been quite a fulfilling experience. It brought back fond memories of the nights I sat in the Feather Market Hall, enjoying this classic and historic musical.

The story and music centre around politics (the 1956 Treason Trial), shebeens, love, hardships, unemployment, gangsterism and murder.

Just the other day a group of us coming from the golden age of jazz in South Africa in the '50s and '60s, found ourselves discussing passionately the vibrant music and memorable stage productions of that time. We recalled when *King Kong* took the country by storm.

It became a record-breaking blockbuster and was sold out for a year, during its country-wide tour in the late '50s to the early '60s.

Incidentally, I have just received a rare CD recorded by the original cast of *King Kong* from Gallo record company.

King Kong was premiered at the Witwatersrand University Great Hall on February 2, 1959 and received rave newspaper and magazine reviews. Nelson Mandela and his young bride, Winnie Madikizela, were reported to have been among the crowd that opening night.

The opera's musical score opens with Todd Matshikiza's melodic, but sad song, Sad Times, Bad Times (Ityala Lalamadoda ngu-andazi no-asidimi . . . alaziwa mntu) which was in reference to the infamous

Treason Trial of 156 people arrested countrywide in December 1956 and which was about to resume in Pretoria.

Among the treason trialists were Albert Luthuli (ANC president), secretary Walter Sisulu, Mandela and Oliver Tambo. The trial lasted for more than four years before it collapsed in 1961 with all the accused acquitted.

I still remember when the opera came to Port Elizabeth in 1959 in aid of the school feeding scheme, and the city council had to restructure the Feather Market Hall stage and erect a music chamber below to accommodate the orchestra.

The opera was superbly received and its week-long performances were sold-out. There was excitement all over the city with both white and black enjoying the show.

But performances for whites and other races were separated in accordance with the Reservations Separate Amenities Act, of 1953, and the hall was granted special permission on the grounds the organisers complied with the Act.

After a successful run in South Africa, the musical opened at the Princess Theatre in London on February 23, 1961. When the curtain came down, some cast members, including Port Elizabeth teacher and former national beauty queen Hazel Futa, sought political asylum in Britain, fleeing from apartheid and its security police.

King Kong was adapted from a book by lawyer Harry Bloom, with music by former *Drum* show business editor Todd Matshikiza, lyrics by journalist Pat Williams and directed by Leon Gluckman with orchestration and arrangements by pianist Sol Klaaste, tenor saxophonist Mackay Davashe, alto saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi and composer Stanley Glasser.

The story centred around the life and tragedy of then South African heavyweight boxing champion Ezekiel “King Kong” Dhlamini, 32.

After his surprise defeat by middleweight boxer Simon Mthimkulu, Dhlamini went downhill fast. In February, 1957 he was jailed for 12 years for the murder of his girlfriend, Joyce, and he demanded the judge sentence him to death.

After two weeks on a prison farm in the north of Johannesburg, Dhlamini drowned himself in the Rivonia River.

In the musical the lead role of “King Kong” was played by Nathan Dambuza Mdledle, the leader of the famous erstwhile Manhattan Brothers, and Dhlamini’s girlfriend, Joyce, the Back of the Moon shebeen queen, was played by Miriam Makeba.

Joyce had a boyfriend, Lucky (Joe Mogotsi (also of the Manhattan Brothers), who was a gang leader. Other members of Lucky’s gang were Rufus Khoza and Ronnie Majola, both from the Manhattan Brothers.

Bad blood developed between Lucky and King Kong resulting in King Kong killing one of Lucky’s gang members. He was arrested.

Ten months later, *King Kong* returned to find his sweetheart, Joyce, in love with Lucky again and killed her in a frenzy.

Each episode of the story was told to the strains of pulsating and captivating music.

Of the 14 songs, the tracks I like best are Ityala Lalamadoda, Back of the Moon, King Kong, Kwela Long, Marvellous Muscles, It’s a Wedding and Death Song.

The cast of *King Kong*, which was accommodated at the Alabama Hotel in Korsten, had some interesting characters who had a knack for lying.

I remember one of them we knew as left-handed Mthembu who was very boastful when he found himself surrounded by local beautiful girls. A local lass and former national beauty queen fell madly in love with loud-mouthed Mthembu who invited her to join him later in Jozi.

She discovered that Mthembu, who turned out to be unemployed and penniless, was married to a jealous woman and lived in a backyard shack.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
Wednesday, February 8, 2006].

Music Fans From All Parts Of City Loved Revue

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

The fabulous days of the '50s and '60s will probably always be remembered as the golden age of jazz. I remember South Africans of all colours, and despite apartheid, heartily enjoying Alfred "Alfie" Herbert's star-studded African Jazz and Variety Revue, which was a box-office hit.

This vigorous, action-packed and hugely successful black musical production toured South Africa before the advent of the all-African jazz opera, King Kong. As soon as the revue's week-long visit to Port Elizabeth was advertised, there was a flurry of excitement.

Fashion houses in Main Street did a roaring trade as women flocked to buy the latest and most expensive dresses fashionable at the time and created a colourful spectacle at the shows.

Music lovers came from Grahamstown, Uitenhage, Cradock, Cookhouse and other inland towns to see the performances.

I had a friendly relationship with Herbert and we used to spend hours at his booking office in Govan Mbeki Avenue (then Main Street) talking show business.

His favourite local doorman was Uncle Joe Ledwabe, a no-nonsense man who was avoided by chance-takers.

The revue just could not avoid the National Party's racist policies as Herbert had to apply for special permission to use the Feather Market Hall in a white area. He also had to reserve the first few rows in front for his white audience.

Other races could sit at the back and had to be separated by an empty space forming an "apartheid barrier". But when the show reached its musical peak, blacks would move their chairs from the back to the front and even occupied empty seats reserved for whites.

There was hardly any friction. This proved the separate development policy was a mockery.

But as a journalist and Herbert's friend, I always had a seat right in front among the white audience. I always happened to sit next to a bespectacled elderly white guy.

He watched the swirling short skirts, slim waists of the leggy and hip-swinging singers through a pair of binoculars. Always with a smile dancing on his face, he attended all the shows.

I never figured out whether he used the binoculars because of failing eyesight or attraction to the sensuous dancing.

African Jazz and Variety repertoire comprised the “who’s who” in the South African township music scene brutalised by apartheid.

The revue opened in 1954 with legendary Dolly Rathebe (born Josephine Malatsi) as the main attraction. She was also described as South Africa’s “Ella Fitzgerald” or because of her beauty and shapely body, she was likened to film star Marilyn Monroe.

She sang *It’s Gone and Started Raining* and *Into Yam*.

Rathebe became the first black woman to star in the country’s first African feature film, *Jim Comes to Jo’burg*, as an actress and a vocalist. The film portrayed the urban life of Africans in any township.

Other top-listed stars of the revue were Miriam Makeba with Mackay Davashe’s *Lakutshon’ilanga*, which was also translated into English as *Lovely Lies*, and Saduva, and Sonny Pillay, who was the revue’s Frank Sinatra.

These artists did not earn much and for a recording the pay varied between £5 and £10. They could not afford to make music a full-time career.

I often wondered at the time whether the white people watching the performances knew that these magnificent artists were messengers and nannies during the day.

The star-studded cast comprised 40 singers who sat on rows of chairs on the stage. The revue was a mixture of music, cabaret, comedy and jazz. I still recall their songs.

Ben “Satchmo” Masinga, who impeccably imitated the gravel-voiced Louis Armstrong, sang *Blue Berry Hill* and *Mack the Knife*. Masinga would do a beautiful duet with Louisa Emmanuel, belting out *Baby, It’s Cold Outside*.

Emmanuel came out with Doris Day's Secret Love and Basin Street Blues, while Joey Maxim sang Billy Daniel's Old Black Magic and did an amusing impersonation of Jerry Lewis.

There was Isaac Petersen who, because he had a voice like Nat King Cole, sang Mona Lisa and he also featured in a enchanting duet with Petersen singing Confess.

We had the popular Woody Woodpeckers under Victor Ndlazilwana in calypso outfits who used to bring the house to its feet by singing Harry Belafonte's Day-O while Dorothy Masuka sang Let Me Go Lover and Hamba Nontsokolo, her biggest hit in the '50s. There were also, among others, Thandi Klaasen and Abigail Kubeka.

Hugh Masekela was invited to join African Jazz Revue at the age of 19.

The audience was also entertained by the traditional gumboot dance.

In later years Rathebe settled in Port Elizabeth, married actor and musician Welcome Duru and also became a lead vocalist with the Basin Blues.

Rathebe died on September 16, 2004 after suffering a stroke. She was 76.

The final curtain fell on the show in 1959 and the story did the rounds that Herbert had gone bankrupt when King Kong came on to the scene.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
Wednesday, February 22, 2006].

Port Elizabeth Not Backward in Launching Its Own Musicals

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

Jozi [Port Elizabeth] has always taken the lead when it came to entertainment. This dates back to the '50s and '60s when her artists came to Port Elizabeth and their road shows were usually packed to the rafters. But Port Elizabeth, like a very jealous woman,

refused to be left behind in the shadows of the show business field – as did our neighbour, East London.

Former musician, stage and film actor Welcome Duru and I were reminiscing about Myer Kaplan's show-stopper musical production, *Shanty Town Revue*.

I was reminded of how in the early '60s my sleep was rudely disturbed in Zwelitsha by a noisy cast of this show, Port Elizabeth's first all-African musical revue. I had not expected the group to arrive round about 5am that Saturday and their rowdy arrival had visitors in the house frightened as they thought we were being raided by the Special Branch (security police).

Duru, leader of the erstwhile Basin Blues harmony vocal troupe, was shouting "Jimmy, kwedini, vuka" (Jimmy, boy, wake up) at the top of his voice and knocking loudly at our door and windowpanes. He was also complaining they had not been able to find our place immediately.

He then remembered I had advised him to go to the Zwelitsha police station. When they arrived at our place they were accompanied by two friendly policemen who always helped us by showing our out-of-town visitors where we lived.

This help was usually rewarded by opening our liquor cabinet to the law enforcers to have a drink.

Shanty Town Revue was Port Elizabeth's answer to *King Kong*, Alfred Herbert's African Jazz and Variety stage musical and productions by South Africa's Shakespeare of township theatre, the late Gibson Kente.

Kaplan was a Uitenhage-based pharmacist, political activist and longtime ANC member. He was a man with great charm and wit.

He had spent his boyhood in the Red Location. He died aged 82 in 2003 after a long battle with cancer and was buried in Pinelands.

Kaplan's ANC underground code-name was "Thandabantu" and we - Zola Nqini, his employee, Themba Paulos, both also dead, and I - used to sponge funds off him to enable us to raise our elbows in Kabah Location's "water-hole".

The Shanty Town production's cast included Duru, Norman Ntshinga, Mabel Magada, Fezile Ngwenda, Ntsiki Mali, Rosey Koloi, Baba Naka and Velile Ngqondela. Band members included trumpeter Kekie Njikelana, who also acted, trombonist Mike Ngxokolo and tenor saxophonist Lent Whyte Maqoma.

The musical was vibrant and exhilarating, but with a weak plot. It opened to a packed Crispin Hall in Mount Road on a special permit as all-African shows were not allowed by the Reservations Separate Amenities Act to perform in white suburbs.

Later with some funding from the Imvo Zabantsundu management, as social editor I invited them to come over to Zwelitsha.

This was when I made a fool out of apartheid by managing to get the Town Hall in King William's Town, which had been a citadel of apartheid and out of bounds to blacks.

Through the help of Weir Brothers, a progressive King William's Town hardware company who opened their office for bookings, and

the Port Elizabeth Cripple Care Society, I was able to get the Town Hall.

We had arranged for a one-night show, but because of the turnout and demand we were forced to move to the Zwelitsha Community Hall the next afternoon. The musical was sold out and people came from East London, Alice, Peddie, Mount Coke and the surrounding rural areas.

At that time there was a Batfair Agricultural Show which annually visited King William's Town and was put up just below Zwelitsha police station. Business people and small entrepreneurs hired stalls to exhibit their products.

The organisers usually brought along top musicians from Johannesburg to perform.

Zwelitsha residents like the Bokwes, Mamas and Gqibitholes opened their homes to accommodate the *Shanty Town Revue* cast. I remember an incident at the door of the hall when some young men wanted to gate crash and our door man was Atwell "Saint" Mrwetyana, a former boxer and trainer.

When I got there I found Mrwetyana and one of them locked in a tussle and Mrwetyana unleashed a powerful left hook which sent his adversary flying down the stairs to the pavement. He got up and together with his two friends fled.

Among those Johannesburg artists who dropped in to watch the performance were young Letta Mbuli and Tandi Klaasen.

We had made friends with liquor and food representatives at the Batfair and after the show they hosted a swinging party.

There were other musical stage productions that put Port Elizabeth on the theatrical map.

There was playwright Mzwandile Maqina's socio-political play, *Give Us This Day*, in 1974, followed by *The Trial and Crack*, but he and the plays were later banned. When the ban was lifted, he wrote a prophetic musical, *Face to Face*.

Others were Vuyisile Bojana's *Jazz Train* and *Broadway in Africa* and Victor Vinjiwe's controversial musical, *Take The Blame*.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
Wednesday, March 1, 2006].

We Should Not Forget Massacres on March 21

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

TUESDAY, March 21, is a holiday which should never be taken lightly or forgotten. On that day two massacres occurred in South Africa which helped shape not only history, but our fight for democracy. On this holiday, known as Human Rights Day, we remember those who died when trigger-happy apartheid policemen shed the blood of our people.

I am referring to the victims of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 and the one right on our doorstep in Langa, Uitenhage in 1985.

Since the ushering in of democracy, on this day we no longer resort to defiant, fiery anti-government speeches at political rallies and have the police firing tear gas canisters, stun grenades, live ammunition and rubber bullets into unarmed crowds. We, however, still need to educate future generations on the role so many played to ensure their freedom today.

The PAC-led 1960 Sharpeville Massacre saw 69 people killed and more than 180 injured. After the massacre the ANC and PAC were banned.

Three or four years ago I visited the site of the shooting in front of the police station in Sharpeville, near Vereeniging. PAC local leaders caring for the garden of remembrance showed us around and explained what had happened there.

Apparently PAC founder-president Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe and his executive urged African men to leave their passes at home that day. They were told to join a demonstration and, if arrested, not to pay bail or a fine.

Twenty-five years after Sharpeville, in Uitenhage, police acting on the orders of Lt J Fouche opened fire on an estimated crowd of 4 000 in Maduna Street, McNaughton (KwaLanga), Uitenhage after shouting at them to disperse. The crowd was marching to Kwanobuhle for a mass funeral for four unrest victims, unaware the funerals had been banned.

I arrived at the scene soon after the police had hurriedly removed the bodies. Residents estimated that between 29 and 43 died, but the police put it at 20.

More than 50 000 people attended the moving mass funeral of the victims at the Jabavu Stadium in Kwanobuhle on Saturday, April 13, 1985. Among the speakers were UDF founder and president Dr Alan Boesak, then president of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and Nobel Peace Prize winner the Rt Rev Desmond Tutu, then Anglican bishop of Johannesburg.

I can still hear Boesak saying: "I am, as I stand here today, filled with grief and with sadness. I am also filled with anger. When I look at those 29 coffins I am filled with rage."

In the aftermath of the massacre tensions in Uitenhage townships reached boiling point, there was a massive stayaway from work and school, local and overseas media converged on Uitenhage, policemen's homes were fire-bombed and they were forced to flee the townships, and people branded as informers and collaborators were necklaced. One of them was Benjamin Kinikini, the last member of the Uitenhage Community Council.

The P W Botha government imposed a state of emergency, banned all outdoor meetings in Port Elizabeth and other magisterial districts and deployed the army in force in townships.

On June 11, 1985 Mr Justice Donald Kannemeyer, who conducted an inquiry into the massacre, found the unnecessary banning of funerals on doubtful grounds, and improperly equipped police were the main factors which led to the massacre. He also found the deaths and injuries could not be attributed to an error of judgment or human frailty of any one person.

He rejected the police assertion that they had been attacked with sticks, stones and other missiles, and the funerals had been banned because there was a planned attack on whites.

I remember press photographer Elijah Jokazi and I, a year later, spending almost the whole bitterly cold night at the Kwanobuhle cemetery on March 20, 1986. There were emotional scenes and singing of freedom songs to Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo as 100 activists under Fikile Kobese erected a memorial stone on a monument to those who had died in the shooting.

The 2m-high stone was unveiled the next day.

One of the inscriptions on the stone reads: "In memory of our martyrs whose blood will bear the fruits of the people's total liberation, and others whose whereabouts could not be established after that brutal and merciless killing".

Just below the names of the 29 victims another inscription reads: “We also remember all our heroes who have fallen during the course of the struggle. Their sacrifice will not be in vain. Victory is certain – Dedicated by the freedom-loving people of Uitenhage.”

Tens of thousands turned out at the unveiling following a lengthy service at Jabavu Stadium. Guest speaker Boesak said there would be “no easy walk to freedom”.

One cannot complete the story of this massacre without mentioning the courageous role played by the late Progressive Federal Party member, Molly Blackburn, at the Uitenhage Catholic Centre, comforting the bereaved and the injured, taking statements and arranging for lawyers.

No security force members were ever brought to trial for the two tragic events.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
Wednesday, March 15, 2006].

Townships Reverberated To Jazz, Jive And Swing

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

NOT even the apartheid era could totally spoil the fabulous '50s and '60s, when we enjoyed the vibrant, throbbing and energising

township jazz. This was during the era of swing, be-bop, jazz and jive – vibrant music which reverberated in the South African black ghettos.

It also made its presence felt in the rural areas where indigenous choral and isichathamiya music prevailed.

The Nats, who came into power in 1948 with their disastrous racist policies, were real killjoys, coming up with separate performances for whites and blacks on a permit system.

Black artists like Dolly Rathebe could perform in white nightclubs with special permission as long as they entered and left through the back door, remained in the ante-room and did not mix with the audience. On their way home artists came face to face with the long arm of the law and some were arrested for failing to produce a night pass or were forced to sing for their release.

It was also risking arrest for blacks to attend shows in white areas and I recall some spending the night in the bushes at the North End cemetery and from a distance watching police patrol vans on duty.

I remember one night in 1970 coming out of the Alpha Cinema in Sidwell when our group of five, which included Phindile Norani, had to choose dark areas to walk back to New Brighton to avoid arrest for breaking the curfew. We had been watching *Soul Africa*, a pop music film based on the 1970 tour of South Africa by Percy “King of Soul” Sledge, the highlight of which was his performance in Swaziland.

We also decided not to walk past the New Brighton police station for fear of being hauled into a police holding cell and instead took a risk which could have ended in tragedy.

There was excavation work in progress where Eveready is situated today. There was a thick, long, flat piece of timber placed over this deep sewerage trench to enable pedestrians to cross.

One false step, and we would have fallen into the foul-smelling trench where there was a burst sewerage pipe. I remember praying as I crawled across on all fours.

Despite police harassment, I remember travelling from East London to Port Elizabeth with the Bishop Limba Brass Band which had one of South Africa's leading trumpeters of the time, band leader David Mzimkhulu. We were nearly arrested in Grahamstown.

Saxophonist Hammie Qilingele, who was in high spirits, had been blowing "Bra Ntemi" Piliso's Alexandra All-Star Band's *Hell Fire* on his sax all the way with the band backing him up in the truck and at about midnight we stopped at a petrol station in Grahamstown. Qilingele suddenly stepped from the truck and gave an impromptu performance in the street. Suddenly lights went on in nearby houses and the police were called.

We could have faced two charges - disturbing the peace and being without a night pass.

Former business pioneer Thembekile Sali and former photo-journalist Mabel "Sis May" Cetu, who was fluent in Afrikaans, were with me in a car following the truck. The two intervened and I remember hearing Sis May using the humiliating Afrikaans term "baas" many times.

The police warned us and thanks to Sis May's apparent "constructive engagement" with the long arm of the law, we were allowed to proceed to Port Elizabeth.

The band played a mix of mainstream jazz and traditional or indigenous music which would bring audiences to their feet to jive the night away. They appeared in the War Memorial Hall or the T C White hall or the prefab Social Centre.

The government had imposed the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act of 1953, which forced segregation in all public amenities, public

buildings and public transport with the aim of eliminating contact between whites and other races. This resulted in “Europeans Only” and “Non-Europeans Only” signs being put up, even on public benches in parks and at railway stations.

This Act impacted badly on the growth and development of jazz in the country as whites were either denied or allowed through special permission the opportunity of listening to the performances of other race groups.

The Separate Amenities Act bared its apartheid teeth when in June 1970 Sledge was granted a visa by the department of interior on condition that he performed to non-white audiences only. But when the show opened in Cape Town, some whites defiantly broke the law by disguising themselves as Muslims and coloureds.

The government later reversed its decision and allowed Sledge to perform for white audiences in white areas, but the Bloemfontein City Council refused him permission to perform in its City Hall.

In December, 1983 Sledge breezed into Port Elizabeth on his second visit to the country.

He was accompanied by promoter Pat Nini, of East London, and was entertained to a surprise braai organised by Welcome Duru at his Mendi Road, New Brighton home and I got the chance to interview him.

Sledge only performed at Bhisho, in driving rain, attracting a crowd of only 150.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
Wednesday, March 29, 2006].

Tracking Down Press Colleagues From The 1950s

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

WHEN away from South Africa, one has time to relax and think of the past and the people, some dead, who meant something in one's life. These were some of the thoughts that plagued my mind while at Dunfermline in Scotland despite the terrorist alert which gripped the UK.

One of the people I thought of was a man who introduced me to journalism more than 48 years ago, Dan Chocho.

I had not heard from him or seen him since the '50s. I had kept on wondering whether he was still alive or had joined that illustrious group of journalists, among them Can Themba, Casey Motsitsi, Henry Nxumalo, Todd Matshikiza, Alex la Guma, Casey Motsisi, Bloke Modisane, Nat Nakasa and Stan Motjuwadi in the world beyond.

On my arrival back last week, retired veteran journalist Siphso "Doc" Bikitsha was helpful and I managed to find Dan in Dube, where, after retirement, he operated a successful tavern.

Dan was happy to hear from me, and we talked about the past and the present.

People like us grew up in a divided country with apartheid and colonialism in charge of our lives, placing us in racist compartments for residential purposes. In sport, we had segregation in boxing, rugby, the list is endless.

We had newspapers and magazines solely designed for a black market – *Bantu World*, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, the *Golden City Post*, *Zonk*, *Drum*, *Africa*, *Bona* – which were schools for black journalists.

There were also influential leftist newspapers like *New Age*, which operated from 1953 to 1962 until justice minister B J Vorster banned it. The newspaper's name was changed to *Spark*, and Vorster not only banned the newspaper, but its editors and writers as well, one of them being ANC/SACP stalwart Govan Mbeki. He had entered journalism after he was fired from the teaching profession by Dr Hendrik Verwoerd.

Blacks could not work as journalists on white newspapers until Nakasa blazed the trail by becoming the first black journalist on the *Rand Daily Mail*, for which he wrote a regular column. Then white editors took note of black talent in journalism.

It was in the late '50s when Chocho was bureau chief of the *Golden City Post/Drum* with offices at Court Chambers in North End that I was introduced into journalism, first as a freelancer and later employed full-time by associate editor Themba, doing general reporting. That meant covering rugby, cricket, soccer, politics, crime and social activities.

I joined that list of trailblazers, the likes of Nxumalo, Arthur Maimane, Bikitsha, Zuluboy Molefe, Matshikiza, Lewis Nkosi, Obed Musi, James Matthews, Gordon Qumza, Harry Mashabele, Theo Mthembu, Madilika Vuso, Alex la Guma, Motsisi, Leslie Sehume, Es'kia Mphahlele, Modisane, Nakasa, Stan Motjuwadi and photographers Peter Magubane, Jurgen Schadeberg, Bob Gosani, Gordon Qumza, Madilika Vuso – the list is endless.

Some of those surviving journalists have found that journalism was not retirement-friendly for blacks unless one had something up one's sleeve. Some of the journalists after retiring had to open shebeens and spaza shops to keep the cat away from the hearth or kept on freelancing.

But *Drum* was an initiation school to many distinguished writers today. Some, like yours truly, based outside Johannesburg, were products of long-distance journalistic learning.

This was a period when the black community respected black journalists – a new breed in society – pampered and entertained them.

But some criminals did not take a liking to them, while others even begged us to have their crime stories published.

Most of us entered the profession because our parents either could not afford university fees or obtain scholarships.

I have been asked many a time why I took up journalism. I did so because I did not want to follow most of the professions common to Africans at the time, which were teaching and nursing or end up as a messenger boy or street sweeper.

I have also always been asked for a comparison between journalism of that time and that of today. Although I can readily express my opinion, I have always refused, simply because I am still practising the art and being paid.

I will keep that resolve to the day I start writing my memoirs. As a matter of fact, I have been asked so many times to write them.

I can simply say, from the long-distance tuition, it was instilled in us that we remained objective and impartial, and never drag personal differences into our stories or work.

We wrote about political parties with which we differed ideologically, because ours was to give people information and not to pre-judge.

We had a passion to inform, telling your story and our stories without favour or compromise or bribery, even when working in that difficult apartheid era. We believed in integrity and chose to go to jail rather than disclose our sources.

At least, I can say due to those trailblazers, today we have schools of journalism and graduate journalists.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
The Herald (Port Elizabeth)
Wednesday, August 23, 2006].

Showbiz Pioneer's Contribution Forgotten

by

James Tyhilekile Matyu

Society tends at times to forget the unsung heroes of the past who played a pivotal role in our lives. A case in point is a legend of the entertainment industry in South Africa, veteran impresario Bonakele Nomkonwana, of New Brighton, who seems to have been forgotten.

Affectionately known as "Showbiz" throughout South Africa, he was a household name not only in the urban areas but even in the remote rural areas of Transkei in the 1960s to the '80s.

Today I seldom hear his name mentioned and nobody has ever thought of honouring him with an award, nominating him either as a citizen of the year or presenting him with local or national honours for his contribution to our music – jazz and mbaqanga – in the '60s and '70s.

It often disturbs and angers me when I see people who have made no significant contribution to our struggle, or community or social upliftment and whose agendas centre on self-enrichment honoured today.

The other day, together with Wilberforce Mdoda, I paid a surprise visit to Nomkonwana at his ever-posh Themba lethu, New Brighton, home. I found him still in good health and effervescent as ever.

This was a man who brought happiness and joy to millions of young and old people. In the '60s the Great Centenary Hall used to be packed to the rafters at his promotions, showcasing Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, the Dark City Sisters, Intombi Zesimanje-manje, and other mqashiyo groups.

He also gave a break to Africa's reggae king, Lucky Dube, when he was still an unknown struggling mbaqanga music artist before switching to reggae.

It was on a Saturday morning in the early '60s at the Market Square (renamed Vuyisile Mini Square), which was sort of a rendezvous where young men and their female partners or prospective couples used to arrange to meet, that I interviewed Nomkonwana. One of my beats as a journalist was social entertainment and Nomkonwana fitted in this category.

Walmer township was at that time an almost no-go area to “clevers” from New Brighton, who were always wrongly suspected by local men of coming there to womanise. For that reason I arranged to meet Nomkonwana at the square.

Nomkonwana was an exciting trumpeter and a leader of the Jazz Maniacs which produced legends such as the late alto saxophonist Dudu Pukwana who went on to play a significant role in shaking up the British jazz scene in the 1960s and 1970s. There was never a dull weekend in Port Elizabeth, and I remember the many all-night and fun-filled parties held at Nomkonwana's three-roomed Chase Street, Walmer, house after concerts and beauty pageants.

He brought many well-known and popular artists and music groups to our doors and these also toured the Eastern Cape as far as Mthatha, Qumbu, Mount Fletcher, Bizana, Lusikisiki, Kokstad, Ngqamakhwe and Mount Frere, Cofimvaba, Cala, and Tsolo.

In October, 1966 as director of the South African Musicians' Association, Nomkonwana organised the first National Jazz Festival at the Wolfson Stadium in Kwazakhele. Due to the apartheid system of separate development, the bantu affairs department refused him a permit to hold this festival in a white area, and white musicians and patrons were barred from participating or attending the festival.

But he was granted a special "separate development" permit by the department to stage a special show for an all-white audience in the Feather Market Hall a night before the festival.

The cream of South African black musicians - among them Phillip Tabane and his Malombo Jazzmen from Pretoria, the Dalton Khanyile Sextet from Durban, the Jazz Ambassadors and the Merry Macs from Cape Town, the Elite Swingsters from Johannesburg, the Nu-Quavers from East London and the Soul Jazzmen from Port Elizabeth - took part.

In 1968 in partnership with Welcome Duru and with his late daughter, Nombulelo, as secretary, Nomkonwana formed the SA Township and Variety Show Association. They signed top musicians for Cape tours such as Ben "Satch" Msinga, Tandie Klaasen, Kippie Moeketsi, Barney Rabachane, Dennis Mpale and Shake Mgudlwa, Zakes Nkosi, and the City Jazz Nine.

Encouraged by the success of his previous national jazz festival, in October, 1977, at the height of unrest in the country, he organised a national jazz and pop festival at the Wolfson Stadium which was wrecked by rowdy hooligans.

Two months later, Nomkonwana was detained for seven days under the Transkei public security laws in Umtata, and charged with entering Transkei without authority and staging a show featuring Jury Ntshinga's Black Slaves not sanctioned by the Transkei's Publications Board and for not acquiring temporary work permits. He was released after protesting to the commissioner of police.

On November 18, 1978, the government granted him a special permit to stage a show for a multiracial audience in the Feather Market Hall.

In 1983, he brought the musical group Juluka, with vocalists Johnny Clegg and Spho Mchunu, to New Brighton.

Nomkonwana also joined the pioneers of black beauty pageants, Victor Mkhize, Peter Rezant and Rupert Bopape. In 1970 he staged a successful and first Miss SA pageant in Mthatha.

[Jimmy Matyu About Town
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