

Brenda Fassie

a bright consuming flame

South Africans were fascinated with Brenda Fassie. **Lara Allen** looks at her music and her life and suggests why she was such an icon.

On 26 April 2004 South Africa's most popular musician Brenda Fassie was admitted to hospital after collapsing as a result of a cocaine overdose. She died on 9 May without regaining consciousness. President Thabo Mbeki addressed 20 000 mourners at her funeral in Langa Stadium.

But who was Brenda? What made her such an extraordinary musician? Why did people either love or hate her?

BRENDA, THE MUSICIAN

Born in Langa township, Cape Town in 1964, Brenda was the youngest in a musical family of nine. Her mother recognised Brenda's talent when she led a group called the Tiny Tots aged four. Frustrated by lack of local opportunity Brenda ran away to Johannesburg in her early teens to join Gibson Kente's musical drama troupe. Although she returned home within a year her talent was noticed in the city of gold, and in

1979 Brenda returned to Johannesburg under the wing of producer Koloi Lebona.

Brenda temporarily joined the popular trio *Joy* and then fronted Blondie and Pappa's backing band called *The Family*. In 1983 this group renamed themselves *Brenda and the Big Dudes* and released the hit single *Weekend Special*. This funky disco song about adultery sold over 200 000 copies. In 1986 when British and American remixes were released it stayed on the Billboard Hot Black Singles Chart for eight weeks. The local disco market was brought to life, and the group produced other hits such as *It's Nice to Be with People* and *No No No Senor*.

The primary musical element that South African disco took from its American model was the disco beat, which was grafted onto the late 1970s South African soul sound. Brenda won the hearts and ears of local audiences because of the aching, provocative quality of her voice and her exceptional interpretive abilities. She knew just how to bend pitch, attack a note in a particular manner, or ever so slightly delay its arrival, to achieve maximum emotional effect.

In the late 1980s Brenda merged her virtuoso performance with the outstanding skills of composer, arranger and producer Sello 'Chicco' Twala, forming a creative partnership that became one of the most productive in the history of South African popular music. Their first album, *Too Late for Mama*,

topped most South African charts in 1989.

SCANDAL THAT WAS BRENDA

Meanwhile Brenda's private life became public property. In 1985 she gave birth to a son, Bongani, and in 1989 she married Nhlanhla Mbambo. The wedding celebrations, which cost R300 000 and included over 1 000 guests, were held in both Cape Town and Durban. However, the marriage ended in a much publicised bitter divorce in 1991. During this period Brenda survived scandals arising from fraud charges that were dropped, being sued for not appearing at concerts, being convicted of assaulting a photographer, and intimate admissions about her sex life made on her 087 telephone number.

The next few years were full of personal tragedy. In 1993 Brenda's mother died, and rumours of substance abuse started to circulate. In 1994 she became bankrupt and homeless, and 1995 her lover, Poppie Sihlahla, died of a drug overdose in a Hillbrow hotel while Brenda slept beside her. Distraught, Brenda publicly declared her addiction to cocaine and went into rehabilitation.

Although none of these disasters disrupted Brenda's career for long, she was disturbed by the negative publicity aroused by her lifestyle, and repeatedly tried to counter it through her music. Her next albums were titled *Am Not a Bad Girl*, *Abantu Bayakbuluma*

(*People are Talking*), and *Umuntu Uya Shintsha (A Person Can Change)*.

She also entered a more experimental musical phase, moving away from the 'bubble gum' disco sound of 1980s township pop towards a more mature style. Her 1996 album, *Now is the Time*, included two collaborative tracks with Congolese *soukous* superstar Papa Wemba. Although *Paparazzi* (1997) was not successful in terms of sales, it showed Brenda's search for a new stylistic voice. Produced by Godfrey Pilane, the album ranged from *kwaito* to slow groove to Afro-jazz.

The following year Brenda reunited musically with Chicco Twala who produced *Memeza (Shout)*, the first South African recording to go platinum on the first day of its release. The hit from this *Vuli Ndlela (Make Way)* earned Fassie the SAMA award for best-selling release of the year in 1998, and the 1999 Kora Award for best female artist in Africa. Popular throughout the continent, *Vuli Ndlela* is influenced by South African gospel.

Brenda was back with a vengeance. So was her partnership with Twala who produced her next three albums *Nomakanjani?*, *Amadlozi* and *Mina Naawe*, each winning the SAMA award for best selling album. Then 2002 saw the release of *Myekeleni*, and on her 39th birthday in 2004 Brenda launched her last album, *Mali*.

BRENDA'S LEGACY

The extent of Brenda's fame was exceptional for a South African musician. Her Google recognition is over 84 300 hits, she has an entry in Wikipedia, a feature article in *Time Magazine*, and a life-size bronze statue in Johannesburg's

Newtown cultural precinct. She achieved hits across the colour bar, across the Atlantic, and throughout Africa. She sold more than any other South African musician and earned more than R6 million in royalties in the last eight years of her life alone.

Most extraordinary of all was Brenda's ability to move from one style to another, and remain at the top in both - a very unusual achievement in the world of pop music globally. She was the major star of 1980s township pop and disco, and is widely credited as fundamentally influencing the birth of *kwaito*, and when her 2000 album *Nomakanjani* went triple platinum, the press started calling her South Africa's *kwaito* Queen.

Brenda's legacy to *kwaito* is musical, but it also evident in her use of the ever changing township language *scumto*, her confident, provocative sexual persona, and her general attitude.

Even in early township disco days her image was more edgy than middle-of-the-road pop stars. She had the hard boiled, fast talking, street wise edge of *mapantsula* culture. Brenda never wore the ghetto as fashion accessory. She radiated the real violence, hardship and the need to be smart and cunning to survive the streets because it was part of her being. Brenda sang songs about the realities of ordinary people's lives. Not because she wanted to keep in touch with her roots, but because all her life she struggled street level struggles. While some criticised her, many liked her human frailty, her battles and failures.

WHY SUCH A LIFE?

But why did Brenda live and die the way she did? The explanation often offered for Brenda's self-destructive behaviour is socio



Statue of Fassie in the Johannesburg Newtown complex

political. *This Day's* editor suggested that Brenda's neediness and desperate desire for acknowledgement was a result of her life under apartheid: "Fassie was always enveloped by a deep sadness...the causes are not hard to find: she grew up black and a woman in a country that hated black people and women."

The editor also challenged the post-apartheid government on its lack of delivery - not only materially, but in terms of the despair and lack of self worth that township life instilled. "For every Fassie who makes it out, who knows how many others are lost to drugs, AIDS and general despair? Who knows how a Weekend Special turns out? All the politicians who streamed to her bedside..."

would do well to consider that perhaps Fassie died of a broken heart." In this reading Brenda's pain, and possibly her popularity with millions of South Africans, is about an inability to heal from scars as a black South African.

Another explanation concerns the dangers of Brenda's 'escape' from the ghetto. Brenda rose too fast from township waif to superstar, she couldn't take the pace. She didn't have the background or social support to understand money, and how to use it without destroying herself.

This explanation is offered as an answer to the media's sensationalist reporting of her escapades. Her manager Peter Snyman asserted: "The media's always been very cruel to Brenda. They didn't realise, here's this little girl straight from the townships, thrown into the spotlight."

The *Sunday Times* pushed this further: "Fassie was South Africa's first mega pop music celebrity in the mould of Madonna. But unlike Madonna, she had no role models because nobody in this country had ever been where she went. She was on her own, and right from the start she struggled to handle the fame and money that became hers overnight."

But this is ridiculous, you may argue. There are lots of excessively rich black people who accelerated from below zero to wealthy in one generation. Well precisely. Brenda achieved wealth and fame a decade before the majority of South Africa's new black elite. It took her 20 years to burn out her flame. Could her relationship to the 'good life' be a frightening precedent for some of our elite high flyers? Are we going to see more tragic stories of our leading lights over the next ten years?

Brenda 'ate life'. Her money and

recognition allowed her to do so to extremes. She consumed like one who knows what it is to be without money. There was a desperateness that those coming from generations of middle class life do not experience. The bitter memory of injustice and deprivation, as well as the harsh realities of the present, particularly the brutal presence of death, brought on compulsive eating in times of glut.

Many of the big men and women in the new South Africa also eat life. They enjoy pleasure in the present, taking risks to do so. Does the way Brenda lived her life show something about the way many South Africans, rich and poor, relate to HIV/AIDS? When wealth and pleasure represent the fruits of freedom, consumption is a political act; an expression of power. Big men must consume, and an important part of their consumption is to consume women. Many South Africans have unprotected sex as addictively as Brenda had sex and smoked cocaine. Does the way in which Brenda ate life, partly explain why so many South Africans flirt with death for the sake of pleasures in the present?

The idea that we can explain everything through people's economic position in society is common. But there must be something else that explains Brenda's life and death.

Again press analysis offers some pointers. *This Day's* editor came close to an explanation with this: "Could it have been because she had a hole in her soul that all the fame, money and hangers-on could not fill? Many of the world's greatest musicians had a similar affliction, and they too died prematurely: Elvis Presley, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain.

In all of their lives something was amiss." I would like to stay with the idea that Brenda had something in common with other artists who self-destructed.

The French philosopher and psychotherapist Jacques Lacan offers a concept that helps us understand Brenda's condition and the function she played in society.

Brenda, and many other artists who hovered between madness and acceptable behavior, mediated for 'normal' people a place that Lacan described as 'the real'. 'The real' is the underside of what we normally see as reality. It is beyond what we can imagine, conceive or express. Yet it exerts a force on everything that we do and are. We do everything we can to avoid acknowledging 'the real', but we are also fascinated and drawn to it.

One of the important social functions of artists is that they explore the edge of reality more than most people. A 'great artist' is often someone who dips into that space of power, horror and ecstasy, and shares small parts of it for us. Through her music Brenda shared 'the real' with millions of South Africans. This function of artists as mediators between reality and 'the real' accounts for their uncertain social position. We value artists for their courage and fear them for their ability to cross over into 'the real' and return with evidence. They are admired and despised; met with adulation and moral judgment. And these contradictory responses is what Brenda always attracted.

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