

"Maskandi deserves respect"

Interview with Phuzekhemisi

He strums an ordinary guitar, wears traditional Zulu attire and comes from Illovo in KwaZulu-Natal. **Woody Aroun** and **Bonga Ngwane** spoke to Phuzekhemisi, the king of Maskandi or traditional Zulu music, about his life and music.

Tell us a little about yourself? Where were you born and did you always live in Illovo?

My name is Phuzekhemisi Mnyandu. I was born in Umkomaas, kwa Dumisa, in a village called Enspheeni. I grew up like all other rural boys. I looked after my father's cattle and did everything that rural boys were expected to do, taking care of the farm and the household. I often had to fight with the other boys for the cow liver. I came from a poor family and there was very little opportunity to acquire an education. But I did have some schooling, the equivalent of Grade 3. I spent most of my youth working. At the age of 13 I worked for a farmer and then later moved to Durban North where I worked for a further two years. In 1979 I moved to Johannesburg.

How did you get the name Phuzekhemisi?

I got the name while working in a furniture shop in Johannesburg. They did not want to keep cold water for us to drink (*phuzza*). So I visited the nearest 'chemist' (*kbemisi*) to get water to drink ... so my friends called me

Phuzekhemisi. This is the name I used when recording my CDs.

What influenced you to become a musician?

I come from a family that loves music. When we were young my brother and I used homemade guitars and played music. I was part of a group of boys and my father and brother used to lead us in music. When my father passed away I took over the lead. In 1981 my brother and I joined the Ngubane family of musicians in Johannesburg. The group was called Special Five. We worked very well with them and in 1985 I recorded my very first album called *Phuzekhemisi No Kbethane*. After my first release my brother and I then parted with the group. By that time we felt mature enough and able to manage on our own.

Maskandi? What is Maskandi?

Maskandi is the popular name for Zulu traditional music and is deeply rooted in the Zulu culture. Maskandi musicians sing about everything and anything to promote the Zulu language and culture ... the purpose is to keep our traditional music alive for



future generations because it is through the medium of music that we are able to popularise our culture and values.

People say that your songs have a strong message, critical of our social surroundings, yet it inspires hope for a better future. How do you feel about this?

As musicians we are poets. We sing about social issues that we observe so that those issues get special attention by the relevant authorities or individuals. One of my CDs is titled *Amakbansela*

(Councillors). I was referring to the poor service delivery even after people had voted. That CD became popular because people bought it and played it for their councillors in order to shake them up.

After releasing your album titled "Local Government" you were criticised by the former Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Lionel Mtsbali, because you were perceived to be discouraging people from voting. Is this true?

No! No! I was not saying that people should not vote. I was referring to my observation with regard to service delivery. As a poet I believe I have a right to sing about what I see and I request politicians not to interfere with what we preach. They should give us space to entertain the people of South Africa so that we become self supportive.

You are very popular in KwaZulu-Natal. Do you enjoy the same support in the other provinces and South Africa as a whole?

True. KZN is the number one province when it comes to support. However, people in the other provinces do buy my CDs – this is evident on the computer system where one can see the number of CDs that are sold in the country, and the location of sale.

We are told that you have performed in a number of overseas countries. Were you well received?

Yes, yes, more than anywhere else. When we were there we were treated like kings and queens and the support is wonderful ... they simply enjoy our music. I have

performed in almost all the major European capitals, and even in Washington. The international audience loved us very much and we appreciate their support and urge fellow South Africans to continue supporting us.

How many CDs have you produced?

I have produced 16 albums since 1988.

Do you think that Maskandi music is widely recognised in SA?

At the present level Maskandi music does not enjoy the type of recognition that it deserves. The main stream radio stations are not playing our music as much as they play other forms of music. SABC 1 has done away with the Maskandi Programme (*Ezodumo*). This is an indication that very little is being done to play our music. We felt neglected during the SAMA awards for 2006. I won but was not shown on national television like the other musicians. They decided to go on ad break without showing me receiving my award. We had a serious concern and later requested a meeting with SABC to explain their bias for the other musicians.

Which of your albums do you think are the most successful?

Imbizo (Gathering), Injayami (my dog) and Amakbansela (Councillors) proved to be very successful – they are my favourites.

What are your future plans? How do you plan to sustain your music?

I am prepared to stay with my recording company Gallo Music

Lyrics from the song Amakhansela

*Obulumeni bangakithi angeke
siphinde sibavotela
Obulumeni bamakbansela angeke
siphinde sibavotele
Intutbuko ayikho kulendawo, angeke
siphinde sibavotele,
Obulumeni bezifundazwe angeke
siphinde sibavotele, intutbuko ayikho
Obulumeni basekbaya angeke
siphinde sibavotele*

*"Nathi nizokwakha izibhedlela, nakbe
namaClinics,
Nemigwaqo ayikho, benzani abantu
bakithi eSouth Africa".*

*We will never vote for the same local
government again.
They aren't useful
There is still no development in our
area.*

*You said that you'll build hospitals
and clinics, but that has not been
done*

*You also promised to do road
construction but we still have to walk
long distances on bad roads.*

until I die. Over and above that I have produced at least seven young musicians – Nyonemhlope (Whitebird), Phathekile and Nonkasha to name a few. But when I was their age I was very popular. Now I have to find a balance between my music and a few small business interests, just so that I can sustain an income and provide for my family. But I am passionate about my music and Maskandi will always be a part of me.

Woody Aroun and Bonga Ngwane are officials of the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa. Phuzekbemisi was interviewed in isiZulu, this is a translation.