

Poems & songs for workers

Interview with Mzwakhe

Popularly known as the 'people's poet', Mzwakhe Mbuli has been seen on stage at many workers' events. To those who know him, he is not a new face but has been a struggle musician of note for many years. **Alfred Mafuleka** talks to Mzwakhe about his long career.

Mzwakhe Mbuli's career started in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, through to the turbulent political dark periods of the 1980s state of emergencies and similar repression by the apartheid regime of the National Party. Mzwakhe did not need to go to school to learn politics but was taught by events that happened around him. His questioning mind also played an important role in the development of his political consciousness.

He recalls: 'I went into town and saw white children in a school bus. I have never seen this in the township. Where were the children coming from? Why was it that the children got bus rides from school whilst some black kids walked barefoot four kilometres each way to school?'

Living and social conditions were harsh for black people in the townships when compared to suburbs where whites lived. Mzwakhe experienced this harshness which informed his poetry and music.

Those interested in coming up with clear cut music labels will find it difficult to box Mzwakhe's music and poetry. This could be a result of where his music influences came from which included 'imbube music' by hostel

dwellers and school-based theatre groups and music events that took place throughout his youth. The death of fellow students after his school participated in the Soweto Uprising encouraged Mbuli to write his first poem. He describes this period as 'God's miracle' because it marked the beginning of his career and also laid the foundation for his political opinions.

Mzwakhe's 'first' recitation was at a funeral for a local pastor in Soweto. From then onwards he never looked back, becoming popular during funerals and political events of the 1980s. Come the release of the Robben Island veterans in 1989, the young poet was on standby with hard hitting political poems which became another way of popular mass protest against repression. His poems were emulated and performed by workers as part of the working-class struggle against bosses' exploitation and apartheid oppression.

Called the 'lang man' (tall man in Afrikaans) by the security police, he became a target for the Special Branch (SB) and faced several arrests and detentions during the long-term state of emergency, which only got lifted by FW de Klerk in June 1989.

Ironically, Mzwakhe's brush

with the law did not end in the pre-democracy period. He was detained for 'armed robbery' after being accused of staging a hold-up at a First National Bank (FNB) branch in Johannesburg with others. Sentenced to 15 years imprisonment, he was released in 2003 after spending six years behind bars. Mzwakhe believes that 'speaking out cost him his freedom'.

His first recorded poem and music album was *Change is pain* which was recorded in 1986. It was obviously banned by the apartheid government and his second album 'Unbroken spirit' came out in 1988 and got the gold status despite no radio exposure. He was arrested in the same year and tortured by the security police and warned to 'stop this nonsense, of making noise all over the country' but he remained defiant. Threats could not stop him.

Mzwakhe performed at the inauguration of the first democratically elected president of SA, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela in 1994, and prides himself for the unexpected visit he got from Mandela when he was in prison in 2002.

However, although still in the same mould of the struggle genre, his focus has somewhat changed



to incorporate the social ills of HIV and AIDS and corruption to political violence like Boipatong, right-wing and farmers shootings of innocent black people always protected by the courts or getting less lenient sentences. One of his powerful social and political questioning poems is titled: 'Ake ningiyekeni ngemibuzo bengingekho' (leave me alone with questions I was not here).

Some refer to him as the 'voice of reason' and his strongest statement and words are contained in the poem published immediately after his release from prison:

***From childhood to adulthood
none could arrest my mind
From the cradle to the grave,
none could imprison my mind
God sustains, I'm unsinkable
No prison walls could arrest
my mind...***

Whilst 'Mbulism' – the title of his latest album – is amongst the most recent work from the artist he rates his 'Amandla' album highly because it contains his best work so much so that anyone listening to it would understand what Mzwakhe is all about. 'Amandla' got high raves from SA's two best legendary musicians Hugh Masekela and

Jonas Gwangwa. Workers are featured in the first track, which lists stalwarts who include Elijah Barayi, Moses Kotane, and Vuyisile Mini and shows his passion for the workers' struggle.

On his contribution to the struggle for workers, Mzwakhe has performed at many events including at the formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) in Durban in 1985, at the Kinross Mine disaster 1986 in which 177 mineworkers died and recently at NUM's 30th anniversary at Matlosana and May Day rallies such as one that took place at the Sharpeville George Thabe Stadium in 2013.

Mzwakhe Mbuli is not an imbongi (praise poet) for individuals, but the struggle for liberation – from the United Democratic Fund to the present day. On how can workers revive their own struggle poetry, he has a simple message: 'go back to the Cosatu general secretary message on the official opening of the new Cosatu House. He said every Friday there would be a workers' events, book launches, poetry etc just for the workers. That is the way Cosatu must go. With so many members there is enormous talent among Cosatu members and the federation needed to come up with a cultural day. 'Cosatu needs

to have a cultural day you cannot go wrong! Look, Mbongeni Ngema wrote a play about Gert Sibande.' According to South African History Online, Sibande was an African National Congress activist and one of the first to be accused in treason trials of 1956 to 1961.

Today's enemies of the people are poverty, unemployment and corruption. '... In my lifetime I've never seen children learning under trees, except a black child.'

EARLY LIFE

Born on 1 August 1959 in Kofifi, Sophiatown, Mzwakhe has no memory of Kofifi as he was an infant when his parents were forcibly removed. He says that was the main reason he fought against apartheid and continues to fight up to this day.

His parents were ordinary black workers with his mother Roselinah Msuthukazi working as domestic worker for white families and his father Elijah Katali Mbuli employed as a truck driver. His parents met in Windhoek, Namibia then South West Africa.

Long before he would be known as the 'people's poet', he says that his 'father was prophetic' about his future fame. He would normally say: 'My son Muziwakhe would end up overseas'. But he was tough with him, deliberately depriving him of shoes even in winter as part of 'building him' into a man.

However, Mzwakhe is not bitter about his father's (whom he calls Israel) unconventional ways of raising a son but is thankful. He says it helped him withstand painful torture at the hands of the apartheid security police. ¹⁶

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