

# Against the Tide

Music legend **Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse** was around in Woodstock – not the Cape Town suburb, Woodstock the era – but he was 'very, very clean', he says. Well, almost. He chats with **Dave Levinsohn**, who points out it's a half-hour he'll never get back

**did you know?**

I can read two books at the same time, one in each hand.

**DL** In my experience, when I'm at weddings and *Burn Out* comes on, all the white people come onto the dance-floor and think they can dance. Did you write that song especially to make white people look k\*k on the dance floor?

**SM** [laughs] Not at all, not at all. I just liked the song. I just wrote that song 'cos at that time it's probably ... it was just really a feeling I had. I was just messing around on the piano.

**DL** But piano wasn't actually your main instrument?

**SM** No, it's not. It's just an instrument I use for composing and getting to understand the basic rhythm of the music, but whatever instrument I play plays within the context of the pianist.

**DL** Then that's like me. I play the classic keyboards with the lights ... there's a little Japanese guy in the machine that plays the drums for you. Did you ever meet Cedric Samson?

**SM** Oh, I've known Cedric for years. He even took my girlfriend.

**DL** [laughs] He took your girlfriend? See, now you're

talking! Is there a beef there?

**SM** There's no beef. Musicians do those things. I think I had the best girlfriend in the industry so he fell for her!

**DL** Now tell me about Kippies. When you're a manager of a club, doesn't the music suffer 'cos you're counting money and you're standing at the door?

**SM** That's why when it came back I told everyone that I was no longer keen. I gave it my best shot because at that point I felt it needed someone who understood the passion, someone who could relate to how audiences respond to a particular music. And I think I was at the right space at the right time [to leave].

**DL** And now, where are you in terms of music?

**SM** This has allowed me room to actually concentrate a lot on what I do and practise my instruments and learn to play properly.

**DL** You're talking about every instrument: drums, saxophone, kalimba?

**SM** Well, I don't play drums that much any more.

**DL** So we can't actually call you Sipho Hotstix. →

We've got to call you Sipho Hotfingers.

**SM** Hotsax! Hotsax! In Soweto they call me Hotsax ... as in saxophone.

**DL** Oh, I was spelling it with an 'e' [both laugh]. So your first band, let's go there: The Beaters. That came from drumming.

**SM** Yes. When I started, I wasn't a drummer per se. I played in a cadet band. So I was asked to come and play because I was of that disposition.

**DL** Were you in a cadet band at school? I remember those things back in the 70s, there was a big need for cadets and I had no idea why – in case we were attacked at school, we could play music for them? [laughs]. Were any of your songs banned in the 80s?

**SM** Ja, ja, there's an album I did called *Chant of the Marching*. That was heavy stuff, very, very heavy. It was banned 'cos of some of the contentious lyrics. I had about five tracks banned, actually.

**SM** Ja, ja, and they go to Vilakazi Street...

**DL** ...and have a braai and a car wash.

**SM** Ja, and to see Nelson Mandela's house. All that is very bright and it's very excitable stuff. As you go deeper you realise that things are not as cool.

**DL** You're 60 years old now and when I see something like the Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005, I think: how can you give the oke a lifetime achievement? He's just starting!

**SM** [laughs] Well, I'm flattered. Thank you very much, Dave, for making my day.

**DL** Where are you? 'Cos when I picture musicians I always see them in the studio, a big room full of drugs and naked women walking around, and they're laying tracks. Have you got a studio at home?

**SM** I've got a studio at home...

**DL** But there's no naked women?

**SHM** No, no, no. You see, as you're talking to me I'm

## Did you write that song *Burn Out* especially to make white people look k\*k on the dance floor?

**DL** Did you ever think, when you sing songs like that, and you're at a 46664 concert standing right next to Madiba, that it would ever come out like this?

**SM** Ja, no. When you are given a chance to travel out of the country and meet all the people, you are always hopeful. And I think one got so inspired by what was going on outside that you realise, 'No, freedom is gonna come, however long, it's gonna come.' And my little contribution in music form was part of what many of us should be doing.

**DL** And now, what do you think a young musician, HHP or Mandoza – what would they be fighting for?

**SM** They should be fighting against unemployment first of all because there are quite a number of graduates out there who come out of school. You know, if you live in the township then you see the despondency... A lot of people don't even come close to seeing what goes on in the townships.

**DL** So they'll go to Soccer City and consider that to be Soweto.

getting ready to go for a swim.

**DL** In your house? You've got an indoor pool? You see, you are doing well!

**SM** It's the public pool [laughs].

**DL** Now hang on – you can swim?

**SM** I'm an awesome swimmer.

**DL** 'Cos five comedian friends of mine all joke about black guys not being able to swim.

**SM** [laughs] There's a lot that can't.

**DL** So you got the Lifetime Achievement Award and the 100 metre swim in 48 seconds... [both laugh] Serious question: are you related to Felicia Mabuza?

**SM** Distant, yes.

**DL** So she can organise for you to play at [her nightclub] Back of the Moon for free?

**SM** Um, not really. She'd have to pay me!

**DL** Good. And now, you said you're busier this year playing gigs than ever – because of this World Cup?

**SM** No, you know, interestingly I've decided to stay a bit outside of it because...

**DL** Tell me what happened with the meeting 'cos that was big news.

**SM** For me, I just felt – the World Cup is a great spectacle ... but I've always believed that a spectacle of this nature should have soul. I mean, let's look at the opening concert in Soweto, right? You have all these major artists and then you charge R1 500 per ticket, and the cheapest ticket is R500.

**DL** Ja, you might as well have had it in Sandton.

**SM** Exactly... 'We don't want the poor ones, we want the rich ones.' For me that is a serious problem. And when you make the price prohibitive – I'm not saying people must get it for free, but make it affordable so that everybody has a chance in a lifetime to see the greatness of what we're about to experience.

**DL** So it was never saying, 'Put me on stage.'

**SM** No, not at all, not at all.

**DL** Did they make a compromise?

**SM** I don't know whether this had anything to do with my contention, you know, but after we raised the issues there was a meeting at the Dept of Arts & Culture, where decisions were made to actually include more African artists on the bill...

**DL** It ended up nicely. So, 500 000 albums: how much money did you get back in the 80s?

**SM** No, I sold more albums than that! That was just one album.

**DL** I mean, you had all your contracts in place and everything was *lekker*?

**SM** Ja, ja, ja.

**DL** And you wanna teach that to these young okes [through the Music Exchange]?

**SM** I was very fortunate to have been given a little bit of education, and that came in good stead for me because then I began to... in my travels...

**DL** You were speaking to people like James Brown and Percy Sledge and Wilson Pickett. They must have given you golden nuggets of knowledge.

**SM** [laughing] Absolutely.

**DL** So, as you said: don't get an agent.

**SM** No, no, no... there are good agents out there.

**DL** Ja, well, one. Where do you live, by the way?

**SM** I live in Soweto. →

**did you know?**

I love the Blue Bulls – I have a photo of myself and Victor Matfield taken at Cape Town airport.





**I AM LEGEND**  
Siphosiphiso 'Hotsax' Mabuse,  
Josh Groban and  
Vusi Mahlasela

**DL** And you're going for a swim on a winter's morning? You are a star, man! And everyone knows you, like, 'Hey, Siphosiphiso!' Do you wear a Speedo?

**SM** [laughs] No. I wear a what-do-you-call...

**DL** Billabongs?

**SM** No. I don't wear any of those brand names.

**DL** Because you're independent! Love it.

**SM** I don't wear any of the brand names, but I wear anything that I can use for swimming. You know, the stuff that the divers wear.

**DL** Lycra. Okay, cool. Now, did you ever go to Studio 54 and the disco clubs [in New York] or did you just go to the Apollo Theatre?

**SM** I did. I did.

**DL** And was it total sex, drugs, rock 'n' roll crazy?

**SM** I've never really been part of that movement... I must say that at some early stages during the Woodstock era, maybe I could've been caught up...

**DL** ...had a puff or two.

**SM** Ja. Because it was a statement made against the Establishment at the time.

**DL** So maybe that's what *Burn Out* is all about?

**SM** [laughs] Not really. I was very clean then. When I recorded *Burn Out* I was one of the fittest musicians you could ever come across.

**DL** I do remember. I went to Concert in the Park...

**SM** You'd think I was a boxer. I would wake up...

**DL** You were ripped.

**SM** ... at four o'clock in the morning and I'd be running the streets, and I'd go to the pool. And on Saturdays I'd be seen riding around on a bicycle. So my life was just about fitness and all that.

**DL** And that's before the Jane Fonda fitness craze. And you've got kids, hey? Do you encourage them to be musicians?

**SM** One of them is a musician in England. She's doing extremely well. Mpho Skeef.

**DL** I know exactly who you're talking about! That's your daughter? Now there's pressure on the others.

**SM** Well, the others have chosen different ... one is a film producer, the other one is an accountant.

**DL** Ja, that's the disappointing one...

photographs: supplied

**SM** No, no! [laughs] She's also talented. She can sing.

**DL** And when did you decide you had to sing? I mean, Selby [Ntuli, his Harare bandmate] died...

**SM** No, no, not when Selby died. You know, we started together. Selby actually recruited me to The Beaters.

**DL** You never were interested in vocals. You're just straight up drumming, blowing the horn...

**SM** No, I was, I was, you know, because bands in the past used to sing. The players, guitarists, drummers and everybody should be a singer so you could be a back-up singer. I'm amazed that most band musicians today don't even dabble in just a little bit of voice just to add your little ... your falsetto thing, because you're only concentrating on guitar. And yet if you look

**DL** And he's more famous than people who *can* sing!

**SM** I didn't even know he existed. You know what? Don't underestimate the power of TV.

**DL** So give me some tips here. Who can we listen to? You know, I love James Brown, but he's gone. Maybe his daughter should've been an accountant – there wouldn't have been all that tax cr•p.

**SM** You know, Dave, with all the things that have been said about Michael Jackson, he's a genius. He still remains one of the best things that has ever come out of music, alongside The Beatles.

**DL** You know what's missing? They were artists that put on a show...

**SM** Stevie Wonder... You miss those people that

You're going **for a swim** on a winter's morning? You are a **star, man!** And everyone knows you, like, 'Hey, Siphosiphiso!' Do you **wear a Speedo?**

at The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, all those bands, you know, their people used to back up the lead singer. So as a drummer, I was also...

**DL** But that's hard, to keep rhythm and sing!

**SM** I wouldn't have sung *Burn Out* if I didn't.

**DL** Exactly. So you started singing in the band. So it wasn't a big change. I mean, the band had to carry on.

**SM** But it is the horn that surprises many people ... that I changed from drums to a wind instrument.

**DL** And how do you feel, when you're a pro and then you see these people with vuvuzelas?

**SM** [laughs] Ja, it's a boring instrument. The noise, frankly, it's a tasteless noise. A bunch of bees that go bzzzzz all the way. It just blows a single note.

**DL** It's so sad because you think, African voices, we've got the best songs, we've got the best rhythm, and what people are going to leave the country thinking is: 'I heard some African instrument.'

**SM** This is why now you end up with the Ras Dumisanis, because kids are no longer taught how to sing at school.

really work hard on a gig. You walk out of the gig, you say 'Phew!' For two hours nonstop you're on your feet, your mind is just...

**DL** So what did you listen to as a kid?

**SM** The Beatles. I listened to John Coltrane...

**DL** A *Love Supreme*.

**SM** Yes... my education background really helped me in a way to understand music at another level. Because on Thursdays there used to be an orchestra, an SABC orchestra, that used to come to the township. And out of curiosity, youthful curiosity, impressionable age, you go to these things without even realising how they will remain indelible in your appreciation of things. And I got to take up the flute from that experience. I had classical training as a flute player.

**DL** Brilliant. But I'm feeling bad now. Maybe I should also go for a swim?

**SM** Ja. It's a warm pool, hey.

**DL** That's 'cos they wee in it, bru.

**SM** Ja! [both laugh]. We'll swim and then instead of Vilakazi Street, I'll take you to Robbie's. ■