

HOT STUFF

WHEN SIPHO “HOTSTIX” MABUSE RELEASED “BURN OUT” IN 1985, IT BECAME A SOUTH AFRICAN ANTHEM – AND HAD EVERYONE FROM GUGULETHU TO GRAHAMSTOWN SINGING ALONG TO ITS CATCHY TOWNSHIP-DISCO BEAT. **NIKKI BENATAR** CHATTED TO SA’S GODFATHER OF GROOVE ABOUT *IDOLS*, HIS NEW ALBUM, AND WHY HE DECIDED TO GET A MATRIC AT 59!

Everybody loves Sipho “Hotstix” Mabuse – the South African music giant with the softest speaking voice. After an almost 50-year-long career, Sipho recalls the moment when a band mate from Harari (the band that shot him to fame in the 70s and 80s) christened him with the nickname that was later to become his claim to fame. “We were playing a gig in Ladysmith,” remembers Sipho, “and all of a sudden the lights went out. As drummers don’t need electricity to play, I started soloing, while the rest of the band stood and watched. It lasted about 30 minutes and the audience response was overwhelming. After the electricity came back on, Condry, our guitarist, turned to me and said: ‘Hauw, Hotstix, uyatshisa (you’re hot)’ – and just like that the name stuck.”

After Harari disbanded in 1982, Hotstix embarked on a solo career, during which time he wrote the utterly hummable, irrepressibly funky township-disco jam, “Burn Out”, which quickly became a South African anthem – and could be heard blasting from music players across the country, from Soweto to Simon’s Town.

Though his nickname Hotstix refers to his deft drumming skills, the



Sipho Hotstix Mabuse during an interview in January 2005

legendary singer has also dabbled with a string of other instruments, most notably the flute, piano, saxophone and kalimba. And apart from recording his own music, he’s earned production credits on the albums of some South African greats, including Miriam Makeba, Ray Phiri, Sibongile Khumalo and Hugh Masakela.

An illustrious performer, you’d be hard-pressed to find a country that

Hotstix has not performed in. From New York to Munich, St Petersburg to Swaziland, Hotstix still cites his recent gig at Oppikoppi on home soil as “one I’ll cherish forever”.

LOOKING BACK...

You have performed all over the world.

Which gig(s) stand(s) out?

There are two: the Nelson Mandela concerts in London and the US. In Lon-

don, there were a lot of South Africans in the audience and the response was tremendous; the US show was such an experience because here’s a boy from Soweto, sharing the stage with Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin – what more can you ask for? Sharing a stage with such luminaries...

What’s been the proudest moment of your nearly five-decade-long career?

When an international record company – A&M Records – signed me 1980. It was at the height of apartheid, when South Africa was still isolated from the rest of the world.

You describe the moment you wrote “Burn Out” as an “ancestral intervention”. Can you explain?

How else do you describe something that just comes to you without any effort on your part? Some songs take a long time to write, but this one just came to me without me even intending to write it. It’s the opposite of a mental block! The whole song was written within 20 minutes! I wasn’t even thinking of lyrics or a groove. I had been working on some other material with my producer and when he left the room to take a break, I went to sit at the piano. I’m not a pianist; I was a drummer at the time. But as I was sitting in front of the keys, everything just fell into place.

THE MUSIC SCENE

Tell us about your latest album

I’ve always been a curious musician. Material success has never been a motivator for me; I’m more keen on exploring new avenues and ideas. So, for this album, I dug deep into my spirituality to try and get in touch with what I wanted to do musically. I reflected on what I’ve done, and thought about combining elements of that with what’s currently happening in music. So, I’ll be traversing parts of this country, interacting with different sounds and different tribes to



Sun City Superbowl for the homeland concert with Yvonne Chaka Chaka

At his house in Soweto

“ABDULLAH EBRAHIM IS ONE OF THE MOST INSPIRING MUSICIANS I’VE COME INTO CONTACT WITH. HE IS VERY UPRIGHT; HE KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS AND HE KNOWS WHAT HE’S THERE FOR.”

try and find a groove that will represent who I am and where I come from. I wanted its release to coincide with my birthday in November, but realistically it’ll only be ready by March next year.

Who impresses you in the SA music scene?

I’m very excited about Simphiwe Dana – lyrically and musically. Prime Circle really do it for me, as do Liquid Deep – they have a sense of groove that reminds me of me when I was young. It wouldn’t be fair to exclude Thandisa Mazwai from my favourites list.

“Burn Out” was such a success because of its massive crossover appeal. How do you rate current crossover stars, Freshlyground?

While I love Freshlyground very much,

my heart will always lie with Juluka, when it comes to that crossover-African genre. But that doesn’t take away from what Freshlyground has achieved. I think they’re great and I love jamming with them. They’ve invited me quite a number of times to play on stage with them – which is always thrilling.

What is your opinion of *Idols*?

I think it’s flawed, because it misses the point of pop music! Pop music is about selling a brand. A pop idol is not necessarily somebody who has a pitch-perfect operatic voice and can sing like Plácido Domingo. Mick Jagger, for example, is technically not a great singer, but, boy, is he a good performer. He’s a rock ‘n’ roll star!

Crushanda for me is an idol – she’s



Performing at the Standard Bank Joy of Jazz festival held in Newtown

got the image, the chutzpah, and she chooses the right songs. Lefa too.

With all due respect to the judges, you need to have people who really understand how the industry works – who themselves have been recording artists. You need industry insiders, whose judgement is based on the experience of being a pop star.

What is your favourite genre of music to listen to?

I appreciate all genres – rock, classical, opera – as long as it's good.

Do you like rap?

As long as it's good rap and it makes sense. My favourite rap artists are Public Enemy and Jay-Z.

What music gets you onto the dance floor?

I think house music gets everyone on the dance floor.

What's the best thing about being a musician?

You get exposed to travel, knowledge and people of different cultures.

And the worst?

Not getting gigs.

Would you recommend it as a career?

Definitely, but only if your intentions are about enjoying life's experiences and being creative. If you are motivated by

material gain, get an education and work in an office.

BENEATH THE SURFACE

What's your burning desire?

I'd like to see SA music getting more exposure on the airwaves and in the media in general.

What makes you laugh?

Little children.

What makes you cry?

Injustice and poverty. There's nothing worse than seeing people go hungry when you are returning home for a hearty meal.

What is your greatest fear?

Failure. Actually, it's the opposite of that: success is my biggest fear. It's easier to deal with the consequences of failure. Few people know how to handle success...

What is your greatest regret?

Not having spent enough time with my children – especially those who live overseas.

Who inspires you? What's the most important thing you've learnt from him/her?

I get inspired by many of the musicians I work with. For example, Abdullah Ebrahim is one of the most

inspiring musicians I've come into contact with. You know, the music industry is quite a tricky place. He is very upright; he knows what he wants and he knows what he's there for.

Which living person do you most admire?

Nelson Mandela. He represents what a true human being should be: all-forgiving and giving.

What's your least favourite thing about yourself?

I talk too much.

What do you most dislike about your appearance?

How can you ask me that?

What or who is the greatest love of your life?

My children. They could never hurt me – they bring me so much joy.

What's your most treasured possession?

My saxophone.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

Mozambique: its people are the most warm and welcoming you'll ever meet. And it is, after all, the people who make you enjoy a place... or not. And the country is beautiful: great beaches, great music, great food.

What is your motto?

Be honest to yourself.

What quality do you most like in a woman?

Honesty and someone who can just be herself.

On what occasion do you lie?

When I'm scared of retribution.

What inspires you?

Nature inspires and motivates me. I wake up in the morning and I think: Wow! I wish I could sing like those birds; they sound so free. I also get inspired by life and interactions I have.

How do you relax?

I read books and listen to music.

Favourite book?

Why Animals Don't Get Heart Attacks But People Do.

What do you love about living in Joburg?

It's the greatest city in the world. It's a



Pontso Hlakoane and Sipho Hotstix Mabuse



Speedy, Sipho Hotstix Mabuse and Staon shooting a video

“SUCCESS IS MY BIGGEST FEAR. IT'S EASIER TO DEAL WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF FAILURE. FEW PEOPLE KNOW HOW TO HANDLE SUCCESS...”

vibrant city that has so many opportunities for everybody. You just have to go in there and grab them.

Who is Sipho at home?

Papa to my children and Abuti or Baba

Mabuse to my neighbours. I live in the most wonderful neighbourhood. When we wake up in the morning, the first thing we do is greet one another. That positive interaction sets us up for a

pleasant day.

If you could take one album, one DVD and one book to a desert island, which would you choose?

CD: Richard Bona's *Scenes From My Life* – he's a bass player from Cameroon
DVD: *Stevie Wonder Live In London*
Book: *In A Different Time* by Peter Harris. It's a very touching history of the struggle, and many of the people he talks about I literally lived with and grew up with.

You went back to school this year to complete your matric. You've already achieved so much without it – why was it important for you?

First of all, I just felt that I had not completed what my parents would have wanted me to.

Also, I did it to inspire young people and send the message that: without proper education there's not much you can do. That said, education is not just about a classroom; there is a fine line between ignorance and knowledge.

I'm hoping to pass. My teachers feel I've taken on too many subjects, but I say: it's a challenge. If I fail, I'll go back again.

CELEBRATE GOOD TIMES

You are due to celebrate your 60th birthday in November. How are you marking it?

I don't want to think too much about it – life has its own plans and challenges. Whatever happens on the day, I'll just be thankful. I was hoping to release my brand new album by then, but in all likelihood, it won't be finished. It might just be a low-key celebration.

Where are you celebrating Christmas this year?

Hopefully, because it's my 60th, I'll have all my children around me, but we'll have to wait and see. I've always celebrated Christmas at home with my family, so I'm hoping that's where we'll be this year. ☺