

You never stop learning,' says Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse, a few days after his 60th birthday. 'You learn from the past, the present and the future, which keeps your mind evolving and helps you discover a new person in yourself.' He should know. His insatiable curiosity is behind a music career that, over the course of five decades, has seen him be a singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, producer, industry commentator, arts and culture advocate, jazz club owner, 46664 ambassador and even Eighties pop pin-up (complete with prerequisite Afro and black leather garb).

But it all started with the drums. 'There was a traditional healer who lived opposite my home,' he remembers, 'and normally this was where drums would be played. So, as a little kid of about seven, I was always curious, and when the drums started playing, I'd run across to see what these people were doing.'

'And I'm sure he must have realised I was very keen, so he invited me to start playing, and he appreciated the sense of rhythm I had at an early age.' Soon, he was going further than across the street, drawn to the hostels where traditional musicians performed. 'Even if I'd get a hiding for coming home late, I would stand there and watch them play.'

DRUMMING UP APPLAUSE

MUSIC LEGEND SIPHO 'HOTSTIX' MABUSE CHATS TO **NILS VAN DER LINDEN** ABOUT HIS FASCINATION WITH DRUMS AS A CHILD, HAVING MADIBA AS A FAN AND COMPLETING MATRIC AT THE AGE OF 60



wishing I could become one of them,' he chuckles. He didn't quite follow that path, becoming the drummer in a cadet band instead, before graduating to a full drum kit by the age of 15. That, surprisingly, didn't go too well.

'I didn't know what I was doing – it was a disaster, because I'd been playing a single drum with the cadets and then suddenly you're faced with having to play four, five drums with the bass drum and cymbals. It was unbelievably disastrous,' the usually soft-spoken Sipho roars with laughter.

Typically, he saw it as a learning experience. 'I started communicating with professionals on how to do certain things and I would spend hours practising, and the end result was that I eventually became known as "Hotstix".'

Still in high school, he formed The Beaters, a band heavily influenced by The Beatles – and not just in name. 'Most of the musicians were what we'd consider vagrants at the time, and we thought of ourselves as more elite because we were in high school, we spoke English and we listened to white radio stations. Our consciousness was something completely different – there was this thought that if you spoke English you were smart,' he recalls of the early Sixties.

'Of course, with the introduction of black consciousness, everything changed – the music changed, there was political awareness, the struggle was intensifying, and, voilà, we found ourselves being part of a bold new movement.' The Beaters found a new name (Harari) and a new sound (a disco-funk-jazz hybrid incorporating traditional African instruments) that reflected Sipho's growing appetite for musical discovery.

'There was a period when I was a very conscientious artist. I was curious about almost every instrument. When we went to tour in Zimbabwe, I'd see these people playing the mbira, so I asked them how to play,' he says. 'Again, it was the period in the Seventies of intellectual engagement with all sorts of things – politics and music – so that in itself made me the kind of person who would always want to learn different things.'

'I am always up for challenges. I am a purist musician – when I feel an instrument and I get to like it, I put my mind to it and start working at it. I always want to believe it's a case of mind over matter. I apply that philosophy and then I just go for it.' This is an approach that's led him to take up instruments such as the piano (to write the songs he heard in his head), saxophone (nobody else could play what

he wanted) and flute (to serenade a beautiful Indian girl). 'I was like Romeo playing at her window,' he grins.

But the romance didn't last and nor did Harari, paving the way for a solo career that hit the big time with 1985's 'Burn Out', one of South Africa's first bona fide crossover hits, long before Freshlyground or Lira popularised the term. The catchy pop anthem remains his most recognisable song. ▶

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Below Attending the Mandela Day: A 46664 Celebration concert





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'It puzzles me,' he says frankly of the track's initial, and ongoing, success. 'I always refer to it as a song written with ancestral intervention, because it didn't even take me that long to compose.' He may be on to something there – the funky jive has taken on a life of its own, even becoming a term of reference in the townships.

'When I hear the song, it always sounds new. When I play it, it sounds different to the first time I recorded it. There just seems to be something about the song that never wants to stop. And however much I try, I can't change people from wanting that song more and more.'

But it was another song from the era, 'Shikisha', that, thanks to its frequently televised music video, found him an

unlikely fan – a prisoner on Robben Island named Nelson Mandela. 'I think what excited him was to suddenly see black people dancing with white people on the same stage to township music,' suggests Sipho modestly. 'That for him was what he'd imagined South Africa to be, and suddenly he saw this on TV. That must have fascinated him.'

It certainly made an impact – almost two decades later, the political leader asked Sipho to become an ambassador for his 46664 HIV/Aids campaign, ultimately earning the musician a place on the bill at Madiba's birthday shows at London's Hyde Park and New York City's Radio City Music Hall.

'The first one we did in London when Madiba turned 90, the sense of community

was such a humbling experience,' he remembers. 'For me, I couldn't imagine Peter Gabriel walking into my dressing room as I was practising. It was fascinating. And meeting Quincy Jones and all these people that you've seen on TV or read about in newspapers and suddenly here you are with them, part of this.'

'And, of course, Mr Nelson Mandela, coming in, saying: "Hotstix!"' He smiles at the memory.

He also saw the shows as an opportunity to learn. 'During rehearsals, Stevie Wonder comes in, he sits at his piano, he spends an hour perfecting every little note. And all of us musicians are sitting in the audience just to watch him preparing for a performance. It's such a fascinating experience, you couldn't pay any kind of money for it.'

Some of that experience will no doubt be applied to his forthcoming album, due early this year.

'I have had many challenges as a musician and I've always believed I should challenge myself beyond the mundane, beyond this status of a pop star. Yes, not all the music I've made will be great to other people, but I should always be challenging myself to ensure that I keep developing,' he says.

'You're here because you want to be a better musician, not because you want to be an enigma or a symbol of admiration.'

But a symbol of admiration is exactly what he became when, at the end of last year, he decided to complete his Matric finals. Apart from hoping to live up to his parents' expectations and inspire young people, he wanted the 'necessary classroom knowledge' to research the history and anthropology of the African music he grew up with.

Not that it was easy. 'The challenge was I wanted to do it in three months, and my teachers were saying it's a process, not an event. But I passed four subjects, so they were very proud of me. At this age, being out of school for 40 years and going back was in itself a challenge – I was in a class with people who were young enough to be my grandchildren,' he grins.

He's not resting on his laurels though. 'I still have to achieve more, I'm not done yet,' he says. 'I've always believed this is a lifetime marathon, you have to keep working harder to keep people interested in what you do.' ■