

A NEW BEAT

Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse has penned some of South Africa's most memorable tracks, is a Sama Lifetime Achievement Award winner and is an ambassador for Nelson Mandela's 46664 charity. At the age of 60, still carrying the nickname he earned from a backstage quip, he's back in the studio – and back at school.

By Evan Milton



LOOKING BACK

'BURN OUT' AND 'JIVE SOWETO' ARE TWO PIECES OF SIPHO 'HOTSTIX' MABUSE'S MUSIC

that defined an era and are intertwined with the history of South Africa's liberation. In 1984, 'Burn Out' quickly became a hit on black radio stations; an even bigger hit in clubs and shebeens. It sold more than half a million copies and worked some 'cross-over' magic before that term could even be imagined in a divided land. Many still hail Mabuse's performance at 1985's apartheid-flouting Concert in the Park as the moment when white South Africa woke up to the wonders of the music being produced around them. It also helped introduce township pop to the international market. In the late '80s, 'Burn Out' and 'Jive Soweto' dented the club hit-lists in the US. In the UK, they became staple tunes when exiled South African freedom fighters gathered together.

Born in Soweto in 1951, Mabuse still lives there. In 1996, a decade's hiatus after he redefined South African mainstream music, his album *Township Child* categorically affirmed his love of the township's energy and rhythm. In the intervening years, he had recorded and produced music for legends such as Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Ray Phiri and Sibongile Khumalo. He has also performed with Percy Sledge, Wilson Pickett and Paul Simon (whom he showed around his beloved Soweto during the Graceland recording sessions). It is in Soweto, too, that Mabuse, at the age of 60, has chosen to go back to school to study for the matric certificate he abandoned in the 1960s in pursuit of music.

'Completing my matric is a dream I have always harboured,' Mabuse says. 'But procrastination is the thief of time, and little did I know that 45 years can go past like it's 45 days or, even, 45 minutes. Last year I realised, "I still haven't written my matric!" I registered and, at first, it was a great challenge, but now I am enjoying it.'

Why, though, did the younger Mabuse abandon his schoolbooks? 'Earning money, and having beautiful women screaming at me all the time!' he laughs. 'You forget that you have a purpose bigger than performing, which is getting an education. I have no regrets; a lot of great things came out of my career. I have been privileged to travel the world with music. I've shared stages with Stevie Wonder and Aretha Franklin – what more can you ask for? But I still believe education is important, so I had to go back, even if that meant sitting in a classroom with people young enough to be my children or grandchildren.'

With characteristic humility, Mabuse ignored suggestions of a private tutor to fit in with his busy schedule, and chose to enrol in the adult education programme of the Thaba-Jabula Secondary School near his home. Here, after the teenage learners have gone home, adult scholars occupy the school desks for afternoon classes. Mabuse takes the lessons seriously – the first stipulation from his manager when *Signature* requested this interview was that it could not happen in the afternoon; afternoons are school time.

Mabuse says that counting in his favour is that he has always been an avid reader. In fact, he's currently juggling two tomes, in addition to the matric course, the new album he's completing and preparations for performing the national anthem at the Springboks vs All Blacks Rugby Championship match at Soweto's Soccer City in October.

'The biggest problem in education today is that an emphasis on reading is not highlighted. People go to school with the objective of studying a particular subject to be employable – they do not engage with the ordinary reading of books beyond just that employability. Here I am, learning about the political genius of Abraham Lincoln from Doris Goodwin, or quoting something from AC Grayling, which is that reading should go towards leisure. People should engage in reading for ongoing education outside of any classroom, or mere employability.' Mabuse pauses and gives a chuckle before he quips, 'Anyway, at my age, who is going to employ me?'

Which brings us to the origins of his nickname. 'I'm still a drummer, although not as hectic as I used to be, now that I play the saxophone and flute more.' He explains, 'At one show, the power went off and I was the only one who could continue – I played a drum solo for about 30 minutes. It was very, very long, but I had the energy to do so. I would always practise and suddenly, all the practice and the skills came to my aid.'

All over, people were applauding, and I was overwhelmed by that. Afterwards, Condry Ziqubu, our guitarist, said to me, "Hau, my friend, you are hot. Hot sticks." And that is how the name came to be identified with the person, rather than an instrument. I'm happy with it; it helps people, especially Western people, remember the name "Sipho Mabuse".'

As an elder, and someone who has served on the boards of the National Arts Council and the Southern African Music Rights Organisation, Mabuse recognises his position as a role model. This is partly why he chose to return to study at a public school. He is also vocal about the political and cultural challenges that face South Africa. 'I will re-emphasise the importance of education. I strongly believe that we cannot be, and should not be, a nation of imbeciles. We need to be on par with the rest of the world, so that we understand those who rule over us, and they cannot willy-nilly make decisions that we don't question. There are many challenges. We understand what apartheid did, and how it manipulated education to oppress the majority of people. That will take a number of years to correct. But it takes a level of consciousness that this is the right thing to do and, until we get political leaders who have that level of consciousness, it will remain our biggest challenge.' ⑩