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South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo became famous in the United States for its work with Paul Simon. The group plays L2 Church on Jan. 17.



LIFE AFTER 'GRACELAND' FOR LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO

By Peter Jones

When one grows up under the bad end of a system like apartheid, it never hurts to dream a little. Just ask Albert Mazibuko of Ladysmith, South Africa.

"Something that helped me a lot was I had a lot of dreams," he said. "Things were so tough. Life was very challenging. The music was comforting us all the time."

The music was a sort of soundtrack to those dreams, Mazibuko said, especially for his cousin Joseph Shabalala whose late-night escapes from the toils of oppression took him places few young men in a Zulu village could have imagined.

"He had the idea of forming the group. The dream would stay with him every night when he goes to sleep," Mazibuko said. "He even learned how to blend the voices from the dream. But he said the language they were singing was a strange language."

The dream eventually came true in the form of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, a vocal group that would take traditional mbube music from the coalmines to the hit charts, most famously in a highly successful collaboration with Paul Simon.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo plays the L2 Church, 1477 Columbine St., on Jan. 17 in a concert produced by Swallow Hill Music Association.

When founded in 1964 by Shabalala and a group of family and friends, Ladysmith's members had little reference for music, except the mbube or Isicathamiya songs they would hear sung in their streets and homes. Few had radios. In Mazibuko's case, his earliest musical teacher was the grandmother-psychic who raised him.

"Each and every night before we go to sleep, she would sing and we would beat a drum and

dance," he said. "I enjoyed that moment every evening."

The music they sang, sometimes called mbaqanga or township jive, had originated in the form of work songs in the 1920s when laborers were taken to mining camps far from home and developed a style of competitive singing to pass the time.

"They were trying to sing the traditional music that they used to sing in their homes," Mazibuko said. "The music changes because there were no women, young boys or young girls. The men would sing the high part. It sounded different."

Mbaqanga saw unlikely international attention in the 1950s when Pete Seeger brought a song called "Mbube" to the United States. After recording it as "Wimoweh," the song became a standard among folk artists before the Tokens re-imagined it as "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" and took it to No. 1 on the pop charts in 1961.

Over time, "Mbube," translated as "lion," became the name for the genre.

"That song played a big role," Mazibuko said.

It would take another quarter century before the genre would catch further attention from the international community when Simon asked Ladysmith to sing on *Graceland*, his 1986 album that fused South Africa's indigenous music with his own pop and brought attention to apartheid in the process.

Mazibuko says when Simon approached Shabalala with the idea, the American musician was greeted with more raised eyebrows than excitement.

"You want to work with us? What kind of work? When we got to see him for the first time at the studio in London, it was

really challenging. We struggled with this song for the whole afternoon," Mazibuko said.

The acclaimed *Graceland* and accompanying concert tour with Ladysmith returned Simon to the hit charts while turning Ladysmith into the most popular and well known group of its kind. Even so, Simon was blackballed by the United Nations for recording in South Africa in violation of a worldwide boycott.

"We just saw an opportunity and we grabbed it," Mazibuko said. "We didn't know anything about that. We might have been reluctant to join if we knew."

The CD turned out to be a significant opening in the worldwide attention on apartheid, event though Simon's lyrics were decidedly nonpolitical. Ladysmith would later accompany Nelson Mandela when the activist received his Nobel Peace Prize.

"That was wonderful," Mazibuko said. "He danced with us and then he said something very remarkable. He said, 'Keep up the good job, boys. I am a big fan. I was listening to your music while I was in jail.'"

After *Graceland*, Ladysmith won a Grammy for its own follow up, *Shaka Zulu*, which Simon produced. The group would soon work with other artists as disparate as Andrea Vollenweider, Michael Jackson and Dolly Parton.

"That time was easier," Mazibuko said of Parton. "That was an enjoyable one."

Ladysmith's latest collaboration has garnered another Grammy nomination. *Music From Inala* is essentially a soundtrack to a "Zulu ballet" of that name, which the group has performed across the United Kingdom and in Moscow. At least one review noted that the most entertaining dancing on stage was by Ladysmith's own members.

Mazibuko says the upcoming show in Denver will be equally danceable.

"There will be a lot of dancing and singing and laughing and joking," he said. "Some people we might invite to come and dance with us."

For more information, call 303-777-1003 or visit swallow-hillmusic.org or mambazo.com. Contact Peter Jones at pjones@lifeoncaphill.com.

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