

## ABDULLAH IBRAHIM

It's a week of profound anticipation. It's early April in Cape Town, South Africa, and the town is preparing for the fifth anniversary of the North Sea Jazz Festival Cape Town while the entire country is gearing up for the upcoming elections that mark the 10th anniversary of democracy. At the pre-festival press conferences featuring the marquee artists, questions center not so much on the music but on the significance of the twin commemorations.

Perhaps the most renowned expatriate, 72-year-old singer Miriam Makeba, affectionately known as Mama Africa, expresses her enthusiasm for being able to live again in her homeland following the dismantling of the apartheid regime. "Ten years later, I'm even more pleased," says Makeba, a staunch supporter and cheerleader of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress party that a few days later again dominated the vote. "South Africans have fought hard to hold onto our new freedoms. We've accomplished more in a decade than many democracies."

Pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, inarguably South Africa's most renowned jazz instrumentalist and a sage at heart, is far less forthcoming. In fact, he refuses to be a poster figure for either the festival or the ANC. He's prickly and circumspect during his session with journalists who press him on his opinions of the dual anniversaries. A Cape Town native who today lives in the Kensington district of the city as well as still shuttles on occasion to his Chelsea Hotel digs in New York, Ibrahim downplays his first appearance as a leader in his hometown festival. He calls it "just another gig," then complains about the underbelly of South Africa's miracle of freedom. "What about AIDS, poverty and the crime rate? And Cape Town is losing the vestiges of the real Africa. After 10 years, are we really in charge of our own fate? The circle is broken here. We have lost the natural rhythm of the universe."

Ibrahim's fellow countrymen bristle as much at his seemingly politically incorrect opinions as his cantankerous attitude. They ask him why he has become so disillusioned. He smiles, replies that he's quite clear about what he sees and feels in his heart, then ends the interview with a parable: "The black eagle has only one wing and is blind in one eye. It can't fly. We're working today to get our eagles flying again."

The next morning in his hotel suite, Ibrahim, who will turn 70 on October 9, grins at the mention of the previous day's upset when he turned the press conference on its head by posing more questions than he answered. "The problem is people don't understand the creative process," he says. "They have a preconceived idea of where I fit in and what I have to say. If you assume something about me, I'm not going to go there. If you want to know what's happening politically in the country, why not speak to the ANC. I didn't hear anyone asking me about my music."

Ibrahim sighs. "People can stand on a soapbox at a press conference. But the proof is on the stage, in the headphones. Everything else is peripheral."

At first glance, Ibrahim looks to be perpetually locked into a solemn visage, his eyes intense, no-nonsense, and his gaze weighty, thoughtful. He tells me he drives nearly every day to Table Mountain, the massive 3500-foot sandstone plateau that overshadows Cape Town. Not only are the views spectacular—the fog lazily dissipating to reveal the hills and city's downtown below and the chilly blue seas beyond—but the mountaintop is the perfect place for rumination, an exercise the pianist embraces. "When you go there, the mountain gets a hold of you," he says with an earnest voice of mythical authority.

However, a moment later, Ibrahim's eyes brighten as he talks about his mentor Duke Ellington and how the maestro would pick the lint off the shoulder of your jacket when he had something important to say to you. He laughingly recalls going to New York for the first time and anxiously asking Ellington for advice. "Duke looked at me and while picking the lint off my shoulder said, 'Survive.'"

Ibrahim is eager to expound upon the spiritual precepts of his jazz survival. The journey includes leaving the oppression in South Africa in 1963, living as an expatriate in Switzerland and later the U.S., being discovered and recorded by Ellington, experiencing the doldrums of the jazz life, overcoming professional obstacles and finally returning home to Cape Town in 1990—in the aftermath of the bloodless revolution yet prior to the first free national elections that swept Mandela into power.

Ibrahim has recorded numerous albums in a variety of different settings, but he beams when talking about his trio. "I didn't come here to play a concert for reviews," he says, in

reference to his upcoming festival show with his longtime stateside rhythm team of bassist Belden Bullock and drummer George Gray. "For us, it works on a whole different level. That's how we live. It's as if we're in a state of stunned discovery on the beauty and power of God through the music."

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As a child, Ibrahim was surrounded by music, from traditional African songs to African American religious hymns and spirituals in the African Methodist Episcopal church in his Kensington neighborhood. He also tuned in to jazz on Voice of America radio broadcasts. Hearing Albert Ammons' piano boogie woogie inspired him to learn the instrument his grandmother played in the AME services.

Born Adolphe Brand, he earned the nickname Dollar because he always carried the currency to the docks to buy jazz records from visiting American sailors. In 1951 at age 17, he broke into the professional ranks with the big band the Tuxedo Slickers. "That was my training because apartheid policies didn't allow us into music conservatories—or into medical school," he says. "We played Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey tunes as well as the traditional music from here. During that time, it was hard to distinguish between Count Basie and South African music. It was that close melodically, harmonically, rhythmically."

Ibrahim loved Basie but was floored by Ellington. "I was more drawn to Duke as a pianist, composer and arranger. There's no way to escape his influence. But in those days I couldn't get his arrangements because they were closely guarded and not published."

In 1959, Dollar Brand met alto saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi, now a legendary jazz figure in South Africa, and with him and trumpeter Hugh Masekela formed the Jazz Epistles, the country's groundbreaking modern jazz ensemble. A couple of years later, he was asked to accompany vocalist Sathima Bea Benjamin, a young star on the Cape Town scene. "At first I said no because I had no interest in playing with singers any longer," he says. "But I went to a rehearsal and I saw this beautiful lady and I thought, 'Well, I'd better do this gig.' I asked her what she wanted to sing and she said 'I Got It Bad And That Ain't Good.' What's amazing is that I had just been working on that song. So it was meant to be." They were married soon after.

South Africa's apartheid policies became so stifling in 1963 that Brand and Benjamin left the country on the invite of a Swiss friend who secured them a regular gig in a Zurich club called Africana. The pianist enlisted his Cape Town trio, bassist Johnny Gertze and drummer Makaya Ntshoko. Soon, they began to meet all the American jazz artists traveling through the city, including Errol Garner, Art Blakey, Cedar Walton, Freddie Hubbard, John Coltrane and eventually Ellington. "Sathima and I really wanted to meet Duke, but the night he was in town the club wouldn't let me go," Ibrahim says. "Sathima went and I don't know how she did it but she convinced Duke and the whole group to come see our last set." He pauses, then laughs, "It was scary."

Ellington liked what he heard. The next week he took the Dollar Brand Trio to Barclay Studios in Paris and recorded the band for Reprise Records, Frank Sinatra's label for which he was doing A&R work. The LP, *Duke Ellington Presents the Dollar Brand Trio*, introduced the pianist to the world.

(Remarkably, a session with Benjamin was also recorded, with her piano accompanists including her husband, Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. The master tape was lost but eventually a dupe was discovered in the possession of Barclay chief engineer Gerhard Lehner and released a few years ago on Enja as *A Morning In Paris*.)

Other early Dollar Brand highlights were his appearance at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1965 with bassist Gene Taylor and drummer Joe Chambers and filling in for Ellington on five East Coast Orchestra dates when the bandleader was in Los Angeles working on a film score. The pianist briefly toured with Elvin Jones in the mid-'60s, but has rarely stepped into a supporting role since, other than backing up his wife. In the late '60s, he converted to Islam and adopted a new name, in the mid-'70s he briefly tried to return to live in South Africa but found the politics there even more onerous, and in 1976 took up residence with his family in New York.

Ibrahim went on to record numerous albums, the majority of which have been released by Enja. (Many of Ibrahim's CDs are currently being reissued in North America by Justin Time Records, including two superb trio recordings, 1998's *African Suite* with orchestral support and 2000's *Cape Town Revisited*.) His style is an amalgam of Ellington's elegant touch and the buoyant

and complex subtleties of South African music. And it also bears an affinity to Thelonious Monk's quirky, unpredictable genius.

Ibrahim's first encounter with Monk came during his tenure in Zurich. "I went into his dressing room and told him I was a pianist from South Africa. I thanked him for his wonderful inspiration. He looked at me quizzically and walked away, then looked at me again from across the room. After a minute he came back and said, 'You're the first piano player to tell me that.' And I thought, 'Whoa, that's heavy.'"

When he first heard Monk's music, Ibrahim was immediately drawn to it even though colleagues thought he couldn't play and was faking it. But he knew better. "I remember my first compositions where people complained that what I was playing sounded false. But it all sounded fine to me. That's the same with Monk. We shared a kinship. When I was a young man in Kensington I listened to 78s that were so old the print on the labels was worn off. I was fascinated by this one piece that I played over and over again. Later I discovered it was Debussy's *Prelude To The Afternoon Of A Faun*. It was fascinating. When I finally heard Monk, it reminded me of Debussy in a way and was a confirmation of his brilliance."

Ibrahim was also attracted to the architecture inherent in Monk's work. "A lot of people complained that Monk's meter changed and that his bars were irregular. But I never had a problem with that. When I started composing I spent a lot of time in shantytowns where my musician friends lived. I'd sit in the ramshackle homes that people had built from pieces of wood and iron. There were strange angles and doors were ajar. That was reflected in my music."

When Ibrahim finally returned to South Africa in 1990, the transition was traumatic. "It took me a week to walk from my door to the front gate. Then it took another week to go to the corner and back. In the third week, I managed to walk around the block. I slowly began to venture out. I checked in with other people who had been living in exile and they shared the same experience."

Did returning home have an effect on his music? Ibrahim replies that it was as if he had never left. "We live in dream time like the aboriginal people. What we see physically is a dream, so in some sense I never left. That is the strength that we find within—the discovery of the self."

To further explain, Ibrahim talks about his 50-year training in the martial arts. "I studied with the masters and they'd always say, 'No mind. No mind. You think too much.' They were saying if you think about doing things your creativity will be curtailed. The samurai loses his fear and becomes totally fearless. The same holds true for jazz. You can't be afraid to make mistakes. My martial arts teachers always told me, 'When you make a mistake, make a good mistake.' Just like you have to remove the fear of making a mistake while improvising, you also have to lose that fear in your personal life. You have to operate on faith."

Ibrahim relates that to what is happening in South Africa today. "We are the microcosm of the world to come. We have overcome apartheid with a minimum of conflict. We reached resolution through negotiation, without resorting to war. We begin to understand all this through the music, to repair the fragmentation in our immediate community and on a global perspective, to reconnect the circle that has been broken."

While he's approaching 70, Ibrahim is not slowing down. He continues to tour regularly, with upcoming dates in such classical music venues as the Cologne Philharmonic Hall and the Frankfurt Opera House. He also has new projects in the works for Enja, including a project with Hamburg Radio's NDR Big Band, further cementing his long-term association with the label. In addition, he hooked up with *kwai*o TKZ band member Tokollo to do a hip hop remix of "Soweto," a tune he penned in 1970. Then there's the M7 Project Ibrahim started in Cape Town that addresses other issues beyond music, including medicine, meditation, martial arts and movement.

A German film crew is working on an Ibrahim documentary during the festival. They filmed him on Table Mountain and in Kensington and this evening they'll be taping his trio date at Rosie's, a 1500-seat theater in Cape Town's new Convention Center. Ibrahim excuses himself to go to sound check but promises "some goodies" at the show. "I can't wait until the night, after the sun goes down," he says. "Then I can do the trance dance and be my real self."

He doesn't disappoint. His transcendent appearance with Bullock and Gray is the highlight of the festival. Together they embark on journey music that changes shape, color, tempo and ambiance from the airy to the exclamatory. A poet on the piano, Ibrahim chimes chords, sprinkles single-finger notes and drifts into a state of lyrical grace. He splashes like Monk, throws

in a dash of boogie woogie, walks the blues with his left hand and sketches a melody line with his right.

The audience is hushed in rapt appreciation. The trio breathes together as they ebb and flow in segue mode from one Ibrahim tune to another, including such pieces as "Blue Bolero," "Duke 88," "African Marketplace," "Chisa" and "The Call." At the end of the set, the crowd explodes with a standing ovation—an acknowledgment of his iconic status as a musical hero of post-apartheid South Africa.

Backstage after the show, Ibrahim's rhythm mates are still in a state of glow. "He guides us," Gray says.

Bullock adds, "It appears seamless, but we follow where he's going."

Gray nods and says, "We know what he's thinking."

"It's like magic the way he'll be in the middle of one tune and find his way to another," says Bullock.

Sitting in his dressing room, Ibrahim is all smiles. "It's beautiful and scary, not knowing what will happen next. We go into different places, then ask ourselves later, 'Where were you, what was that?' I never understood that when I was younger. Most of us didn't, which is why so many of us fell into drinking alcohol, smoking joints, womanizing. We thought that was what the music was about. We couldn't explain what it was that we were feeling, but I finally realized that music is a deeply moving spiritual experience." He pauses and adds softly, "It's guidance from God."

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