

Entretien avec Louis Moholo-Moholo

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What were the reasons for your exile with the Blue Notes in Europe?

Because you know... There were heavy vibes in the time we lived in South Africa. The South African government made the state of emergency, so that no group of people more than three should congregate. And we were in a position whereby we had a white person playing in our band, Chris McGregor. So, because the South Africans did not want this kind of combination, we decided to leave South Africa. We wanted to save the music and save our development. They were arresting every development that black people were doing. We decided to leave South Africa only to save the music, and only to come back and maybe plant the music back. But, unfortunately, my friends never made it in South Africa. I feel so cross about it that my South African friends who struggled very much to help the struggle in South Africa never made it. I am the only one that made it in South Africa. It was very sad for me to leave, actually.

So you had political reasons and artistic reasons – You wanted to continue as a band?

Yes, to save the music. Because the South African Government destroyed it. They tried to destroy the music. People like Dollar Brand, Makaya Ntshoko, Jonas Gwangwa, Hugh Masekela, Myriam Makeba, who decided to leave South Africa in order to preserve the music for the children of South Africa.

What were your experiences when you discovered Europe and the musical scenes in Europe? What was different for you?

Of course, our hands and our feet were in chains in South Africa. When we came to Europe it was freedom, and freedom makes sense to me! We were so happy to be in a very nice place, Switzerland. We came to Switzerland, and the arms of the Swiss people were open. They helped us in the struggle of South Africa to get the Boer to its knees. And on behalf of South Africa, I must thank the Swiss for helping us to win the revolution! Thank you very much!!

Some people engaged in the Café Africana in Zurich, where you played, say it was a important inspiration to hear a band playing jazz like that... Irène Schweizer, for example, told me that you didn't play songs, but hymns...

Yes, we are a very religious society in South Africa. When we came over here, we were playing longer sets. A set would maybe be two hours in South Africa. Over here, a set would be about 45 minutes then we had a break. We were surprised to see this happening because we would play all night long, literally all night long, in South Africa! When we came over, the music was so high! We were surprised actually by the musicians of this country playing kind of similar to John Coltrane. We were surprised because we had passed that, we had gone beyond that. It helped us to reflect and stretch back, start from the beginning, to leave our egos and everything in South Africa. We found out that in South Africa we had

lived in false lives, because we had to dodge this and dodge that. We had to lie about this and to lie about that. So we came to Europe and found that things were straight in Europe. And we were happy because we are that kind of people; we are straight people. When we came to Europe, we found straighter people than us. So, we were very much impressed by this situation. Meeting people like Irène Schweizer was like a revelation for us. You know, she helped a lot, she was so kind to help us through our endeavors. Because we were young, as well, we left our parents when we were young and went into self-exile. Exile, actually, I would not recommend exile to anybody: it is really tough! Some of the people can take exile, and some other people cannot take exile. For instance, people like Mongezi Feza couldn't take exile. I could take it myself better than him. So, it differs from people to people, it is really personal. It really winded up Mongezi: he didn't understand why South African rules and vibes made people be treated the way they did, and he just decided to go to heaven...

Did your approach of your own musical tradition change during this year you spent in Zurich, and then in Amsterdam and in London?

Yes, because South Africa is a very isolated country. So to compete with the world, we had to join the world. We joined the world by coming over here, instead of being in isolation in South Africa, in a small corner of South Africa... When we came over here, we were so much relieved, musically and otherwise.

What was the attitude of the audience in the small places, clubs or cafés, where you played in Europe? Was it like a concert or a party? How were you performing and how were people listening?

When you are playing in South Africa, people are riding bicycles and chasing gals and things like this and kissing and everything, making a lot of noise! They applaud in a different way, they whistle and scream... So, we were used to things like this. When we came over here, people were not even clapping: we asked the people to clap. This really encouraged us, put us in our position where we really belonged. It destroyed the self-confidence. You know in South Africa, we were confident. We knew, the minute you started playing, somebody in the audience would be riding a bicycle in the hall – that was normal for us... And when we came over here, people were sitting down, not clapping, not saying anything until up to the end... We never knew that a standing ovation would be like an honor. In South Africa you have a standing ovation before you play, anyway! Standing ovation was a norm, like riding bicycle and kissing while you are playing. It was kind of an appreciation in a way... It's like a small kid, a young kid listening to some good music: he will jump on the bed, and jump, jump, jump! This was exactly what was happening in South Africa.

How did you stay in Switzerland? Did you have a political support?

We were on our own... We had a fantastic manager called Maxine McGregor, [Chris] McGregor's wife. She was so beautiful, and a fantastic negotiator, a hustler! She was negotiating because she comes from South Africa. In South Africa there is a little bit of truth in what you would be preaching. Because you have to talk the truth otherwise you

go no way in South Africa, if you go ducking and diving like some people in Europe do. In South Africa, you have to be straight in order to be straight yourself. She was born with this kind of attitude and we went by: we were not rich but we could put bread on the table. She could see us through, so that we were good healthwise. Luckily, we were strong people up until the point by which we just fell apart. And, we did fall apart.

When each member of the band started his own project...

Yes. We decided to break up the band, so that we spread it into areas. We couldn't spread the music if we were a bunch together. So we decided to break. And then, once in a while, we would get together and refresh, rejuvenate ourselves with each other. And after that, off we go into our positions. I mean, Johnny Diany would go to Sweden, I would go to England and Chris [McGregor] to France, Mongezi [Feza] would go to Copenhagen. You know, things like that, so that the music should be spread and be heard much, much further than what we had done when we were a band.

Those years were also very important also for the European scene emerging with people playing "free jazz" ... Was it something obvious for you?

Yes... It was normal for us to play like "free". You know, in South Africa, in our music we don't count "one, two, three, four" – we just sing. We just go into a song. We just pick up a bongo and play. And then the whole band will follow. We don't have to be like "one, two, three, four" and prepare ourselves in the way that the European, the Western musicians do. We would literally steam into things! We were surprised when we came over here that the discipline was not the kind of discipline. we, ah... Our discipline was to play! The discipline here was the way you sit, the way you walk, the way you arrange a bandstand. The stage we played for instance yesterday, these weren't known [in South Africa?] . We would just pitch up outside and everywhere. We did not need a stage, we could not afford a stage, anyway. Our growing up in the conditions that we did grow up made us a bit tough. If you know what It mean. It made us a bit tough!

I think this is what surprised and inspired the people who listened to you during those years... This approach to the music was also obvious at the concert yesterday, in the way you give a direction to the band.

Yes... But this is very tough. I don't want to do it because sometimes the level of the sound would be high and then, in order to communicate with somebody, I have to shout. This is bad for me to do it because sometimes I shout a little bit too much... But I really should be excused because most of the times the spirit is so high that I get lost in the midst of it.... And also, because there are no microphones, so you talk a little bit louder. I am not shouting, really, but sometimes I am excited.

What did change in the scenes you discovered in Europe? I mean at the beginning you played in small places like the "Café Africana", but you played also in festivals. What was your experience with these changing, evolving scenes?

Of course, explaining the feeling of seeing Ella Fitzgerald on the same bandstand where I am going to play. It is a feeling I cannot explain in a million years, really! Seeing Lionel Hampton on the stage is mind-blowing, really. It is something that I thought will never happen in a million years, because of the way the Boers were behaving in South Africa. There was no chance.

Which artists were your main inspirations as a child?

There were some few cats in South Africa that inspired me, like [Pucks Gioia?] was one name, and [Elima Busa?] was another name. These were heavy drummers. And I also like that man called Big Sid Catlett... I really liked him. I appreciated music as a young kid and I would jump on my mother's bed, until maybe the springs break. That's how the music took me then...

When did you start to play on a jazz drum kit?

I was five years old... There was a band that was formed by a certain person called Moses Melekwa. He was a tutor and taught us the approach: just how to sit on the drum kit. He didn't show me much, just showed me how to sit on the bass drum. Now I don't play drums anymore: I just look at them and they play by themselves. But I used to play drums...

You play also other instruments? I mean the source of your music comes also from traditional songs...

Yes. I play all the instruments in a way... As I said we started from church, from the boy scouts, growing up like that, you know... I fancied myself as a singer but then I know that maybe Abbey Lincoln is better, but I fancied myself as a singer. As Dudu [Pukwana] said, there is no black person who cannot sing. Every black person can sing and I am one of them (he smiles)!

Do you go back to South Africa often now?

I live in South Africa now. I went back... I stayed in England and at one time I woke up and I looked around, and I found that everybody was gone. Dudu Pukwana was in heaven, Chris McGregor in heaven, Mongezi Feza, Johnny Dyani, all these people in heaven. My friend Thabo Mbeki who became the president of South Africa, he also left England and many others [...] Of course there are young people in England now who come from South Africa and I have no contact with. But when I looked around everybody had gone. Luckily, I met my wife; she is a South African. She also liked the idea of going back to South Africa. So, I'm lucky like that. But other people are not lucky like that. You would like to go back, but maybe your wife would not like it. And sometimes you would stay in England for the sake of the kids, because the kids go to school... You don't want to uproot them and the education would maybe be a little better in England than in South Africa, in the sense that if I had the same degree from Oxford University and would apply for a job, I get the preference... Unfortunately, the world is like this!

What are your musical projects in South Africa now?

I'm pulling no punches. I'm playing the same way I'm playing in Europe... South Africa got to have this kind of music. Even if they don't understand this music, I'm going to force them to accept it.

You consider yourself in the jazz tradition until today?

Hip Hip Hourray man! I must spread the message, of Reverend Frank Wright and Dudu Pukwana! I must spread that message, because it's just lovely: it is a force of the universe.

Another question concerning this year in Zurich: is there any live recording of The Blue Notes?

At the Africana, unfortunately not. Technologically, there was not so much out there as today. We would record something on a cassette and the sound of it would be like frying eggs, you know. There is a lot of music that has been taped then, actually, but it is not for produce. It's just for personal... because of the noise and the weakness of the sound.

What was the kind of repertoire you played there?

Everybody had a say. Some people think that Chris McGregor was the leader... And we got to have a leader anyway! Chris was the voice: he was our voice rather than a leader. In that sense that, I must say, he dealt with the white people of Europe better than I would and Dudu [Pukwana] would. So there was something in common with the people of Europe and him. We left him the business side, also because his wife was on the business side arranging things. So it came to be that Chris McGregor was the bandleader, but musically we had all put in. If Chris McGregor woke up with a song in his heart he would play it. But he never told me how to play the drums in it. It was automatically just magic that band! We didn't have to arrange for the drummer. Even with Dudu [Pukwana] and Mongezi [Feza] compositions, they never told me how to do the drum thing. And I would never tell Mongezi how to play his trumpet. It was magic. I really think that band was made in heaven!

Did you also play with local musicians, in jam sessions?

Of course. In those days, in the sixties, it was easier to play than now. In those days we used to play for three weeks in a club. Now you cannot even play for half an hour in a club! You know what I mean... And jam sessions, oh yeah! There were a lot of connections then, more than now. It's more privacy now, with laptops and all that kind of things... But then, we used to share ideas and to play with each other. The norm of today is to keep your cards nearer your chest! I don't say it's helpless, but love is gone. But, it's the evolution, you have to accept it and go with the flow.

And today, what is your way of composing music? You sing it first, or is it in the same tradition that began with the Blue Notes?

I don't know, whether I was more free playing music in the sixties or now. But it is very difficult now to play the music that we played in the sixties. I really loved the sixties, you know.

When you compose music today; ist it the same approach as in the sixties?

It is the same approach, yes. Now it is digital. Then, it came from the heart. We did not have paper or pen, so we were singing to the guys! Today is like, you just put things on paper and put it on the bandstand. And then you have nothing to do with it: all you have to do is to correct! But then you used to do the whole thing, and also to walk the walk. Today you don't have to walk the walk. The machines will walk the walk.

Thank you, Louis