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Robin Denselow salutes the first lady of South African song

→ BEGINNER'S GUIDE

MIRIAM MAKEBA

Nelson Mandela summed up her remarkable career better than anyone. As the South African government took the extraordinary step of declaring two days of national mourning for the singer, Africa's greatest statesman paid his own tribute to the lady who was both Africa's original superstar and an artist who played a crucial role in the lengthy battle against apartheid. She was, said Mandela: "South Africa's first lady of song and so richly deserved the title of Mama Africa. She was a mother to our struggle and to the young nation of ours. It was fitting that her last moments were spent on a stage, enriching the hearts and lives of others – and again in support of a good cause."

Miriam Makeba died in the early hours of November 10 after collapsing as she was

leaving the stage at a concert in Caserta, southern Italy, in support of Roberto Saviano, the author of *Gomorra* – recently made into a film – who has received death threats from the mafia. At 76, Makeba was still a fighter, and still using her musical

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skills to highlight causes that concerned her. But she should not be remembered simply as an activist, for she was arguably the greatest diva that Africa has produced – a singer who could mix South African township styles with blues, jazz, or any other influences that took her fancy. She was

quite simply an extraordinary musician, and years ahead of her time in the way that she proved to the West that Africa was, and is, a musical powerhouse.

Makeba had an often difficult life, in which international acclaim was matched against personal suffering. She addressed the United Nations, sang for President Kennedy, was granted honorary citizenship of ten different countries, but was exiled and banned from South Africa, her homeland, for over 30 years. She survived cancer, four divorces (including the break-up of her marriages to Hugh Masekela and black activist Stokely Carmichael), and the death of her only child. But she never stopped singing, and will be remembered both for her rousing live shows (including a final British concert at the Brighton Festival on

May 21) and the quite remarkable variety and artistry in her recordings.

Makeba's father died when she was young, and, as she explained to me earlier this year, she had to leave school "to work as a maid and a nanny to little white kids, and help my mother when her white employees allowed me to go where she was living." She loved singing and listening to local stars like "my heroine" Dolly Rathebe (whose songs were always part of her repertoire), as well as American jazz and blues stars



Makeba at the UN's New York HQ in 1964 for an anti-apartheid petition, talking to Sir Hugh Foot

blues, jazz and Latin styles. Americans adored her, and in 1962 she was invited to Madison Square Garden to sing at President Kennedy's birthday party.

Makeba always insisted that she was not political, but she used her fame as a singer to tell her audiences about the sufferings of black South Africans. As she explained: "I was singing about my life, and in South Africa people always sang about what was happening to us – especially the things that hurt us." The white South African authorities were not impressed, and Makeba was banned from returning home. Later in the 60s, she suffered yet another setback when she became engaged to the radical black leader Stokely Carmichael. She may have won a Grammy and notched up a top 20 hit with 'Pata Pata', but the US now turned against her, and recording projects and concerts were cancelled. Ever the exile, Makeba moved on, settling in the West African state of Guinea with her new husband, and proving that she could



Makeba performing on the African Jazz & Variety Show in 1956

like Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday. She started playing in the Johannesburg clubs, and soon became a sensation. At 21 she was invited to join South African superstars, The Manhattan Brothers, and she went on to lead her own girl group, The Skylarks, and star in the South African 'jazz opera' *King Kong*.

Her breakthrough in the West followed her invitation to Venice in 1959 for the premiere of the anti-apartheid documentary *Come Back Africa*, in which she sang a couple of songs. Later that year, in London, she met up with singer and actor Harry Belafonte who helped launch her massively successful career in the US. She was something of a novelty: a glamorous African singer who performed the rousing township songs of Johannesburg and the 'click' songs of the Xhosa people, but could also tackle

tackle West African songs as effortlessly and brilliantly as she sang Johannesburg township songs or the blues.

The twists and turns in her career continued. She separated from Carmichael in 1973, and in 1987 she joined Paul Simon, and fellow South Africans Ladysmith Black Mambazo and ex-husband Hugh Masekela, on the worldwide *Graceland* tour. She eventually returned home to South Africa in 1990, at the personal invitation of Nelson Mandela, as the apartheid system began to crumble, and became involved in projects to help suffering young people and the victims of landmines. And she kept singing – right to the end. ●

See Miriam Makeba's obituary on p14. www.miriammakeba.co.za

BEST... ...ALBUMS

Live at Bern's Salonger, Stockholm, Sweden, 1966 (Gallo CD/DVD, 2003)

A quite extraordinary album (and DVD) that shows why the young Makeba made such a massive impact in the West. She looks stunning, and her material ranges from jazz and blues to a song from Brazilian star Jorge Ben. Her South African songs include a slinky scat treatment of 'Amampondo' and her soulful exile's lament, 'Oh, So Alone' – which was still part of her repertoire in her final shows this year. Reviewed in #22.

The Guinea Years (Stern's, 2001)

In Guinea, Makeba enthusiastically threw herself into the local music scene, and the campaign by President Sékou Touré to promote new African music for the independence era. Backed by a Guinean quintet playing guitar, bass and percussion, she tackles not just songs from her early repertoire, but also West African Mande praise songs like 'Djuiginira', honouring the president himself.

The Best of the Early Years (Wrasse, 2003)

Good 24-track selection, including 'Pata Pata', originally recorded in South Africa in 1956 and a major hit in 1967, along with early recordings with The Manhattan Brothers, The Skylarks and the *King Kong* cast – along with some of the less West African songs she recorded in Guinea. Reviewed in #17.

The Definitive Collection (Wrasse, 2002)

Compiled 'with the help of Miriam Makeba', this includes 'Pata Pata', along with another perennial favourite, 'Click Song'. The disc includes a collaboration with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, and a version of Dylan's 'I Shall Be Released' in which she's joined by Nina Simone.

...TO AVOID

Homeland (Putumayo, 2000)

This should have been stopped. She was still singing well, but the band is not worthy of her, and the songs include a ghastly, slushy MOR ballad 'Cause We Live For Love'. And why on earth did she decide to re-record 'Pata Pata'?

You can hear an excerpt from *The Definitive Collection* on this issue's interactive sampler: www.songlines.co.uk/interactive/057

IF YOU LIKE MIRIAM MAKEBA, THEN TRY...

SIMPHIWE DANA
The One Love Movement On Bantu Biko Street (Gallo, 2006)

Miriam Makeba was critical of young South African singers for trying to sound too Western, but there are echoes of Makeba's mix of township styles and jazz in Simphiwe Dana, a South African Music Awards winner in 2007.

