

ama Africa Goes Home

When I last talked to Miriam Makeba, in 1989, she closed our conversation wistfully, saying she still dreamed of seeing South Africa, the homeland from which she'd been exiled for almost 30 years — exactly as long as Nelson Mandela had been in prison. A lot has happened since then, including an emotional return for her, and a new state of emergency for her nation, declared only a day before we spoke again, via her hotel phone in San Francisco, a few weeks before the tumultuous April elections.

Makeba's currently touring with 4 singers and 7 musicians, including her longtime musical cohort (and onetime husband) Hugh Masekela, who's having his own career resurgence with a hot new live album. "I'm okay," says Makeba with a shy laugh and a snuffle from a slight cold. "It's difficult with Campbell age."

Miriam Makeba (photo by Charles

Much has been difficult in her life, which saw exultant high points in the U.S. and Europe — with accolades for her soaring music and prizes for her articulate activism — and thudding lows when governments turned against her, and friends and family-

members died in a dizzying variety of ways. Now living on two continents, the prodigal Mama Africa tends to describe herself with a protective “we”, perhaps to compensate for all the years she’s been held at arm’s length from her own people.

“We finally went back in 1990, when Mr. Mandela came out of jail. His wife told me they were going to be in Sweden, in Stockholm, to visit Mr. [Oliver] Tambo, who was ill. I was in Spain, and I flew just in time to meet them. We talked for two hours, and Mr. Mandela said how wonderful it was when the prisoners heard our [records] from their cells, that it sounded like freedom. Then he said, ‘now you must come home!’ And I said, ‘how can I go home? I am a banned person.’”

The newly freed leader told Makeba to go to a South African embassy and try again, so she ventured to one near her home in Brussels, Belgium. “My name was still in the computer,” she recalls with a sigh, “but the government had said everyone could come back. Eventually, I received a temporary visa, and went home for six days. It was just so... I didn’t know how to feel. I was crying, I was happy, but also very sad. There were hundreds of people to meet me at the airport, and my family, or what was left of it.”

The singer returned to Johannesburg for two tumultuous performances the next April. “It was my first time singing for my people in 31 years. I didn’t have to explain myself! Everybody understood. It was like a beautiful revival, and just I had to cry all night.” The response was so effusive, she decided to find a new home there, alternating with her Belgian apartment. In fact, she rehearsed the current tour in South Africa, with homegrown musicians finally free to travel.

“Many things have changed. Most of our leaders are out of jail, and we can move about, more or less. We’re about to vote, if they let us. But in all honesty, for our people, nothing much is truly different. Life is still as hard as ever, if not more so. People have no housing, there are so many squatter camps; our children have no proper schools, no books; not enough hospitals — the basic things. So it will be an uphill battle, even if we win the elections: we’ll have the flag, but not the money.”

Most of all, Makeba rankles at any suggestion of further trials brought on by tribal factionalism. Herself the offspring of Xhosa and Swazi parents, the singer shuns divisive labels. “Me? I’m a South African — don’t know what else I can be. I must tell you, there are no tribes fighting each other,” she declares resolutely. “That is what is so hurtful: When you read the international papers, they tell you this is a tribal fight. The people who live in Natal Province are all Zulus, but

there’s so

much greed, so much killing. But we always have hope.

When

you give up hope, you may as well lay down and die. I

always

said, ‘maybe one day I’ll go home’, and I did. I never

expected

anything, but still some of my dreams came true. We

have to
and also
And now we
” It’s also
year-old
inspiration. She
Song, in
“We have
nations, and you
difficult. Now, if things go well, you should see
because there’s a lot of talent: in theatre, in music, in dance, in painting and sculpture.
These people, who have been so suppressed have so much to say.”

thank the people at home who stood up to everything,
the international community for raising their voices.
must say: ‘don’t abandon us. This is only the beginning!’
a potential rebirth for Makeba’s music, now that the 62-
musical matriarch is drawing on home turf for
recently finished recording a new album, *Sing Me a*
South Africa, although it has yet to circulate widely.
had very strange careers,” she says of her fellow
performers-in-exile. “When you function in other
don’t have the backing of your own country, it can get
a lot coming out of South Africa,

Meanwhile, Makeba’s been travelling and working, as usual. Riding in her tour bus across North America, she has plenty of time to think about the turbulent past and the still-cloudy future, especially now that her late daughter’s children, performers in their mid-twenties, are part of her troupe.

“They are the only close family I’ve got, and it’s wonderful to have them with me,” she says with evident pride. But the decades of putting art and struggle in front of her personal life show up in the essential loneliness which hangs around the weary edges of her voice, whether talking or singing.

“I’m never in one place for very long,” she admits. “It’s just that I love to sing. I think one of the very few times I’m happy is when I’m singing. When people say I sang well, that’s when I’m satisfied. I don’t feel good when I have a bad night.”

This distinction, apparently, is far more important than the recent discovery that her name was touted as a possible ANC candidate for parliament. “When they asked me, I said ‘uh-uh’. I was very honoured, of course, but I told them that if I did anything, it was to be this way, with my music. Mr. Mandela told me, ‘you have been our ambassador, and you must continue to raise our voice in the world.’ That means more to me than any vote. Politicians come and go, you know, but music is forever.”

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