

FEATURES

Winning tradition

Fikile-Ntsikelelo Moya wonders why Ladysmith Black Mambazo is more successful overseas

It was perhaps appropriate that Ladysmith Black Mambazo won their second Grammy when most of South Africa was asleep. After all, they are the undisputed kings of the music of the night — indeed their genre of is'cathamiya is also called *ingomabusuku* (song of the night). Other names for this style of music include *mbube* and *cothoza*.

But as the biblical adage goes, as prophets they are greater in foreign lands than they are at home.

Cultural activist Peter Makurube is emphatic on this point. "It is a bitter-sweet thing," he muses.

"Mambazo should not have been affirmed by the Grammy. Everyone is saying that they have sold six million copies, but I wonder how many of them have been bought by South Africans. I would not be surprised if it's only 100 000."

Makurube compares them with the likes of Hugh Masekela, Charlize Theron and Miriam Makeba, implying that South Africans have handed over the responsibility of creating



Ladysmith Black Mambazo won a Grammy award in the Traditional World Music category this week

cultural icons, giving the responsibility to foreigners.

According to Makurube, "we need a [Steve] Biko of sorts. South Africans are willing slaves of foreign culture. Cinemas and recording companies are promoting foreign culture. South African radio stations don't play South African music; white South Africans believe they are Europeans and blacks are stuck in the Western thing."

"The people who buy Mambazo's music are in the hostels and they probably don't know that they have won the Grammy. We have no clue about how good we are."

Mambazo, however, do seem to

have an idea about how good their original sound really is. After years of flirting with music styles that pandered to a global audience, South Africa's most enduring and successful band returned to their a capella roots with their recent *Wenyukela*. It is this album that was repackaged for the international market as *Raise Your Spirit Higher*.

Their outreach worked and they have been rewarded with a Grammy in the Traditional World Music category.

Wenyukela is a celebration of the music that put Ladysmith Black Mambazo on the map in the first place. Their previous collaborators Paul

Simon, Dolly Parton and Andreas Voltenweider may have opened the ears of new audiences, but as the Grammy has shown, Mambazo are greatest when they do what made them unique and original. It was this style that tickled the ear of Welcome "Bodhloza" Nzimande — now Ukhozi FM station manager — in 1960.

One of the songs on the CD, *Music Knows No Boundaries*, proves itself to be prophetic; an album of Zulu folk music earning a Grammy from a judging panel that probably had no clue about what the artists were singing about. Where English is used on the song, it comments on the

parochial South African experience.

Today Ukhozi FM is regarded as the successor to the apartheid era Radio Zulu (which functioned under the auspices of Radio Bantu), and it was here that Ladysmith Black Mambazo were first aired and the recording companies bought into what they heard on radio. Nzimande was instrumental in getting the group to the studio.

Nzimande recalls, "when we first heard them in 1960, we felt there was something special about them."

"The way the whole group sang the rhythm in the song *Nomathemba* suggested that this was a new thing in *ngomabusuku*."

Though he has still to hear the group's award-winning album, Nzimande reckons there was no great betrayal when they searched for new sounds. He notes that these days "the touch of [hits like *Nomathemba* and *Isigcino*] is not there."

"But I thought [the Grammy award] is a good gesture because they were not only playing for local audiences. Here in South Africa we were losing what we know about Mambazo, but the sales out there have been marvellous."

Nzimande feels that the inclusion of musical instruments "was not a good thing or a bad thing in itself."

"It was music development. In fact, it was a good thing because change is always good. We move with the times."

