

## ARTS AND CULTURE

# The Portfolio: Rafs Mayet

Rafs Mayet 15 March 2019



'Teramma kassie vi' die musiek' by Rafs Mayet

It was heady times in September 1989. The first Mass Democratic Movement march in Durban had just happened earlier that week and many were drunk on the possibilities of the resistance campaign.

I'd just come back from spending time at the Afrapix offices in Jozi and had been caught up in the early days of Mandela mania.

Abdullah Ibrahim (formerly Dollar Brand) had returned from exile and I'd been a part of the media bun fight at the then Jan Smuts Airport where he'd been mobbed by fans and family alike.

Stills and film cameramen were arguing with each other and then someone broke

ranks as the lanky Abdullah came through into the concourse making it another media scramble.

Well a few nights later at the Wits Great Hall, Abdullah did a solo piano performance – I think it was a part of the Weekly Mail Film Festival back then. So all the photographers were down at one end of the stage, jockeying for a good position near the edge of the stage where the piano stool was.

As soon as the big man walked on stage and sat down to play, the sound of camera shutters drowned out the sound on stage. Casually leaning over he said, “Keep it down there, I’m trying to make some music here.” That was it for the motor-drive brigade. With cramping legs, we stopped taking pictures, listened to the music being made and watched with envy those who had Leicas and their almost silent shutters.

Returning to my seat, I was surprised to see that other great musical icon, Hugh Masekela, had slipped into a seat nearby and was listening intently. At the end, after an encore, Mr. Ibrahim stood up and with his hands joined as if in prayer, he bowed to the audience several times. Then noticing Bra Hugh in the audience, he called him on stage and raised his hand like a boxing referee would do with a winning prizefighter.

I’d gotten some decent pictures but nothing that really grabbed me. I’d heard from Rashid Lombard, who with Rapitsi Montsho was making a documentary about Dollar’s homecoming, that they would be in Durban the next week for a performance at the Durban City Hall and I was determined to be there.

And so I was there early for the sound check, watching and listening to the piano tuner and others preparing the stage for the show that evening. There was also to be a screening of the movie *Chocolat*, which Abdullah had written the score for.

He had a formidable reputation amongst photographers and would not hesitate to throw you out if you disturbed him onstage or elsewhere. Having heard some stories, I was more than apprehensive about what kind of response I’d get from him. Anyway, down the aisle he came, and I made my move.

In my best broken Afrikaans I asked him, “Maaf Meneer Ibrahim maa’ kan ek ’n paar kiekies vat gedurende die sound check, Kanala? (apologies Mr Ibrahim, but can I take a few pictures during the sound check please?). All he said was, “Maak gou” (make it quick) and so I moved around taking pics, trying to be unobtrusive. I then got on stage and shot three frames through the body of the piano – nothing new as several photographers before me had done. After a while I sat down and listened to him run through two pieces, say something to the piano tuner and then make to leave the hall.

So I packed up my gear and was walking ahead of him when I noticed Winston Mankunku Ngozi, who was in town for another gig, coming towards him saying, “Ya Shorty hoesit? Wat sé jy nou?” which made me giggle as the great Mankunku was quite a bit shorter than Abdullah. After embracing and talking for a bit, they went their own ways.

Later that evening, after the performance and movie, I was able to get backstage into the change room where he was talking to his old friend Caleb Ndimande, a local trumpeter who had fallen on hard times and was surviving as a house painter in Umlazi township. In earlier times in Cape Town, they would slip over a church wall and go sit in the graveyard where Caleb helped Abdullah with his arranging skills, laying the charts out and going through them showing him how to group the horn parts and the various voicings of other instruments.

I went back to the darkroom to process my film and had a moment that all photographers know after you’ve developed, fixed the film, rinsed it a bit and unrolled it from the spiral to see what you’ve got. And then a frame or two just jump out at you making your day, letting you know that you’ve captured something that will last a while, unlike a short-lived ephemeral topical news moment that is quickly forgotten in the fast moving world of news photography. A different kind of high .....indeed.

I think it’s the light coming through the window on the top left of the image, and a small reflection of it on the bottom left of the piano that makes the pic come alive, for me at least.

I've made and sold and given away several prints since then, as well as showing it in a few solo and group exhibitions, the most recent being the *States of Emergency* show at the Nelson Mandela Foundation. I just felt that amongst all the 'fists and flags' images that we've come to associate with "struggle photography", people tend to forget the role played by creative activists during those times. I know that Abdullah Ibrahim and his wife Sathima Bea Benjamin played several concerts and fund-raisers for the ANC back then. He even took a jazz opera on the road through Europe!

I'd been following his career since the late Sixties/ early Seventies, from *Peace + 2* onwards, buying albums as and when they became available, hearing snippets about his performances overseas. I loved it when a story reached our shores, like how he and the promoter fell asleep during a press conference in Australia. As difficult as many say he is, I have big respect for someone who has such a commanding presence both on and off stage.

When he came back then in 1989, he set the bar for all returning musicians, demanding respect for his talents. He wanted to be transported comfortably, fresh fruit and flowers in the change room. He had become a vegetarian because of the uncertainty of food during his travels around the globe.

Who can forget the popularising of his seminal composition *Mannenberg* by Robbie Jansen and Basil Coetzee and others at countless meetings, rallies, cultural festivals and launches during those dark days?

And as he growls towards the end of the song – "Julle kan maa New York toe gaan, maa ek bly innie Mannenberg" – directed at saxophonist Morris Goldberg who was leaving for NY in a few days time. Goldberg played on the recording but was not credited (ask Rashid Vally the producer about that). Ironic, I thought, as by 1977 Abdullah was himself back and based in New York until his return from exile in 1989.

**Reference** : Mayet, R. (2019). [The Portfolio: Rafs Mayet](https://mg.co.za/article/2019-03-15-00-the-portfolio-rafs-mayet) from the *Mail & Guardian*, 15 March 2019. Available at <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-03-15-00-the-portfolio-rafs-mayet> online. Accessed on 25 March 2019