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Feya Faku as I knew him – a tribute to the great South African jazz trumpeter

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Feya Faku has passed away at the age of 63 and still at the height of his musical career. © Siphwe Mhlambi



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Darius Brubeck is a Friend of The Conversation.

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[Lex Futshane](#), the South African bass player in the 1992 student band [NU Jazz Connection](#), was the first to tell me that the great South African jazz trumpeter [Feya Faku](#) had [died](#) while touring Switzerland on 23 June. He was born on 6 June 1962 and was just 63 years old.

Within a day of Feya's passing, my wife Catherine Brubeck and I had heard from every member of the student band that I'd helped form, except the late [Lulu Gontsana](#) of course. They expressed great sadness and praised not just his playing but also the man himself.



<https://youtu.be/fhthU1zLz6U>

The trumpeter, flugelhorn player, composer and teacher was born in Emaxambeni in a black residential township called New Brighton in Port Elizabeth (today Gqeberha). He would be inspired by members of a significant jazz community there as a teenager and formalised his training at the then University of Natal (later University of KwaZulu-Natal). He'd go on to become one of the distinctive trumpeters locally and on the international jazz scene.

But a lot has already been written about Feya's career (check out Gwen Ansell's [obituary](#)), his recordings, a timeline of musical associates and collaborative projects. So here I feel free to write from the heart and recall certain times we shared with Feya.

Student years

Feya was one of a talented cohort of students from New Brighton, who came to Durban in the 1980s to study jazz at the University of Natal, where I was teaching. The great South African saxophonist [Zim Ngqawana](#), also from New Brighton, was the first to arrive.

One day Zim requested a meeting in my office, and I surmised he needed help with something. Instead, he told me that there was a trumpet player back home who "deserves the same chance as I have". This was also true for Lex Futshane and drummer Lulu Gontsana.

They all came and suddenly Durban was a better place to study jazz. They brought jazz knowledge and multi-cultural influences with them, expanding the landscape of South African jazz despite the injustices of apartheid.

They were not yet registered students entitled to campus housing so, for a while, all four stayed in an annexe to our house. When we sold the house, we all moved into a very large flat near Albert Park in Durban. During apartheid, Africans were not allowed to live in designated white areas, so we were the official renters. When Catherine and I moved out, they simply continued to live there with a lease in our name.

Early success

After the success of the Jazzanians, our first student band to travel overseas, we formed another flagship group. The NU Jazz Connection would perform at the annual International Association for Jazz Education conference in Miami and other places in the US and then later at a youth festival in Germany.



NU Jazz Connection. From left: Lex Futshane, Sazi Dlamini, Feya Faku, S'thembiso Ntuli, Mark Kilian, Chris Merz, Darius Brubeck and Lulu Gontsana. Courtesy Darius Brubeck

The music label B&W (later MELT 2000) recorded the band while they were there. The album African Tributes featured Feya, Lex and Lulu, plus Sazi Dlamini (guitar), S'thembiso Ntuli (tenor sax), Mark Kilian (piano and keyboards) and US music professor Chris Merz (alto and soprano). Feya's moving rendition of the South African classic Ntyilo, Ntyilo foreshadows the expressive, ballad style that became his trademark.

Everyone in the NU Jazz Connection except Lulu, who died in 2005, was available for the 2023 launch of Playing the Changes: Jazz at an African University and On the Road, the book Catherine and I wrote about our years in Durban.

This was the last time we were with Feya. Thirty years after African Tributes, the band still sounded great. I am so grateful for this wonderful memory.

Gentle maestro

On our various tours, for example to the US, Germany, Peru and Mozambique, Feya was cooperative and professional. He was extremely sensitive and empathetic and connected with people just by quietly being himself. Musically speaking, think of the great US trumpeters like Chet Baker or classic Miles Davis, vulnerable, subtly melancholic, understated yet agile.



The gentle maestro. © Sipiwe Mhlambi

That's what I used to say. However, listening to recent recordings made during his residencies at the Bird's Eye Club in Basel with Swiss musicians, his compositions and instrumental voice seemed more energetic, with old and new influences crystallised into a strongly personal style.

Contact with Feya, although frequent, was somewhat random. A special moment for me was going into Dizzy's Jazz Club in New York to check out the technical

set up for my upcoming gig and, unexpectedly, meeting Feya there. He was just finishing up a run with South African saxophonist McCoy Mrubata.

Later, he went through a bad patch, contracting Bell's palsy, a sudden weakness of the facial muscles. For a trumpet player, this would be like a pianist with broken fingers. He moved back from Johannesburg to New Brighton, where he had support in his community and from family.



<https://youtu.be/3cQc8EtuhD8>

Fortunately for him and his growing audience, he recovered and began touring again, often as a single soloist joining various international musicians.

According to those who were working with him on tour in Switzerland, he died peacefully in his sleep. It is some relief and a blessing that Feya left us in such a gentle manner.

Reference:

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