

Landmarks in SA Jazz | Mannenberg

The iconic music of Abdullah Ibrahim's *Mannenberg*, recorded in 1974, celebrated contemporary South African reality as well as capturing it for all time.

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- [Culture](#)



July 1984: South African pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, previously known as Dollar Brand, at the North Sea Jazz Festival in The Netherlands. (Photograph by John van Hasselt/Sygma via Getty Images)

An appreciation of the music we designate as South African jazz would be incomplete without an account of Abdullah Ibrahim's landmark 1974 record, [Mannenberg – Is Where It's Happening](#). The album represents much more than the pair of songs that form it.

The two-track record embodies first and foremost the personal transformation of a man wrestling with the meaning of his mixed heritage. Ibrahim had recently returned home to Cape Town in 1968. He had left in 1962, heading into self-imposed exile first in Europe and then the United States. He settled in New York with his now deceased wife, the remarkable jazz singer and composer, Sathima Bea Benjamin.

Born Adolph Johannes Brand, the musician gained global fame as "Dollar Brand". An identity he was home to purge in favour of a more spiritually conscious way of being in the world after a medical doctor and Native American healer told him to take better care of himself. He quit smoking and drinking alcohol, embraced Islam and dropped the Dollar moniker for his now iconic Arabic name.

Along with this spiritual awakening, Ibrahim put his mind to the sociocultural politics of the day in a series of columns for The Cape Herald newspaper, titled The World of Dollar Brand. The articles admonished what was then termed the Cape Coloured community for its ambivalence towards, if not seeming disavowal of, its African heritage. He implored people to be proud of their traditions, from ghoema to the annual Tweede Nuwe Jaar (Second New Year) musical parade, as the basis of shared creative capital.

By the time Ibrahim took his quintet into the studio to record, the needle would have shifted notably on these issues. Mannenberg would fundamentally also be touched by the social zeitgeist. Consider that in 1974 the black world was under the spell of the grand possibilities birthed on the back of the wave of independence across Africa, the euphoria of the Rumble in the Jungle boxing event in Zaire, where Muhammad Ali triumphed over George Foreman, and the exploits of the youthful Black Consciousness movement in South Africa.

To reflect this grand pool of mixedness, Ibrahim and his newly minted band relied on a clever blend of well-established jazz idioms doused with pop township sounds steeped in what has become known as Cape Coloured folk musical sensibilities. As historian John Edwin Mason puts it, Mannenberg "was an intriguingly unfamiliar combination of familiar ingredients – the groove was marabi, the beat resembled tickey-draai or a lazy ghoema, the sound of the saxophone was langarm, and the underlying aesthetic was jazz."

It's a mixedness that can easily be a metaphor for being in the ontology of both Cape Coloured life and black working-class existence writ large. Think of how the eastern Islamic spiritual heritage, colonial Dutch inheritance and African roots were melanged into apartheid-era township experience on the Cape Flats. Further, muse over how Soshanguve (Sotho-Shangaan-

Nguni-Venda), a township in Pretoria, is an acronym for an intra-African ethnic creolisation of sorts.

Mannenber, a modest two-track bouquet that includes meditative track The Pilgrim, has since become one of the best-selling jazz albums in South African history. Beyond its sales, the title song helped launch a new style of jazz unique to South Africa in general and Cape Town in particular. It's a sound that can be heard in Pat Matshikiza's [Tshona](#) and Kippie Moeketsi's [African Day](#), both of which came out in 1975.

The commercial success of Ibrahim's classic was dogged by allegations of plagiarism. Mason writes: "Mannenber bears strong resemblance to [Jackpot](#), a mbaqanga song by saxophonist Zakes Nkosi recorded in about 1960." Others credit the familiar sound of the two tracks to the idea that they share roots in the same uniquely South African musical traditions. Nonetheless, these issues helped show how Mannenber embodied more than the identity politics of what was then referred to as the Cape Coloured community. It even became the unofficial anthem of the anti-apartheid movement beyond the explosive 1970s and through the volatile 1980s.

The 'Mannenber' band

The band Ibrahim put together for this recording included Paul Michaels on bass, Monty Weber on drums, Morris Goldberg and Robbie Jansen on flute and alto saxophones, and Basil Coetzee on tenor sax. The work that Coetzee put in endeared him so much to listeners that they nicknamed him "Manenber". (But not "Mannenber": Coetzee's family was forcibly removed from District Six to Manenber in 1969.) The people of the Cape have honoured him by naming a stage in his name at the annual Cape Town International Jazz Festival.

The album cover features an image of an elderly woman, Gladys Williams, from Manenber. She was a housekeeper at Goldberg's family home. The picture was taken by Ibrahim shortly after the recording. He had accompanied Goldberg on a visit, part of Ibrahim's search for a vision that inspired his composition. He had told the band the song was inspired by an imagined image of an elderly woman walking down a township street. Williams embodied that spectre for the visionary composer.

Anyone hearing Ibrahim's inspired tune quickly becomes aware of its exhilarating alchemy. The tune relies on simple but extremely effective structures. It opens with the piano stating the melodic theme, quickly joined by Michaels' marching bass. Together with Weber's pulsating brushwork on drums, they launch the rhythm section into a repetitive cyclic groove. This becomes the base upon which Coetzee's improvised tenor saxophone flourishes with an aid of periodic chorus lines from Goldberg and Jansen's altos.

The propulsive groove develops into a sustained intensity. The sax and piano play a basic call-and-response pattern. They all weave into each other like a group of friends laughing and sharing a tasty gossip at the shebeen. The music is loose and regular enough to allow both Ibrahim and Coetzee to stretch themselves and claw at the edges of their imaginations with the comfort of knowing they can return to familiar territory by simply restating their theme.

The breakthrough of Mannenberg is in how the record's music celebrates a contemporary South African reality in all its tortured glory. It does not go in search of any notions of a redemptive African past that needs to be recovered. It locates listeners in the squalid township where they dare to be, and charges to them to be joyous in spite of apartheid and colonial trauma. This is arguably why it can be both politically potent and sensually suitable for the masses.

The meaning of Ibrahim

There's an apocryphal piece of jazz lore that posits that the future of the music lies somewhere between pianists Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk. The breadth of Ellington's compositional range and the blues rooted depth of his vision are unquestionably the source of much of what we consider authentic in North American music. Monk, on the other hand, single-handedly taught the future how to blur the lines between the self and what is possible in the world. He is a model for unpretentious and unbound capacity to just be.

Now, with that swirling in your head, consider that Downbeat magazine has since declared the following about Ibrahim to be true: "The pianist's ability to invent singable melodies out of quirky note choices and off-kilter rhythms, as a composer and improviser, makes him a true heir to Duke Ellington and Thelonious Monk. Like them, he could make the piano sound like an African singer by combining unusual notes to suggest the sounds between the keys, by making wide leaps across the scales and by knowing when to play and when not to play."

To be lionised like this speaks to both Ibrahim's prodigious gifts as a creative musician and the culture that makes him possible. South Africa, along with Brazil and Cuba, has a unique heritage of modern black music in the black Atlantic. Though connected to North American jazz, it does not rely on African-America in the U.S for its genesis. While Brazil has given the world music such as Bossa Nova, and the Caribbean island of Cuba created Afro-Cuban, South Africa has evolved modern music forms like tsaba-tsaba, marabi and kwela on the journey to the totalising short-hand, jazz.

Reference:

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