

Busisiwe Victoria Mhlongo – 28 October 1947 to 15 June 2010

Busi Mhlongo, or Mam' Busi as she was known to her family, friends and legions of fans across the globe passed away on the evening of 15 June 2010 after a long and brave fight with cancer.

Mhlongo was admitted to Inkosi Albert Luthuli Central Hospital on Sunday 13 June and yesterday morning asked for her pastor and family to be with her. They were with her right up until the end which came just after 9pm.

Mhlongo's husband was the late Early Mabuza, brother of Felicia Mabuza-Suttle. She is survived by her daughter Nompumelelo Elaine Mabuza-Black, who is married to John Black, and her beloved grand-daughters Zoe, Suray and Inga. Mpume resides in Florida, United States of America and is currently on her way back to South Africa, having visited her mother in March and April of this year.

Mhlongo's entry into the music industry was when, as a teenager, she secured a position in Alfred Herbert's *African Jazz and Variety* revue. She went on to do a remake of the song *My Boy Lollipop* for the Gallo Record Company, under the name Vicky Mhlongo, which proved to be a massive hit across Africa. In 1968 she left South Africa via Mozambique, ending up on the casino circuit in Portugal.

Mpume had been left in the care of the Mabuza family and it was shortly after arriving in Portugal that Mhlongo got the news that Early, one of the best jazz drummers South Africa has ever seen, had been stabbed to death. This will forever remain one of the darkest periods of her life as, having gone into artistic exile, she could not return to South Africa to bury her husband and care for her daughter.

In the 1970's, Mhlongo mostly worked in North America, performing in theatre and as a singer. One person that she worked extensively with in New York was bassist Steve Neil. It was whilst working out of New York in the mid-70's that Mhlongo had her first battle with breast cancer. By 1978 the cancer had gone into remission.

Over the next decade Mhlongo made Holland her home base, where she worked with groups such as Osibisa. During this time Mpume was living in America with the Mabuza family.

By the late 80's, Mhlongo's need to be close to her mother, Flora Phiri saw her return to Durban where she had to essentially start all over again. The Vicky Mhlongo persona was dropped and she set about re-inventing herself as Busi Mhlongo. This was an extremely frustrating period in her life, returning to a country wracked by the dying kicks of the Apartheid regime.

From being feted all over Europe to being treated as a second class musician and citizen in her own country was very difficult. Whilst her actual birth date is 28 October 1947, she somehow ended up having Early's birth date, 7 May, recorded as being her birth date in all her official documentation. For someone that lived life as large as Mhlongo, she just took it as a good excuse to celebrate twice a year.

In Durban, she met up with old friends and musicians such as Bruce Sosibo, Susan Barry, Madoda "Doc" Mthlane, Mshaks Gasa, Sandile Shange, Siphon Gumede and Madala Kunene. 12 Grace Avenue in Westville became home and there was born the band Twasa. Through her contacts in Holland and in particular promoter Wim Westerveld of *Chazz*, they toured Europe as

Busi Mhlongo and Twasa in 1991. At the end of the tour the album *Babhemu* was recorded by the small independent label Munich Records in the space of three days.

Back in South Africa, the struggle for recognition continued with none of the major labels showing any interest in distributing *Babhemu* locally. It was a struggle to keep the group together with there being no viable performance platforms available to black musicians, apart from places such as the Rainbow Restaurant, the Moon Hotel and Behind the Moon in Point Road.

Still, they managed to keep it together and in 1993 the group toured Europe again, including dates in England that featured an appearance at the prestigious Ronny Scott's in London. Another noteworthy performance was at the Chard Woman's Festival where producer Will Mowat saw her for the first time live. Mowat came to prominence as a member of the 80's group Soul II Soul.

Mhlongo was billed alongside such established world music artists as Youssou N'Dour and Angelique Kidjo. A young owner of a fledgling record label, Damon Forbes of Sheer Sound picked up on all the rave reviews of her live shows and the album *Babhemu*. When the band returned to South Africa, he contacted Mhlongo and managed to secure the distribution rights for the album. This was the first South African artist that Sheer Sound ever distributed.

In 1994, freedom came to South Africa and with it the return of other big name artists such as Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba. Masekela invited Mhlongo to join him at various appearances on his homecoming tour and in 1995 she participated in the South Africa freedom celebrations at La Villette, Paris, France.

All the while Mowat had been courting Mhlongo, desperate to work with her. By this time he had gone on to produce Angelique Kidjo's massive hit album featuring the track *Agolo* as well as Vicky Sampson's album featuring *African Dream*. Another small independent label, MELT 2000 came along and signed Mhlongo in 1996, thereby providing the foundation for the album that would finally secure the recognition that Mhlongo so richly deserved, namely *Urban Zulu*.

Urban Zulu came about when Mhlongo was rehearsing at the BAT Centre in 1997/98. In the room next door, maskandi Phuzekhemisi would be rehearsing. Mhlongo got to know two of the musicians in Phuzekhemisi's band, namely Mkhalelwa "Spectre" Ngwazi and Themba Ngcobo. Paris based drummer Brice Wassy was also very much part of Mhlongo's life at this time and with these musicians the material for *Urban Zulu* started to take shape, under the guidance of Mowat.

Urban Zulu was released in Europe in November 1998 and went on to hold the number one spot on Sterns' World Music charts for nearly three months. It became a massive hit when released in South Africa and went on to garner three South African Music Awards. Sadly, MELT 2000 ran out of budget and the album was never properly introduced to major markets such as North America and Japan. It never got the support of key marketing tools such as high quality videos and so, just like *Babhemu*, became a cult album rather than the commercial success that could have provided the life that Mhlongo so richly deserved.

At the turn of the century Mhlongo signed to the now defunct label Chissa and released the album *Freedom*. In 2005, Mhlongo was working on a World Music revue in Holland with long time friend Leonie Jansen, when she started to feel ill. It was only on her return to South Africa, in early 2006, that she got up the courage to go for a check-up and it was at this point that she learnt that the cancer had returned. A mastectomy and chemo-therapy followed and she resumed her punishing touring schedule in 2007.

In 2008 she hooked up with musician and producer Steve Dyer and they started to develop the material that would form the basis of her last album, *Amakholwa*, which was released in November 2009 by yet another small independent label, House of Memory in partnership with the provincial government developed KZN Music House managed by Mbongeni Ngema's Committed Artists.

By this time she knew that the cancer had spread even further and in December 2009 efforts were made to get her into a treatment program. Just prior to this, after a performance at the Rainbow Restaurant in October 2009 she was approached to provide a song for locally based environmental consciousness organization, The Human Elephant Foundation, the brainchild of local artist Andries Botha. In early December she went into the KZN Music House to record two tracks with Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The songs chosen for this collaboration were *Nomkhubulwane* off the *Babhemu* album and *Amagugu* off the *Amakholwa* album. Mowat was once again producer. These songs remain incomplete, with the instrumentation needing to still be done. The KZN Music House assisted with these recordings.

Mbongeni Ngema contacted the MEC for Health, Dr. Sibongiseni Dhlomo and the Premier Dr. Zweli Mkhize and managed to get her placed on a treatment program sponsored by the Province.

Whilst she might have released music that touched people from all walks of life, the fact that Mam' Busi was forever stuck with small independent labels meant that she never achieved the financial rewards that the general public might have expected. Her primary source of income was through performing live and with the spread of the disease she was unable to continue to perform. For this reason, her extended family would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the Premier of KZN, the MEC for Health and KZN Music House for the care and support they gave her over the past six months. They would also like to thank the wonderful and caring staff at Inkosi Albert Luthuli Hospital and the nurses from Highway Hospice.

Issued on behalf of Busi Mhlongo's daughter Nompumelelo Elaine Mabuza-Black.

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