

Greatness Gone

*The recorded legacy of the late jazz musician Bheki Mseleku, who died a year ago, is just a small residue of his ignored talent, writes **Peter Machen***

Gwen Ansel put it best in the pages of the latest issue of *Baobab*, a journal of new South African writing. "Nobody was interested. Now he is dead, everybody is interested". She was quoting the brother of the late jazz pianist Bheki Mseleku who was protesting the way in which Mseleku's supreme talents had been ignored in his home country. But while dead musicians often make more money than living ones – witness even the posthumous cavalcade of cash garnered by the death of the apparently broke Michael Jackson – the fact that no-one – or at least no-one in the South African commercial mainstream – cared about Bheki Mseleku is one of the most heart-breaking facts of our time. And in the narrative of Mseleku's life, his lack of support in South Africa, the place he called home despite his claim to global citizenship, together with the emotional and commercial neglect by both the public and the recording industry, almost seem to be a component of his lonely death.

Mseleku, for the many who do not know, was one of South Africa's most talented jazz musicians, although jazz is an almost useless and contaminated word to describe the multitudinous sounds that Mseleku made; shimmering and resonant, fluid, free-form and delicately structured conversations between the jazz languages of the planet. A composer and arranger of almost obvious beauty who used no signs of the obvious, he was also a master of the guitar and saxophone, through whose voices, along with his beloved piano, he would sing his universal music. And yet his albums hardly sold here. Hardly anyone outside of music knows who he is. But the fact that the music that Mseleku played was considered unmarketable and inaccessible is not so much a mark of his idiosyncratic genius as it is a mark of the tyranny of the wilful stupidity that defines our local and global culture. No-one who has opened even half an ear to the profound beauty of Mseleku's output could consider it to be inaccessible. It is easily accessible. It is in fact quite blatantly beautiful. But what is not is easily classifiable, or familiar, or comfortable. It doesn't fit into any of the niche's that record companies consider to be a market. (And it bears pointing out that much of what we now now consider to be mainstream music – music such as Bob Dylan and Pink Floyd and even Miriam Makeba – would simply not gain entry to the mainstream media anymore in a world where fatuousness and vacuousness are the prime parameters for inclusion).

Bheki Mseleku was, ultimately, a victim of that most 21st century affliction: the market. Mseleku, who died a year ago, will no doubt live on forever through the small volume of recorded output he leaves behind. He will still be on the fringes, but he will be a little closer to the commercial centre. Because now that he's dead, he finally fits into that category occupied by artists such as Vincent van Gogh and Moses Molelekwa. The Dead genius. Now we can market him. All of which might seem a little rich in the context of recognising Mseleku in an awards ceremony. But the truth is that even in their posthumous fervour, the music industry and their associated media machines will not be bringing the beauty of Mseleku to any radio station near you. They might be courting jazz aficionados and culture buffs but in terms of adding him to the popular canon built by the music industry, Mseleku's okay but have you, um, heard the new Whitney Houston. 50 million people will buy it. Um, what was I saying. So yes, every opportunity to even mention local genius is an important one, even if it risks courting hypocrisy.

I only saw Mseleku once – at the Bat Hall in a double bill with Winston Mankuku. It was one of the most electrifying night of my life. The roof of the Hall seemed to slide open, revealing the starriest of heavens and – for all those desperate record company execs – a category for Mseleku's music: space music. Mseleku's music was bigger than the planet, it occupied the cosmos. It spoke to the beat of the earth and the throb of the galaxies. He was one of those rare musicians that made you cease to exist while watching and listening to him. And my single viewing, although limited, still makes up for the fact that I missed Nina Simone's last concert in London because I was broke. And now, like Simone, and so many of our greatest stars, Mseleku is gone. And no-one can ever take his place. I almost want to believe in heaven so that I can imagine its orchestra – filled mostly with dead Southern Africans, our glorious brothers and sisters, and perhaps the lady whose baby cares only for her – with Mseleku somewhere there, out on the edge – making music that fades into infinity, a garbled dream of fractured buddhist gongs marking the movement of the spheres. Atoms, planets, broken sprawling humanity, all colliding into one.

☒ The Heritage Awards is a high-profile annual event which sees six phenomenal South Africans honoured for their contribution towards the preservation and promotion of South African heritage

and culture. The other five awardees are Nanda Soobben, Johnny Clegg, Noria Mabasa, Jay Pather and Alfred Nokwe. The awards ceremony takes place on Saturday 19 September at 7pm at the ICC Durban at a glittering function. To book contact Sheeka at sheeka@kizo.co.za or on 031 566 4324.