

Unity through Music

Johnny Clegg, who is being honoured at next week's Heritage Awards, occupies a special place in the musical history of South Africa, writes Peter Machen

In the late '80s, for any middle class kid who was even vaguely opposed to apartheid, it was very difficult to hear any dissenting voices. While history now reveals that there was a thriving alternate media, that media was inaccessible to those in the country's white middle-class heartlands. Central to the twisted social experiment of apartheid was the overwhelming control of the media and the airwaves, and as a result, many people never got to hear the country's incredible wealth of protest music that ranged from Hugh Masekela to Brenda Fassie to the Kalahari Surfers. They did however get to hear Juluka, the non-racial multicultural group formed by Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu. Despite censorship and the banning of Juluka on SABC, the band nonetheless managed to gather a large following both locally and internationally. That success must have made the apartheid government very nervous. The very existence of Juluka was anathema to the government's racist policy of separate development; a non-racial band explicitly exposed the lie that was apartheid and the fact that Juluka produced such jubilant and buoyant music can't have made the government any happier. That they managed to spread their songs of freedom and common humanity around the world, must have driven all those balding white heads to distraction.

Although he was born in England, Johnny Clegg remains one of South Africa's foremost musical talents and cultural ambassadors. An anthropologist by training, Clegg talented as a musician and songwriter and the resultant musical expression – both with Juluka and his subsequent band Savuka and also as a solo artist – has resulted in a rich legacy, both in its social impact and in the beauty of his music. A fervent anti-apartheid campaigner, Clegg – partially by virtue of his race – was one of the few leftwing social commentators who managed to secure space within the mainstream media of apartheid (despite much censorship) and was thus capable of fighting the system from within. In doing so, he helped to ease the transition towards a non-racial South Africa.

Clegg's fusion of Western melodies and English lyrics with indigenous musical forms places him as a forerunner to the world music explosion spearheaded by Peter Gabriel. Growing up in the UK, Israel, Zimbabwe, Zambia and South Africa no doubt helped him in his quest to make music with global appeal. The resulting universal resonance of his music, led by an exquisite ear for song-writing, has led to commercial success and critical acclaim around the world, both for Clegg and for his bands.

As a teenager, Clegg was deeply attracted to Zulu street music – he frequently took part in traditional Zulu dance competitions and learned to master the Maskanda guitar. This led him to study anthropology at Wits, where he subsequently taught, before embarking on his musical career and forming Juluka, South Africa's first racially mixed band, with Mchunu. Although their first album *Universal Men* received no radioplay from the dominant government radio stations, it nonetheless became a massive hit, and Juluka went on to become a thorn in the side of the apartheid system, touring Europe and garnering two platinum and five gold albums. But when Mchunu was asked by his father to return home to herd the family goats, Juluka disbanded.

Clegg went on to form his second band, Savuka, which continued his fusion of African and European musical structures, although this time the music had a slightly poppier feel. The Savuka albums *Third World Child* and *Shadow Man* achieved enormous commercial and critical success around the world, while their 1993 album *Heat, Dust and Dreams* was nominated for best world music album at the Grammy Awards. Savuka were disbanded in 1994 and in 1996 Juluka was temporarily reformed. Although, he occasionally still plays with the band that changed his life, Clegg has largely moved on to a successful solo career, releasing three successful solo albums including a live album and 2006's *One Life*. He is currently travelling between Johannesburg and Europe, recording tracks for his new album, which will be available early next year, another addition to the musical legacy that Clegg has been building his entire life. It is a legacy that has helped, in its way, to bring us all closer together.

☒ 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, Bheki Mseleku, 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.

