Foreword

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Who are the beneficiaries of the South African jazz legacy? Who are the forebears and architects of this rich cultural heritage? Who gets to choose them and what criteria are employed to identify and crystalise their status? So many questions, so many answers. We often consume ourselves with arriving at the “right answer”. Dare I say, there is no right answer. This legacy is not reserved for a chosen few who fit a particular narrative shaped by an often distorted and lopsided history but rather for those who possess a relentless curiosity, passion and respect for this music and its tradition. Jazz is inherently an African-American art form. However, there is a tendency to focus on “American” and not so much on “African”. Some will go as far as to say jazz is black music. This belief is not without merit, considering the very origins of jazz emanate from the African descendants of slavery in New Orleans.

Fast forward to the 1950s and 1960s, a period of parallelism between South Africa and America with the apartheid regime and the American Civil Rights Movement, respectively. Their common experience was that of racial oppression by white rule. Jazz was the language of freedom, protest, rebellion but also a language of celebration for all that was black and excellent – a music that spoke so eloquently of black culture across the globe. This was a time when black South African jazz musicians absorbed and mimicked the sound of American jazz through the smuggling of recordings. Not only were they mimicking the sound, but the tradition of jazz as a whole. Many artists during this period and beyond, to the 1980s, left the country to live in exile. One such musician was Bhekumuzi (Bheki) Mseleku. Highly influenced by the music of John Coltrane, McCoy Tyner and Bud Powell, he remains one of South Africa’s most iconic jazz masters both as a pianist and a composer.

Those familiar with Mseleku’s artistry describe him as being deeply spiritual. He was a man whose music was the source of meditation. There’s a story about how Alice Coltrane, wife of John Coltrane, gifted Bheki Mseleku with the very mouthpiece that John Coltrane used to record his seminal album *A Love Supreme*, recorded in 1964. This record is positioned in jazz history as one of the most spiritually charged albums of all time...
– a work premised on Coltrane’s relationship with religion. Jazz pianist and emeritus professor of Music at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey, Lewis Porter notes *A Love Supreme* as “the definitive statement of the musical and spiritual aspirations of this quiet, unassuming man”. This description of John Coltrane could easily be used to describe Bheki Mseleku whose music career flourished outside of South Africa. Not lost in this story is the symbolism of a mouthpiece as a powerful baton passed on to Bheki who himself was a spiritual conduit of his rich Zulu identity. Bhekumuzi in isiZulu means “keeper or watcher of the home”. Through Andrew Lilley’s writing of this book, he seeks to visit the very home of Bheki’s jazz artistry. *UBheke umuzi womsebenzi kaMseleku* (You are keeping watch over the home of the works of Mseleku). There’s power in the naming of an African child.

Bheki’s energy and influence transcended racial, religious and cultural differences. These are worldly boundaries that fell outside the ambit of Bheki’s spiritual calling as a musician. This is evidenced by the diversity of the musicians Bheki worked with in America, Europe and especially in the United Kingdom. These musicians are referred to in the body of this book in magnificent detail. Bheki’s legacy is the very embodiment of jazz as an expression of democracy. Founder of the Jazz and Democracy Project, Dr Wesley Watkins believes that the correlation between jazz and democracy is underpinned by individual freedom within a collective process. Andrew Lilley finely details some of the most poignant recordings Bheki has created with musicians from different walks of life. These iconic works are the outcome of a democratic process by virtue of these unique individuals expressing themselves in a safe space, propelled by the spontaneity of improvisation and inspired by each other’s synergies.

South Africa has been a democratic country since 1994. Jazz played a pivotal role in the fight against the apartheid regime. Fittingly, in the context of my contribution to this book, my master’s dissertation was tirelessly supervised by Dr Andrew Lilley himself. Together, we immersed ourselves in the life and times of those who used jazz to speak truth to power whilst also analysing musical influences and technical commonalities between South African and American jazz with a particular focus on Miriam Makeba, one of the most prolific cultural figures of the liberation struggle. The tide has turned as Andrew pens his own documentation of a South African great. I’d like to believe that both our motivations to write about these musicians’ works are commonly driven by a desire to arise curiosity and strengthen the research and archiving of South African jazz and its pioneers. The mere fact that Andrew Lilley can take under his wing a young, black girl child all the way to a master’s degree in jazz studies from the University of Cape Town is testament of his unwavering
commitment to the preservation of this sacred art form as practised by our own.

As I conclude, I return to the meaning of Bheki’s name: keeper of the home. The way I see it, through this book, Andrew is visiting the home of Mseleku’s artistry. I have yet to come across someone who speaks as passionately about Bheki as Andrew Lilley. The baton has been passed on to him. He is the carrier of the spiritual mouthpiece now. Through this book, he invites others to visit the home of Mseleku, a colourful musical home furnished with intricate designs, sonic paintings of the jazz forebears and sculptures of the fallen heroes and heroines whose blood runs through the veins of jazz – a spiritual home that welcomes all. To the reader – walk in.

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