Beyond Memory

Mojapelo, Max

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

PRAISING AND PRAYING

My early memories of South African gospel music date back to the late sixties when I went to Matladi High School in Zebediela for my secondary school education. There were various quartets inspired by *The King’s Messengers Quartet*, the best at the time. Two student singers who left a lasting impression on me were Stephen “Sparks” Madisha and the late Daniel “Tiger” Dikgale. Interestingly, their nicknames were from the soccer field. They excelled with The Messengers’ songs, especially *I’ve Got a Message* and *Never Needed The Lord Before*. My personal favourite of the Messengers was the Gift Makapela arrangement of *Ezekiel Saw The Wheel* (Motella, 1969) as well as *There’s No Disappointment In Heaven*. When Sparks and Tiger left the school we formed a group known as The Praise My Lord Quartet consisting of Marcus Lehodu Nakene (bass), the late Daniel Tebogo Molahloa (alto), Thomas Smally Kekana (tenor) and myself as lead vocalist. Our songs varied from Alexander Sandilands’s *120 Negro Spirituals*, The King’s Messengers Quartet, Salthiel Maake and the Sunray Messengers, Babsy Mlangeni to some international evergreens like The Beatles’ *Let It Be* and Brook Benton’s *Heaven Help Us*.

It was later in the seventies that other local gospel groups surfaced but like the Messengers, they were church-based.

Some of the groups featured the drum in their music like The Emmanuel Apostolic Church Choir under the leadership of Archbishop Elias Magoai. But most groups like Amadodana Ase Wesile and The Rustenburg Boys led by Jacob Monegi continued without instruments. There were also other boys choirs like Rustenburg Top Ten, Maseru Top 6 and Rampheri Rock Messengers in the early eighties. It was only later that the organ became a common instrument in the music as it was popularised by soul music. A number of priests dominated the
gospel scene with this organ-dominated blend including Rev. Ndlovu, Rev. Shoba and others. Most of their music was recorded on transcriptions by the SABC’s Music Production department. Record companies were not interested in recording “hymns” for commercial purposes because there didn’t seem to be any profit-making potential.

I was working at Radio Lebowa (now Thobela FM) when Rev. Ndlovu had a big hit with Nna Ke Na le Thabo. At that time Professor Jerry Mawatle Mojalela was the SABC music producer. Jerry discovered a lot of talent in gospel and traditional music in those days. Later Rev. Ndlovu joined S. Ntyalentale’s record label Number One as private record companies started realising the commercial potential of the music genre. Then emerged stars like Zakes Mnguni. Those were the days of child star Vusi Mbabati who released her 1985 album, Ungenzela Konke (Okuhle) co-produced by Tom Mkhize and Shamba Lerole on the Mambo Music label. Groups like St Moses Choir, St James Church Choir and Ladysmith Black Mambazo took the music to another level. By 1984 when St Moses Choir released Jesu Langa Lokulunga, which was produced by Lucky Monama of Makgonatsohle fame, they had already recorded three other albums: Ha Lefatshe Le Wetswe, Ikhaya Lami and Bayahuba Abantwana. St James Church Choir’s earlier albums include Seding La Jesu (1984) produced by Archibald Maimani through Decibel Music Company. Ladysmith Black Mambazo’s early contributions include their 1984 album Ibhayibheli Liyindlela which was produced by Gallo’s West Nkosi. Another Gallo group, Mahlathini Nezintombi Zomqashiyo released Dithoriso Tsa Morena (1984), which was produced by the late Marks Mankwane. Bands like Holy Brothers introduced the guitar into the music as witnessed with their albums like Ngikhokhele O Jehova, which was produced by Hamilton Nzimande who also produced the Mazana Brothers’ Kulungile E Zion.

In Venda Roxley Fhatuwani Masvhe was making waves. Roxley was born in Thengwe in 1959 to a musician father, Reckson and a dancer mother, Tshinakaho. He was groomed in the Apostolic Zion Church. The guitarist who is known as “Diesel” to his fans for his stamina on the dance floor received guitar lessons from the legendary Albert Mundalama. Some of his first recordings by Radio Venda (now Phalaphala FM) in 1978 were Thothotho and Mutuku Na Delele. His biggest hit to date remains Munwe na munwe u do fa. Roxley who has more than 300 compositions to his name has released 29 albums. Some of his memorable songs are his xiTsonga gospel track, Siku Rin’wana Hosi Yesu u Ta Vuya (1983 composition) as well as Wanga Murena, a classic he composed with Joe Tshikalange. Vho-Fhatuwani is a founder of Super Records and a cultural activist who led his fellow musicians in Limpopo to speak out against the neglect of the province’s own talent by promoters at local festivals.

It was after the success story of Rebecca Malope that most record companies started focusing on gospel music. Like in any commercial music, there are countless groups claiming their share in this genre that even established
musicians from other genres venture with a track or even an album to test their potential. Some say it is an easy terrain because there are so many hymns to choose from, as well as many supporters from churches. Whether that is true or not, there are icons of the genre.

The most successful individual so far is **Rebecca Malope**. As seen in the chapter “Ladies Of Song”, she started with disco music but by 1992 it was very clear what she was about – a gospel singer. The title of her early album had already declared, *Rebecca Sings Gospel*. The whole album contained gospel music and she never looked back. The album included one cover version of a modern gospel ballad, Julie Gold’s composition *From A Distance*. Her rendition of the song was so brilliant, even singer Bette Midler would smile to herself listening to it. Let me put it on record that on her albums she only used the name Rebecca, and it is very interesting that even without the surname there was never any confusion as to which Rebecca. She’s been the only Gospel Queen in South Africa so far.

Talking about names, from this album Sizwe dropped the pseudonym and composed as Sizwe Zako. Perhaps he was beginning to feel more comfortable with the new direction.

Some of the awards Rebecca won early in her music career were

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td>1989/90</td>
<td>OKTV Awards</td>
<td>Best SA Female Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Coca-Cola Full Blast Music Show</td>
<td>Best Local Established Artist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>South African Music Awards</td>
<td>Best Gospel Singer</td>
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1994 was not only a watershed for South Africa but also for Rebecca’s career. She released a gospel album that captured the attention of the whole nation and gave it hope for the newly-born country – *Umoya Wam*. Some critics say its release was perfectly timed because the pre-election violence created various prophets of doom and many people were fearing for the worst, while some were preparing themselves for a civil war. It is under such conditions that people look to the Almighty for help, and the song made it so simple because it was even easy to dance to. It literally staged a national spiritual transformation. When her next album was released everybody was waiting for another spiritually uplifting experience. They were not disappointed. *Shwele Baba* offered them the cream of gospel. Rebecca too was not disappointed because the album broke all previous sales records in the history of South Africa. It sold more than 100 000 copies in one week, which made it the fastest selling record in the history of South African music. To date it has sold just below a million copies! This was a paradigm shift from the view of many people even in the industry itself about gospel music. One wouldn’t be wrong to say it was a gospel revolution. She actually pushed the frontiers of gospel music and raised the bar. You see, leaders in any industry are individuals who choose the road less travelled and succeed
beyond expectations! Such people are trend setters and are not many among us. In that same year she won the Best Selling Artist category of the SAMA.

Yes, she was happy with the progress she was making in her music career, but she still had one big dream. She wanted to physically walk in the footsteps of Jesus Christ as he was carrying the cross on the long road to Golgotha. Perhaps that would bring a deeper meaning of the blood that was shed by the Lamb on Calvary to her. As if to thank the Lord for the success of Shwele Baba, she went on a pilgrimage to Israel. She returned more determined to spread the Word through gospel music. The music related to the pilgrimage was released on the CD Rebecca Sings Gospel In Israel. Perhaps this was preparing her for the roughest patch of her life. In 1996 her father, John Malope died; her brother Jonathan died; her sister Cynthia died. The one family member who had been with her through thick and thin in the formative years of her career, Cynthia was no longer by her side. No spouse, no child. All her fans were worried and concerned about her future because she was almost alone in the world except for her mother, Pauline. Her reply to her fans came in the form of the release of her 1997 album Angingedwa, I am not alone. In a few weeks’ time it sold double platinum. She adopted her sister’s children – Noluthando and Thandeka. Together with her band Pure Magic she embarked on a one-month international tour of the UK. That’s when the international community crowned her “South Africa’s Queen Of Gospel”. She also toured one of the most advanced countries in African music, the Democratic Republic of Congo. Towards the festive season of the year 2000 as we were preparing for the millennium celebrations, she gathered her musical friends, went into the studio and recorded the CD Christmas With Rebecca And Friends. Some of her friends on the project were Tsepo Tshola (The Village Pope), Ringo Madlingozi, Thembinkosi as well as the late Vuyo Mokoena and Brenda Fassie. CCP’s Mike Maswanganyi was promoting the album as if there was no tomorrow.

The role her music had played in so many people’s lives convinced the University of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal) that she deserved the conferment of an honorary doctorate. Dr Rebecca Malope. Did I hear someone say “Praise the Lord”? Can I get a witness? Halleluya! As if the doctorate was to strengthen and prepare her for the worst, her mother died. But there was another consolation in the form of an award in the Kora All Africa Music Awards. She won in the category of Best African Gospel Female Artist. She started working very closely with Vuyo Mokoena and their duo always impressed their fans as they danced for the Lord. In 2004 she started hosting a television gospel show on SABC 2 titled Gospel Time. The show’s brief was primarily to showcase the best in South African gospel music and secondarily to give exposure to new talent. She was always her joyful self, praising today’s stars and encouraging the stars of tomorrow. Her determination to succeed saw her register for English classes, the language she mastered through the support of a good friend.
For many years she has been with T. Musicman management of Peter Tladi and was produced by Sizwe Zako. That speaks volumes about her loyalty. Here follow some of her best gospel albums all having sold gold and more than six of them platinum:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Album Title</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Rebecca Sings Gospel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Umoya Wam’</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Shwele Baba</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Uzube Nam’</td>
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<td>1996</td>
<td>Live At The State Theatre</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Ngiyekeleni</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Free At Last</td>
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<td>1998</td>
<td>Somlandela</td>
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<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Angingedwa</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Ukholo Lwam’</td>
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<td>1999</td>
<td>At Christmas With Rebecca</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Siyabonga</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Rebecca Sings Gospel In Israel</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Christmas With Rebecca And Friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Sabel’Uyabizwa</td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Iyahamba Lenqola</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Hlala Nami</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>The Village Pope And The Queen Of Gospel</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Qaphelani</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Umthombo</td>
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<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Amakholwā</td>
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One should remember that like most great musicians, in between all these albums her record companies released compilation CDs including *Rebecca: 6 Of The Best* (MFM, 1998). The most unforgettable experience of her career remains the pilgrimage to Israel where she was baptised in the river Jordan. She also wrote a long letter to Jesus Christ thanking Him for the guidance as well as asking for forgiveness and left it on His grave. The worst moment of her career was the day she was performing in front of her own people in her hometown at Ka-Nyamazane Stadium and she was pushed from the stage to make way for the late Brenda Fassie who had to rush to another festival. The promoter told her to take a break and only continue after Brenda’s performance. Before she could even explain to the crowd what was happening, the sound system was switched off. Together with her band they left the stage, got into their combi and headed for the exit point. The security guards had already been instructed to lock all gates. After long negotiations one security guy relented and they left. Just a few minutes after their departure the stadium was on fire. Many music
fans were injured and some died. This was followed by controversial statements on the disaster in the media as well as a strained relationship between the two female singers. This was very sad, especially because she had been inspired by Brenda as a young girl. She once responded to Brenda’s invitation of young girls to take the stage and sing like her, whereupon performing Weekend Special the “Queen of Township Pop” gave her R50 as a prize. How beautiful! How sad!

Towards the end of 2005 through God’s mercy she survived a car crash on her way to Spruitview and won Metro FM Music Awards’ Best Gospel category. Don’t let her height fool you, her will to survive and serve is as tall as the tallest Massai woman and her heart is just as big as that of Florence Nightingale. She sponsors worthy causes and supports worthy campaigns. She remained the undisputed queen of SAMA’s Best African Gospel Album category for many years. However, some of her memorable performances remain the 1994 Rhythms Of Africa show at the Sun City Superbowl and her State Theatre Live recording in the early days of the facility’s transformation under Hugh Masekela. Among the audience was her mother. Her first professional acting role was in a television play Bayethe Jesu 11 as Mama Stardust during the festive season of 2005.

Some of Rebecca’s protégés include Thembinkosi who shot to stardom with his giant hit Sathane Ujampa Mafence and followed with albums like Mbonge (CCP) where he worked with producers Sipho Mbele, Percy Ingle and Jabu Nkabinde, featuring the talent of his “mama”, Rebecca. In August 2005 Rebecca released her CD Qaphelani, which went on to win SAMA 12’s Best Traditional Gospel category. It was followed by Umthombo, which won the Best African Contemporary Gospel Album in 2006. In the Best Traditional African Acapella Gospel Album the award went to Thulani Manana for the CD Impi Kasathane. In the same year Rebecca released her DVD, Live in Soweto. In 2005 she announced that she was launching her own record label. I hope that answered Thandiswa Mazwai’s plea for women to step up to the positions of record company bosses. Mazwai was making a presentation at the second Moshito conference titled, “A Case for the Empowerment of Women and Artists by the Industry” on 20 July 2005.

The original idea that led to the establishment of Independent African Churches was the desire to worship Christ in an African way. Religious leaders like Lekganyane, Shembe, Modise, Manku and others have spread this practice and today there are many big and small churches across South Africa. This way of worship is reflected in the gospel music of the church-based choirs. These groups include Barorisi Ba Morena, Israel Apostolic Church choir, Phuthego Ya Thapelo and so on.

As already mentioned, churches contribute a bigger percentage of gospel musicians. The ZCC has a number of well-known choirs like ZCC Mokhukhu which had a big hit with Ka Lefu Laka (SAMA 5 nomination) as well as Hara Lebitla Laka from their album Le Madi Matsohong (1996). The ZCC Female Choir won SAMA 5’s Best Traditional Gospel section for Nantsi Lengola. Others are
Mokhukhu Male Choir whose 24-track CD is titled *Jesu Waka Mphe Tumelo* as well as ZCC Mpoho and Brass Band. Sello Twala produced most ZCC choirs and bands. Some of these productions are on a series of compilation album volumes under the title *The Best Of ZCC*. Besides these church-related choirs Sello’s other contributions include a young quartet, Children Of God; the young female duo, Maria le Maria, which had a big hit with *O Tla Ntseba Na Ngwanaka?* in 1996, a track always reminding me of Eric Clapton’s *Tears In Heaven*. The duo’s 2000 *Mbulali Wami* was nominated for SAMA 7’s Best Producer category. In 2006 they released another powerful CD titled *Thuma Mina*. There are also many songs Chicco wrote and produced or arranged that were later released on a compilation CD by Universal Music in 2000 entitled *Liyofik’ Ilanga: The Great Gospel Hits From Chicco*. In this area he worked closely with gospel stars like Peter Mokoena, Benjamin Dube and Deborah Fraser. This relationship also saw him produce Bafana Ba Kosha Le Mokoena’s 2001 CD, *Ho Na Le Ditsoetsi*. In the same year he wrote and produced Nokwazi’s *Ngixolele*. In 2005 Twala released *Soul City*, a various artists CD, including the music of the late Brenda Fassie.

Kori Moraba’s albums include *Raohang Masole* (1999). There is also Steve Boshomane of Steve And Family as well as Michael Mamatlaruma whose style is closer to that of Zionists Solly Moholo and Oleseng Shuping.

But within the churches there are individual musicians like Ndanganeni Daniel Luambo of the ZCC who in 1987 released his album *Mulalo Mazioni* through Black Talent Music. There is also *Thapelo Ya Sione*, which was produced by Enos Apane.

The International Pentecostal Holiness Church also has a number of choirs headlined by *IPCC*, fronted by Emma Mkhwanazi and Priscilla Lekaba. The choir was formed back in the sixties, but started recording in 1989. Their albums include the following:

1989  Thula Sizwe
1990  O A Halalela
1991  Tumelo
1992  Amadimoni
1993  Isabatha
1995  Mehleng ya Bofelo
1996  Uthembekile
1998  Ummeli Wethu
1999  Hamba Sathane
1999  Sione
2000  Konyana
2001  Ithembha Lami
2002  Lesedi
2003  Mamelang

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Their earlier albums were produced by John Moriri, an established artist in his own right whose music career dates back to the 1970s in the days of John Moriri and the Manzini Girls. Later he released gospel albums like Kgosi Ya Rona (Diamond Music, 1991). After the John Moriri era, producers like William Mthethwa and Tom Vuma took care of IPCC’s production work. Later Tusk Music tasked Thami Mdluli aka Professor Rhythm to produce the gospel choir. When the company closed down, IPCC moved to CCP Records with their producer. By 2005 when I met Thami he had already produced 12 of their albums. Their compilation CDs include the volumes IPCC Hits, IPCC Best of, Best Live Performance, Igolide as well as the DVD, IPCC Live in Johannesburg.

The other church groups include IPC Male Choir whose albums include Thami Mdluli’s productions Jona Jona (2001) as well as Comforter’s Children who dedicated their CD Morena (2002) to the Comforter himself. The latter was led by the late Priscilla Malete. Most of the church-based groups in South Africa do not participate in public festivals, but perform within the church and record their music for radio and television, which in turn help promote them. I guess it is partly because they are sure of the support of the loyal church membership. Sadly, on the morning of Tuesday 31 July 2007 I received a call informing me about the passing away of the talented Priscilla Malete. According to the caller, she’d been admitted to the Dr George Mukhari hospital near Pretoria due to pneumonia. After a funeral service at Odi Stadium she was laid to rest on Friday, 3 August in Mabopane, Tshwane.

**Pure Gold** is another success story. When Blondie Makhene met the Gwala brothers and cousins at the independent Old Apostolic Church he recruited them to the recording studio where he was helped by Quinton Madlala to produce them. The group was formed by Freddie Gwala in 1973. Their mbube kind of gospel as well as their warrior-like regalia endeared them to the masses. Their debut album was titled Pure Gold 85 (White Dove, 1985), composed by Freddie Gwala and arranged/produced by Blondie Makhene. It featured the hit Tsamaya Le Rona. It was followed by albums like Elakho Likhona (1986), Re Ya Leboha Ntate (1987) and Ke Mang Ya Ho Etellang (1988). By 1991 when they released the album Sitiethlele Baba their label was “Re a Aga/Siyakha” under Blondie’s KGM Enterprises. They followed up with other albums like Re Lokise Ntate. The success of the group reached a climax when they released a CD, Hamba Sathane featuring the country’s hottest property, Brenda Fassie, in 1996. Most of the group’s albums were composed by its leader Freddie Gwala and
Victor Bogopane (Doc Shebeleza), both of whom later joined the pop music market as solo artists as we’ve already indicated. The group’s lead singer, Paul Gwala’s solo efforts include *Impendulo* (1997), *Ofana Naye* (2001) and *Vula Maphiko* (2007). By 2007 he had ventured into ministry, focusing on the youth of the Old Apostolic Church.

Pure Gold share their gospel style with groups like Ivangeli Loxolo, an 11-member isiZulu church choir from Kwa Xuma. The group was led by Thomas Maseko who was also its producer.


One of the longest running stories of success is that of **Amadodana Ase Wesile**, a male group that was started in 1986. Their debut album *Nkosi Sihlangene* was the beginning of a long journey that would simplify and popularise Methodist hymns and unite Christians. Their producer at RPM Records was Mac Mathunjwa who mostly worked on their projects with engineer, Tim Kraft. Their *10th Anniversary Album* is a sure collector’s item. In 1991 when they released *Siyakudumisa Thixo*, Mongezi Nhose was their manager and PRO. The group’s members were Thomas Mokhati, Vincent Maseme, Ntsikelelo Dilata, Victor Mbangi, Sipho Makhubu, Emisang Makamane, Welile Shexane, Willie Maseko, Mxolisi Makhawula, Philip Mtshali, Fana Sithole, Michael Thonyama, Mandla Mabaso and Mzwandile Mboyana. By 1998 when they released *Morena U Ba Etele*, they had moved to the mother company, Gallo Records. The album was composed and produced by Tom Mokhati. By then they had already recorded 20 albums. As we know, in between the albums their record company released compilations. Their trademark remains the time beating hand-held cushions. Though along the way misfortune befell them losing two members in a car crash, one in a car hijacking tragedy and another through illness, their faith and determination sustained them. They’ve received so many accolades including SAMA 2’s Best Traditional Gospel Performance for *Dumela Fela* and SAMA 3 in the same category for *Ndikhokhele ‘O Jehova*, which went gold in a short space of time. SAMA 5 nominated them in the Best Traditional Gospel category, which they would later win in SAMA 8 for *Jesu O Tsokile*. Their albums, *Ngeloxa Lokushiywa* and *Kukh’Induli Eluhlaza* were SAMA 7 and SAMA 9 nominees respectively. Perhaps their greatest achievement to date was when they received the first prize in the “Year 2000 International Gospel Music Festival” in Istanbul, Turkey. By 2005 some of their offerings were *Siyabonga* as well as *Bokang Modimo Wa Kganya*, which saw them nominated for the Best African Spiritual Group In Africa category of the 10th Kora All Africa Music Awards. We look forward to many more CDs from these soldiers of the cross who in 2006 boasted a catalogue of 27 albums.

This male choir’s style also inspired the formation of female groups like Mpumalanga’s **Masibuyele Ku Jehovah**. The Nelspruit-based choir was established
in 1988 and its members were Anna Zulu, Anna Thabethe, Lizzy Khoza, Zodwa Mashego, Belinda Nkosi and Elizabeth Mahlangu. Their debut album was *We All Know Jesus Is Coming* (1995). The sextet that was crowned Best Gospel Group by their provincial government in 1999 boasts five SAMA nominations, four of which they won as well as a string of 11 albums, which include a platinum and a gold disc.

Gallo Records recorded another well-known Methodist church male choir, Abavuseleli Bama Weseli, which among its albums released *Besihamba Ebumnyameni* (1987), produced by the late West Nkosi.

CCP Records released Umqokoz’ Obomvu’s album, *Mababonakaliswe* (Kaya-Lami, 1989) which was produced by SM Khoza and engineered by Sam Wingate. The choir was formed during the Methodist Church Centenary Celebrations and its members were Daniel Leopeng (lead singer/choir master), George Mogotsi, Samson Mthembu, Mxolisi Dlamini, Sipho Sangoni, Philip Matheza, Richard Ndibongo, Wiseman Somthunzi, Thembi Sikhonde, Nomvula Bidli, nokuthula Khumalo, Zodwa Sishange, William Motse, Bethwell Ngxabazi, Stephen Sawe and Bekezela Mkhanyiswa.

The company also recorded the music of another powerful group, Witsieshoek Pulamadiboho. Most of their music was composed by Tankiso William Sephula. Their albums include *Mamelang Sione* (Black Music, 1986), produced by Simon Ngwenya as well as *Sinje Ngomthandazo* (1989), produced by SM Khoza and engineered by Richard Mitchell.

CTV Records released one of the great groups of the era, *The Holy Cross Choir*’s album *Thulani Nilalele* (Red Label, 1984), produced by Tom “Bishop” Mkhize. The music was composed by the group’s lead vocalist, S. Mokhethi and co-arranged by Tom Mkhize and Joseph Dumako. The group’s members were (bass) J. Mofutsana, S. Mofutsana, P. Lechalaba; (tenor) M. Makhetha, M. Ntchala, A. Radebe, M. Mokhethi; (alto) L. Mokhethi, M. Mofutsana, E. Ntsula, F. Mokhethi as well as S. Mokhethi (lead vocals and soprano). Their albums include *Yehla Moya*, *Ha Ba Tshela Jordane* and *Ha Re Na Tshabo*.

Perhaps at this point it would be proper to introduce to you one of the great composers and producers of the era, Joseph Dumako aka Joseph Dee. He was born in Kroonstad, Free State. All members of his family were into music. In the mid-seventies Joseph released his first Sesotho composition, *Rebecca*, which sold more than 25 000 copies. He formed The Holy Cross Choir in 1983. Their debut album, *Tholang Le Mamele* (Sotho version) was composed, produced, arranged and conducted by him. He also played all keyboards and percussion. The album sold more than 100 000 copies. In 1984 he started searching for young talent in his Maokeng community and most of his recruits were students who sang at funeral services. In 1985 he was ready to form another choir, The Holy Spirits. Their debut album was in Sesotho titled *Kabelo Yaka Entle* (Teal Records, 1986) and its isiZulu version was titled *Okholwa Ku Jesu*, produced by Joseph Makwela.
and West Nkosi. The album sold over 50 000 units within six months. Their other albums include Sefapanong, produced by Tsietsi Mafabatho and Hauhela Moya Rona (Teal Sound, 1991), produced by William Mthethwa under the name The New Holy Spirits. William also produced other gospel groups like The Moonlight. The music of the Holy Spirits was so popular that in 1988 Tom Mkhize produced and arranged an album by Nelson Reed titled Holy Spirit In Sax on CTV Music Team’s Spinna label.

In 1987 Joseph Dumako embarked on a solo project releasing Mercy! Mercy!, a six-track instrumental album featuring his keyboard prowess. He also produced other choirs like the Forever Mass Choir’s album titled Jesu, Morena (Spiritual, 1989).

Dumako also encouraged Paul Lechalaba to pursue his music career beyond being just a group member. Son of Pastor Joseph Lechalaba, Paul was also born in Kroonstad. From an early age he was inspired by his father who was a guitarist and vocalist. By 1984 he was a session musician for the Holy Cross Choir as already alluded to above. Later he formed his own gospel group, New Life Singers, which was contracted to Gallo Records. In 1990 Paul embarked on a solo career with debut album Diketso Tsa Morena, which went gold within two months of release. His other albums include Nako Ya Ho Rapela, Tloho Le Wena and Jwale Ke Nako.

Maybe before I pass this era of the gospel groups let me pay tribute to some that left a mark at the obvious risk of leaving many out: The Challengers, Elabethela Choir, Bahaufi Le Morena, Masibuyele Ku Jehova, Philadelphia Full Gospel Church Choir, Baromioa Ba Khotso, King David’s Messengers, Saints Be Joyful, SOS Choir, Rehauhetswe Choir, The Moonlight, Meadowlands Gospel Choir, The Alexander Rejoice Choir, The Messengers Of God, Lord’s Comforters, Hosana Ea Pele, The First United Apostolic Church In Zion, Galathia Bandla Lenkosi, The Bright Catholic Church Of Zion, Bathabisi Ba Morena, Children Of God, Dikonyana Tsa Modimo, Bogolo Ba Sione, Diiteleni Assembly Trumpets, Dwaro Rocks, Leswika La Motheo, People’s Gospel Choir, Abathenjwa ba ka Jehova, Balatedi Ba Morena and many more.

Other individual musicians who dominated the gospel music scene of the eighties were Itani Madima, Victor Phume as well as the late Freedom Sengwayo from Zimbabwe. Victor later dedicated his life to serving the Kingdom of God in the House Of Joy. Pastor Victor Phume is brother to former Mr South Africa, Paul Phume. Itani later became a member of Echo Gospel Group.

There were also known individuals who were backed by particular groups like Javas and the Gospel, Margaret and the Gospel Singers and so on. One of these individuals was a talented young man, Sami Malete of Sami and the Revival. This young man who shot to stardom with his 1990 album Sebe Saka on Hit City’s White Dove label left us in the morning of his career. Other talented composers of the genre were Abram Shabalala and Derrick
Ndzimande. Derrick’s albums include *Halala NgoJesu, Phenduka Namhlanje, Ngikulwile Ukuulwa* and *Ujesu Wami Uyaphila*.

From the era of Sami Malete there emerged a new generation of gospel musicians I choose to call young ambassadors. In 1991 Hit City also recorded Ikahani Brothers’ album, *Le Batla Mang?*, which was produced by Richard Felani Gumbi. Cool Spot recorded the music of Hosana Hosana Hosana starting with their 1988 album *Satane Tlohele Batho*. The music was co-written by Elphus Mkhize and Victor Mbingo and produced/engineered by Mally Watson. Some of their other albums include *Paradeising* (1990) and *Ba Tshetse* (1991). Other such young ambassadors were Soldiers Of The Cross, Ivangeli Loxolo, Ramphele Rainbow Pioneers and Masogana A Jamela.

Some of today’s most successful ambassadors of God also include Benjamin Dube, Solly Moholo, Sipho Makhabane, Oleseng Shuping, Winnie Mashaba, Hlengiwe Mhlaba, Lundi Tyamara, Debobah Fraser, Jabu Hlongwane, Lusanda Mcinga, Matlakala, Jay Hlungwani, the late Vuyo Mokoena, Khuphuka, Imvuselelo yase Natali, Masibuyela Ku Jehova, Umyalezo Wesikhathi, Joyous Celebration, Ithemba Lamakatholika, Igalatiya, U-Turn, Singing For Joy, Elias Shongwe and The Old Time Religion Quartet. Let’s follow the careers of some of them.

In later years there emerged a new school of young musicians who have proven themselves to be stars in their own right like Solly Moholo. Solly joined Mathibestad Agents in 1992. Thereafter he produced Masole a Kgotso as a member of the ZCC choir. His ZCC blend of gospel took the industry by storm as he released albums like: *Mohlang Ke Kolobetswa ‘Die Poppe Sal Dans’* (2000 SAMA nominee); *Ba Mnitsa Tsotsi* (2002); *Ranta E Wele* (2003); *Tsoha Jonase* (2004); *Mandela O Llela Bana*, which was nominated in the Best African Gospel Album category of MTN SAMA 11; *Moruti Nthapelele; Ba Mo Kobile Kerekeng* and *Sedi Laka Mpontshe Tsela*. In 2005 together with wife Lebo Marishane they announced their wedding ceremony held in Mathibestad, Hammanskraal where he was raised. Solly is one gospel singer who is not afraid of taking a stand as seen in the Piet Matloga ritual murder case. He was President Thabo Mbeki’s favourite political rally performer. His protégés include Sinky Mathe and Fassie who also have their own solo careers.

**Oleseng Shuping**’s style is not very different from Solly’s. His albums include the popular *Se Gopole*. In 2000 he released *O A Le Bona Naa?*, which was nominated in SAMA 7. He sometimes sang with his home boys, Atteridgeville Happy Boys as on their 1999 album, *Marumo Fase*. His CD *Ha Di Tshwane* was SAMA 9’s Best African Gospel Album nominee. During the 2004 SAMA his album *Hareatla Ka Boikhantho* was nominated as Best African Gospel Album. In 2005 he released *Afrika*. Oleseng’s stage performance like that of Solly Moholo is an energetic foot stomping marathon known by fellow Zionists as “Mokhukhu”. It is a marvel to watch. In 2006 he was involved in a near-fatal car accident between Christiana

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and Bloemhof in the North West Province. While lying in hospital, his album with Atteridgeville Happy Boys, *Ke Fodile* turned platinum within the first week of release. God be praised! In October his record company, Cool Spot released the album he had recorded a week before the accident titled *Thoriso Di Ye Go Ntate*. In July 2007 Cool Spot and God Is Good organised a fundraising festival in his name at the Saulsville Arena, Atteridgeville. The aim of the event was to assist him in financing his treatment towards full recovery as the star was bound to a wheelchair.

**Winnie Mashaba** was introduced to the music industry by Solly Moholo. This staunch ZCC member’s debut album was *Exodus 20* (2000), which sold in excess of 25 000 units to receive a gold disc award. She was nominated in the Kora All Africa Music Awards’ Best African Spiritual Female category for her album *O Tla Ya Kae?* (2005). The male section nomination went to Jay Hlungwani for *Ke Tsamaya Jwale Ka Bohle*. Winnie’s album was also nominated for the Best Gospel category of the Munghana Lonene FM Music Awards. Her other albums include *Thola Ngwaneso* (2006), *Ke A Le Tšhaba Lefase* (2007) and *Ke Rata Wena* (2008). By 2008 she had become one of the music promoters’ most sought-after live performers.

**Sipho “Big Fish” Makhabane** from Mpumalanga Province left school at Standard 3 level (Grade 5) to follow his heart and release his debut album, *Yekintokozo*. From there he never looked back and exposed many new gospel artists like Ncandweni Christ Ambassadors, Frans Dlamini, Khuzizono, as well as Shongwe and Khuphuka Saved Group. Together with Hlengiwe Mhlaba they travelled the African continent and beyond performing and striking new deals for their record label, Amanxusa Productions. His albums include the following: *Ngikhululiwe, Makadunyiswe* (1999), *Moya Wami* (2003), *Nkosi Ngibheke* (2004), *Yekintokozo, Intokozo, Instrumental Album, The Instrumentals, Indawo* (2006). By 2007 he was riding on the crest of success with his CD *Ngiyamemeza*, which was nominated for the 13th SAMAs. However, it was his duo project with Jabu Hlongwane titled *Send Your Fire*, which won the Best African Traditional Gospel Album category. His 2008 offering was titled *Hamba Nami*. His other albums feature Amanxsa ka Kristu: *Injabulo* (2000), *Calvary* and *Akukhalwa*.

**Hlengiwe Mhlaba** was born and bred in Kwa-Mashu, Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal. Though she never regarded herself as star material, she loved singing. While teaching Maths and Science at Ndeseni High School in Empangeni, she sang with a group called Pongola Gospel Wagon. The choir performed at weddings and parties around Durban. During these performances she was spotted by gospel star, Sipho Makhabane, who asked her to join him in his project. Amazed by her talent, Sipho gave her the opportunity to record her own debut CD, *Dwala Lami* (2005). Subsequently, Sipho asked her to join him as co-owner of his Johannesburg-based company, Amanxusa Productions. In 2006 she followed up with *Jesu Uyahalalela*, which was nominated for SAMA's
Best Contemporary Gospel Album. By 2007 both CDs had already achieved double platinum sales. Her success story gives many orphans hope as she herself lost her mother in 2000. Surely the support she got thereafter from Pastor Vusi Dube of the Ethekwini Community Church went a long way in shaping a superstar! Isn’t God great? Yes, her CD *Blessings* (Izibusiso) says it all. The blessings were again showered upon her as the CD won MTN SAMA 14’s Best African Contemporary Gospel section.

*Ncandweni Christ Ambassadors* is a group from Swaziland whose leader and founder is Pastor Timothy Myeni. The group’s CDs include *uJehova Ungumalusi, Buya Nkosi Jesu* (2005) and *Izithembiso Zenkosi* (2007). Their 2007 release won MTN SAMA’s Best Selling Album and Best Selling DVD. In 2008 I met the marketing and promotions team of the NCA Music Productions at the SABC Building in Limpopo Province doing their field work. In our conversation I was quite impressed by their hunger and determination in the promotion of their products.

Meadowlands-born *Bonani Benjamin Dube* is the last-born son of evangelists Mrs Grace Dube and the late Mr Benjamin Dube Snr. I interviewed him in the mid-1980s long before he responded to his calling. At the age of 14 he was shocked by the tragic death of his father, but had to continue from where Benjamin senior had left off to complete the race. He did his music diploma in piano at FUBA Academy in Newtown in the mid-eighties. Later with his family as The Dube Family released the album *We Are What We Are* (GalloGRC, 1989) produced and written by him. The album featured some of today’s big names on instruments like Mthunzi Namba, Victor Masondo, Sandile Ngema, Isaac Mtshali, Veli Shabangu, John Hassan, Lawrance Matshiza, Thapelo Khomo and Don Laka. Benny who was a member of Image started his solo career with his debut single *I Live Joyfully*. In 1986 he released *Holy Spirit* as Benjamin And The Youth Choir. It was produced by Sello Chicco Twala at Dephon Records on the Roy B label. The title-track which was written by Chicco Twala became a monster hit. In 1988 when Benjamin released *Ebenezer* he was already a household name who was invited to be a supporting act for the US gospel star, James Cleveland, when he toured South Africa. He later toured America where he shared the stage with greats like the Mighty Clouds Of Joy and Andre Crouche. After releasing *Celebration* in 1994 he took a few years’ break to start his own ministry, the Praise Centre Church. Pastor Dube’s church extended into various branches across the country and inspired new musicians like Family Factory, Well, Avante and Zamajobe Sithole. In 1999 he released *I Feel Like Going On*, which was recorded live featuring musicians like Twins, Lulama, his mother Grace Dube and the late Vuyo Mokoena. Benjamin Dube presents the *High Explosion* (2002) was the beginning of a dynamic concept, which thrilled gospel lovers all over South Africa and beyond. Some of the products of the concept are *Oh! Bless Our God* (2004), an album nominated in SAMA 11’s Best
Contemporary Album category, as well as *Eh Yaweh, Live* (2006) nominated for SAMAs Best Urban Gospel Album category. The category was won by the group Redeemed for their album *Live In Soweto*. Pastor Dube's other albums include *You Blessed Me Still* (2005), *All Time Favourites* (2006), *Looking Back* and *In His Presence* (2007), winner of SAMAs 14’s Best Urban Gospel category. God be praised for allowing him and his wife to survive a terrible car crash in July 2005 on the N3 highway near Alberton on their way from Yolanda Adams’ concert in Randburg. Praise His mighty name!

**Deborah Fraser** was born in Kwa-Mashu, Durban, in KwaZulu-Natal as the sixth child of Catherine and Roy Fraser in a family of eight. Her love for music saw her go through Tu Nokwe’s Durban-based Amajika Youth And Children’s Art Project. In the 1980s she moved to Johannesburg for better career opportunities. Only a few artists can claim to have served the session musicians’ circle the way Deborah did. Among the musicians she worked very close with are Sello Twala and the late Brenda Fassie. While she was Brenda’s backing vocalist at festivals in the eighties, I had the honour of hosting her at my house in Lebowakgomo. In 1990 she released *Doctor’s Prescription*, which included a title she would revisit later, *Abanye Bayombona*, co-written with the late Dumisani Ngubeni. Her 2001 gospel album *Abanye Bayombona*, which was produced by Sipho Mbele became a huge success and was nominated in SAMAs 8’s Best Producer category. Even this second time around she co-wrote this title track with the producer. One of the tracks was dedicated to “my late sisters and brothers”: Jean Madubane, Wendy Mseleku, Moses Molelekwa, Mfazomnyama, Dumisani Ngubeni, Immogane Khoza, Mamsie Zwane, Wings Segale, son Mbuso Fraser, sister Promise Fraser and elder brother Daram Fraser. She also paid tribute to the session musicians who groomed her as a backing vocalist. *Udlalile Ngabantu* (2002) was nominated for Best Female artist in SAMAs 9. This SAMAs 11 winner of the Best Gospel Album category for her *Ngikuxolele* (2004) features the voice of David Masondo of The Soul Brothers on one track. These kind of collaborations can only enrich our music. In that very year she scooped Kora’s Best Gospel Female Artist. Her follow-up offering was *Gloria* (2005). At the end of 2006 she announced her engagement to Pastor Soki Okeke of Mercy Chapel from Nigeria while working on her forthcoming CD *Isililo*, which was released in 2007. On the international front maybe it would be proper to indicate that her CD *Born Again* was released in the United Kingdom. By 2008 Deborah was running a chicken farm near Eikenhof, south of Johannesburg while working on her next album to be released at the end of July 2008.

**Lusanda Spiritual Group** is led by Lusanda Mcinga who’s also the composer, arranger and lead singer. She grew up in Umtata (now correctly spelled Mtata) in the Eastern Cape. At a very young age she taught herself to play the guitar. After recording her first album, she sold it “from the boot”, but her third album was released by Gallo Records. The Spiritual Group consists of (alto) Ntomboxolo
Bulana, Nomzie Mcinga and Phindiswa Rulashe; (soprano) Abongile Mcinga, Nomveliso Ngenelo and Qhamisa Mpayipheli; (tenor) Betusile Mcinga, Sinalo Mcinga, Uvile Sihele and Lonwabo Nkonzo; (bass) Mlandeli Giyama, Sivule Ndikinda and Luvuyo Tyekela. By 2004 they had released eight albums, some having sold beyond the platinum status. Their albums include *Akekho Onje Ngawe, Mandihambe Nawe Jesu, Ngifun’ Izulu* (SAMA 9’s Best Traditional Gospel Album) and *Abanye Bayawela*. When they recorded their 2004 album, *Bathi Bayamazi*, they invited members of another powerful group, Eskin Adult Choir, to join on tenor and bass. In 2005 they released *Umoya Wenkosi* as well as a video of their 11 hit tracks. In the same year the group was nominated in the 10th Kora All Africa Music Awards’ Best African Spiritual Group In Africa category. Their follow-up was *Ndiphakathi*. Lusanda’s son, Betusile followed in his mother’s footsteps and released his debut CD *Mandibengowakho* in 2007.

Lusanda’s success story reminds me of another young Eastern Cape songstress who writes her own lyrics, Kholeka Dabula, who by 2000 had recorded three albums: *Khilikhithi-Yakhalintsimbis, Seliyadumizulu* and *Bambelela*. She was born in Wollowvale in a family of seven girls. At the age of 20 she sang in the choir Masizakhe Christian Soldiers where she caught the attention of KK Music Productions. In 1999 she signed with Bula Music and the result was her third album, *Bambelela*.

**Veliswa Skeyi** from the same province started her singing career in 1992 with a gospel group from King William’s Town known as Lord Comforters. When she went solo she released a self-titled debut album in 2004. It was to be followed by *Dwala Lam* (2005), *Mandilive Ilizwi* (2006) and *Umhlobo* (2008).

A member of Masole A Kgotso, Matlakala Ramathoka displayed so much talent as she led the group in hits like *Sello Sa Lesea*. She later ventured into a solo career without severing ties with the group. By 2006 she was releasing her 7th solo album, *Ba Mpitsa Tsotsi*. “Tlaki” as she is affectionately known, holds a diploma in Theology. She is backed by her group, The Comforters.

The first time I heard Lundi sing I mistook him for Rebecca, but when I listened attentively, I discovered that a new gospel star was born. “Prince Of Gospel Music”, Lundi Tyamara grew up in Worcester, Western Cape. He started singing in choirs at a young age, and at the age of 15 followed his dream to Johannesburg. After working with Rebecca and her producer, Sizwe Zako Lundi joined Bula Music under the supervision of former television star, Tshepo Nzimande. His 1998 album *Mphemumlo Wam* sold more than 350 000 copies. By 2005 he had seven albums to his credit including *Ubuhlungu* (2000 SAMA nominee) all of which sold beyond the 100 000 mark. It came as no surprise when Kora All Africa Music Awards crowned him Best Male Gospel Artist in 2004. His CD *Jeremiah* was nominated for Metro FM Music Awards 2005 in the Best Gospel category. Some of his hits are: *Ngapha Nangapha* and *Phaphamani*. Bula Music has also released a DVD, *The Very Best Of Lundi*. His other platinum
seller CDs include *Umthandazo, Ngiyabonga, The Prince Of Gospel’s Messages (Live), Mvuleleni Angene* and *Umthandazo*, which were produced by Tshepo Ndizimande. The self-produced CD *Impilo* (2007) surprised many people as it won the hotly contested Best African Traditional Gospel category of SAMA 14. In that year, 2007 the Best Traditional African Acapella Gospel section went to MaCecilia at St Paul for their CD *Moshe Mohlanka wa Modimo*. Still true to his roots, Lundi took a break to go through the traditional passage to manhood. His mother, Nobantu Francis Tyamara passed away in 2007 aged 57 and was buried on 12 May 2007 at the Zwelethemba cemetery, Worcester, in the Boland, Western Cape Province.

Another young Bula Music gospel star was **S’fiso Ncwane**. The talented composer and keyboardist’s albums include *Makadunyiswe, Inombolo, Umkhuleko* and *S’fiso*. His first DVD was simply titled *Best Of S’fiso*. In 2006 he signed a record deal with EMI Records to release his next CD, *Baba Ngiya Bonga*.

**Jabu Hlongwane** was born in Dlamini, Soweto, and grew up in Esikhawini, KwaZulu-Natal. As a youngster he was inspired by musicians like Al Jarreau and other jazz musos. Like many of us he sang in school choirs, but it was at tertiary level at the University Of Zululand (now KwaZulu-Natal) in the late eighties that he picked up interest in gospel music. With his friend, Mthunzi Namba they formed a gospel group called Treasured Voices. In 1995 Tusk Records offered him a recording contract and his debut album was *Nkosi Yokuthula* co-written and produced by friend, Mthunzi Namba. Since then, he never looked back. His album *Keep Me True* was nominated in the Best African Album category of SAMA 11. His other works include *Iyeza* and *The Crosspower Experience*. His collaboration with Sipho Makhabane produced a jewel titled *Send Your Fire*, winner of SAMA 13’s Best African Traditional Gospel Album.

I hope you never confuse the above musician with the Limpopo gospel star, **Jay Hlungwani**. A product of Risinga High School in Giyani, he led his group as they contested in the Shell Road To Fame talent search. That experience changed his life for the better and today he has a string of hits including *Avulekile Amasango*, which was later covered by Ishmael.

**Vuyo Mokoena** was born Vuyisile Templeton Mokoena on 30 June 1968 in Duduza, Nigel, in the former East Rand (now Ekurhuleni). He was brought up by his devout Christian grandmother. He said the deep-voiced granny used to drag him to church even on the “women only” Thursdays. He ended up loving it. The former pupil of Mmuso Primary School in Duduza was influenced by the music of groups like Sankomota at an early age. In 1984 he became a member of a young KwaThema, Springs group called Melodi. In 1991 he met Rebecca Malope and Peter Tladi when he won the Best Male Vocalist category of the Super Curl Talent Search singing The Village Pope’s *Papa*. The two judges of the contest asked him to come work with them. He’s been part of that team for ten years during which he replaced Peter Mokoena as lead vocalist of the group.
Pure Magic. He went solo in 2001, joined Sony Music and released albums which include *Sakhiwe* (2000), *Ngosabela Nkosi* (2001), *Sish’udumo* (2003), *The Psalmist* (2005) and *Avuleka Amazulu* (2007). His publishing company was known as Vuyote. Some of the albums were nominated for the SAMAs. Vuyo’s flexibility saw him collaborate with popular maskandi group, Izingane Zoma as well as Deborah Fraser. One of the memorable moments of his career was when he did a duet with Jabu Hlongwane during the 1998 Joyous Celebration concert in Durban. He said it was fireworks! The relationship between the two grew to a point of releasing a collaboration album, *Iculo Elisha* (2002). They did a sterling performance at the launch of Thobela FM’s festive season road safety campaign, “Thari Ya Tsela” in December 2001 promoting their massive hit *Ntate Nthuse* from their forthcoming album. Interestingly, the track became popularly known as “Koloi ya Eliya” due to the chorus line.

On 4 May 2008 Vuyo was diagnosed with a brain tumour and booked into the Linksfield Clinic. After being discharged, his health deteriorated and he passed away at home in Sonneveld in the early hours of Friday, 23 May 2008. The gospel star’s departure was mourned in the midst of that socio-economic tornado that was clothed in the dark cloud of xenophobia. As most foreign nationals crossed the Limpopo river going back home, he crossed the proverbial river Jordan going back home. He was laid to rest on Friday, 30 May 2008 at the Nigel cemetery, leaving behind his wife Tebogo and son Karabo. Beyond the grave Vuyo Mokoena was nominated for two categories of the SABC Crown Gospel Music Awards – Best Male Artist and Best Song. A tribute to the legend formed part of a 2008 roadshow by Joyous Celebration.

The masterminds behind the *Joyous Celebration* concept are three talented visionaries from KwaZulu-Natal – Jabu Hlongwane, Mthunzi Namba and Lindelani Mkhize. The initial concept saw the formation of gospel group Family Factory, an 18-member group whose debut album was titled *The Journey*. The group’s nucleus was friends Jabu Hlongwane, Margaret Thozama Motsega and Wendy Mseleku. Mthunzi Namba became its Musical Director and Lindelani Mkhize, the Executive Producer. They worked with young producers like Godfrey Pilane and Eugene Mthethwa. The line-up of the Factory were (soprano) Vicky Vilakazi, S’dumo Sithole, Nokukhanya Dlamini, and Priscilla Ngqumeya; (alto) Thozama Motsega, Wendy Mseleku, S’bongile Motsega and Gift Vilakazi; (tenor) Neyi Zimu, Innocent Modiba, Stephen Molakeng and Thabang Moshoeshoe; (baritone) Jabu Hlongwane, Sihle Kunene, Langa Dube and Sipho Mnguni. On musical instruments were Ntuthuko Sibisi (organ), Sihle Kunene and Concord Nkabinde (bass). Later the dream grew bigger as they discovered the need for an incubator of latent talent. The talent search grew in leaps and bounds and became an annual event. The show has received a number of accolades including a SAMA 5 nomination in the Best Contemporary Gospel Album for *Joyous Celebration 2*. They Won SAMA 10’s Best Contemporary Gospel Album for
Live in Cape Town. There was also a SAMA 11 nomination in the same category for Joyous Celebration 8. That year the category was also contested by groups like Tree 63 and Worship House. The group’s 2000 album titled Connecting The Nation co-produced by Mthunzi and Lindelani was nominated in the Best Producer category of SAMA 7 while Joyous Celebration 5 and 6 won SAMA 8 and 9’s Best Contemporary Album categories respectively. 2005 was the project’s ninth year and that says a lot about the producers’ passion and commitment if one takes into account the fact that every year had its own album released. The idea of the project was to unearth and showcase new talent every year, but there are icons like Jabu Hlongwane, Vuyo Mokoena and Margaret Motsage from whom the newly discovered would learn. Every year the established musicians are invited as guest artists to bring more variety to the show. The most acclaimed concert of the group to date was the historical Durban One World show, “Kirk Franklin And Joyous Celebration”. Joyous Celebration 11’s DVD titled Joyous 11: Live at The Sun City Superbowl won SAMA 14’s Best Traditional/African Adult Contemporary DVD category. By 2008 the project had released the 12th volume and as usual, undertook a national tour sponsored by Old Mutual.

The keyboard master and musical director of the show is Mthunzi Namba. A former member of gospel duo Sweetwater Amanzimtoti he has his own solo career. His album Let It Rain (2000) won Contemporary SAMA 7’s Gospel section while Send Your Glory (2002) was nominated in the same category in 2002. I met him for the first time in 1992 while member of Sweetwater with Felicia Marion of group Joy fame promoting the CD Greater Is He – Singabangqobi (Friends In Fellowship). The CD also included Joy’s evergreen track, Paradise Road. We would later meet when he worked for the then Radio Zulu (now Ukhozi FM). Almost every conversation we had ended being about music. It was in the glory days of gospel outfit, Friends First whose bass guitarist was Victor Masondo of The Jazzanians fame. That is why when we later wanted to transform the music sound of Thobela FM he was the first musician I believed could create transformational jingles, and he did that with flying colours. He later became A&R and Artists Development Manager Of Sony Music Entertainment S.A. By 2007 the pastor of His Tarbenacle Church was married to Thabile and had two children, Awethu and Asanda who inspired the name of his recording studio, Asawe. He has also released other CDs like Restoration Hour (2005) and The Collection (2006).

Let me take this opportunity to pay tribute to one of the music industry’s humblest, creative and knowledgeable leaders – Lindelani Mkhize. Lindelani grew up singing in school choirs in Umlazi, Durban. His passion for music was fuelled by his music teachers, the Majolas. At a young age he was already in charge of school choirs at Mthwalume and Indukwenhle high schools. Though he was dreaming of taking his interest in music to another level, his mother, former teacher JB Mkhize wanted her son to be an academic “professional”. After
completing matric he did Chemical Engineering at Mangosuthu Technikon. This route met with a cul-de-sac and he turned to a national diploma in music with the Natal Technikon to prepare himself for a career in the music industry. In 1992 he joined Teal Records. He introduced kwaiito artists to the record company. This resulted in big hits like *Tsiki Tsiki* (M’du), *Ding Dong* (Joe Nina), *Korobela* (Kamazu) and others. In 1994 he was recruited by Guy Henderson of Sony International to join the group. The company needed a visionary who could bring in local artists of substance who could match their international image. After joining Sony, Lindelani with the help of former Wits University law student, Lazarus Serobe revolutionised the music industry. Respected musicians like Hugh Masekela were signed on. They created the kind of environment that made the likes of Sibongile Khumalo decide to record music after years of many performances.

I met Lindelani Mkhize for the first time in his Dunkeld West office for mutual projects as I realised through his PR, Lucas Mahlakgane, that he was a visionary. At the time he was General Manager of Sony Music Entertainment SA Local Repertoire Division. Out of that meeting followed a number of successful projects of mutual benefit to Sony Music and Thobela FM. One of his remarkable concepts was the “Sony Summer Sounds” which gave exposure to many young artists. But the project he’ll go down the corridors of history with is Joyous Celebration. While he was managing the local music division at Sony, he also became Joyous Celebration’s composer, producer, artist and conductor. I had the honour of attending most of the annual launches of the show and it was always evident that a lot of planning, rehearsal and co-ordination was the backbone of the show’s success. Most of today’s talented young ambassadors of gospel music are products of the show: Nokukhanya Dlamini, Andile Bhebhula, Swazi Dlamini, Sabatha Masoka, Xoli Nkosi, Nokwazi Dlamini, Thozama Margaret Motsage, Vicky Vilakazi, Innocent Modiba, Steven Molakeng, Thabo Mdluli, Brian Makiwane, Keke Phoofolo, the late Sihle Kunene, Sechaba Pali, Avis and many more. Unlike the independent African church groups, Joyous Celebration’s product is a global, schooled and refined approach that is accompanied by music score sheets but still maintain mass appeal. This approach is also realised in the music of groups like Christian Explainers and Winds Of Change. When Sony joined hands with BMG in 2004 he started his own company, Lindelani Mkhize Entertainment (LME), but still continued to consult for Sony-BMG. In my last discussion with the late Jabu Khanyile he was up-beat about being one of the first musicians to join LME. Lindelani was part of the panel of judges for SABC 2’s Gospel Stars talent search which produced Collin Damans. In 2008 he created another SABC 2 television talent search, *I Want to Sing Gospel*. It was hosted by former Joyous Celebration star, Thabo Mdluli. The greatest honour he received for his excellence was from the 2004 Metro FM Music Awards which presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award in his hometown, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal.
One of the most successful gospel choirs of our time is **The Soweto Gospel Choir** who classify their music as “gospel with deep soul”. The formation of the choir involved people like brother and sister Nkululeko and Gift Vilakazi as well as David Mulovedzi and Beverly Bryer in 2002. They took the best of David’s Holy Jerusalem Choir, Vicky Vilakazi’s backing singers and added other choristers from various Soweto churches and groups to form a mighty choir. Bev became the producer, while Dave became the musical director. Beverly roped in fellow Australians, Andrew Sommerville Kay and David Ellis Vigo of Universal Australia as underwriters of the choir, which they registered as Soweto Gospel Choir Pty Ltd. In 2005 the choir embarked on a hectic tour of the US taking them to 39 cities. It was reported that their Carnegie Hall shows were already sold out six months before the performances. Other countries they had already toured by 2005 include Singapore, Spain, Germany, England and Australia. Among the accolades they received were The Australian Helpmann Award for Best Contemporary Music Concert, the American Gospel Music Award for Best Choir as well as the Gospel Music Award for Best International Choir. Locally they had only received a SAMA nomination at that stage. The choir’s contribution to the upliftment of fellow South Africans was reflected in its founding of the AIDS orphans’ Vukani Foundation in 2003. It also raises funds for another HIV/Aids orphans sanctuary, Nkosi’s Haven. The choir’s CD, *Voices From Heaven* made it to the international gospel music scene. Under choirmaster Lucas Bok they participated in the November 2005 Unite Of The Stars concert raising funds for the Unite Against Hunger project sharing the stage with the likes of Diana Ross and Christina Aguilera. Their second album, *Blessed* made history by winning the coveted Grammy Award (49th) in the Best Traditional World Music category on 11 February 2007. Back home their DVD *Blessed Live In Concert* scooped the Best Live DVD category of SAMA 13. Their follow-up CD *African Spirit* was released in the same year and won Metro FM’s Best Gospel Album category. At the beginning of 2008 it won them another Grammy Award. The success of this group has given hope to other local acts like the Vaal Sound Chorus whose 2006 CD was titled *Siyakhothama*. Did I say and the Soweto Young Voices?

**Avante** is a gospel outfit from KwaZulu-Natal in Durban’s Kwa-Mashu township. Having been friends from their early school years at Kwasethu High School, they put their voices to test in the Shell Road To Fame talent search in the early nineties and never looked back. Besides their albums, which include *Hlalani Ethembeni* (2005), they collaborated with a number of musicians including Rebecca, Brenda, Vuyo, Mandoza and Ringo who featured them on his massive hit *Iyeza Lemini*.

There is also **Shalo Vine**, a young female trio from Dube, Soweto whose debut album was titled *Never Give Up*. The church-based group, which was started in 2004, is an offshoot of the famous Dube Choir.
Among the young generation of gospel musicians there are performers like Moshe Wa Msholi from GaKgapane near Tzaneen in Limpopo province. He took the music scene by storm with his Afrikaans hit, *Trap Die Duiwel*, which was followed by *Dankie Na Die Here* in 2006. Other musicians include M’Zet, Mojeremane, Nontando, Nyaka, Kenny Makweng, Donny, Siyabonga, Mthembeni, Ntokozo Mbambo, Thabo Lebeko, Pascaline, Nдумiso, Sabata Masoka, Vision, Happy Sisters, S’нethemba, Vuka Afrika, Ntokozo, Vuyokazi, Gospel Divas and many more.

I was shocked to learn that promising young gospel musician, Zolile Ndyawe was shot dead on Wednesday, 31 October 2007 in Kwa Zakhele, Port Elizabeth, in the Eastern Cape Province. The budding star had just finished recording his second CD. His killers were reported to have taken his cellphone and some documents from him. Have our lives become that cheap?

At the beginning of 2008 it was reported that Mojeremane aka Lucas Xale took his life on 3 February and was buried on Sunday, 17 February 2008 in Mabopane, near Tshwane. How sad!

There are musicians who are not necessarily gospel artists but made some impact with either some tracks or CDs: Babsy Mlangeni, Tsepo Tshola, Steve Kekana, William Mthethwa, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Soshanguve Black Tycoons, Don Gumbo and Tshisalanga, Bhekumuzi Luthuli, Ntombinkulu (Rev. Sam Zondi), Johnny Mokhali, Ikhansela No JBC, Sharon Dee, Molemo Jub Jub Maarohanye and others.

By 2007 this genre was the most popular on the local scene that it deserved its own awards ceremony. Organised by Zanele Mbokazi, the launch of the Crown Gospel Music Awards on Sunday, 11 November 2007 at the International Convention Centre in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, would surely elevate it to even greater heights. The first event sponsored by Cell C would be staged at the same venue on 24 August 2008.

As we pause on the long journey in this first edition, let us refresh our memories and go back to the packed Vosloorus Community Hall, where a final memorial service was staged for Simon Mahlathini Nkabinde on Saturday, 7 August 1999. In response to the public outcry about our stars that fade like flowers to be buried like paupers, the former Arts and Culture Minister Ben Ngubane promised to investigate and correct the wrongs in the local music industry. Indeed, in March 2000 a Task Team comprising members from government, music industry and civil society, as well as two international experts sat in Johannesburg. Provincial hearings were also conducted. A document called the Music Industry Task Team Report was compiled. Following the MITT recommendations, the newly-formed CWUSA set in motion a process which culminated in the birth of the Seriti Social Security Scheme for Creatives. Members of the scheme/union would enjoy short-term insurance and medical aid cover. Some of the midwives in the scheme to be in full operation by 2007
were the SABC, SAMRO and the Department of Arts and Culture.

Judging by the number of institutions offering music diplomas and degrees, the growing number of independent labels, the mushrooming of new radio stations and television channels, the various music projects and workshops; judging by the growing number of music and cultural festivals, the variety of collaborations, the number and growth of the music awards; judging by the UNESCO Convention on cultural diversity as well as government intervention programmes in South Africa, the future looks bright. Sing Africa Sing!