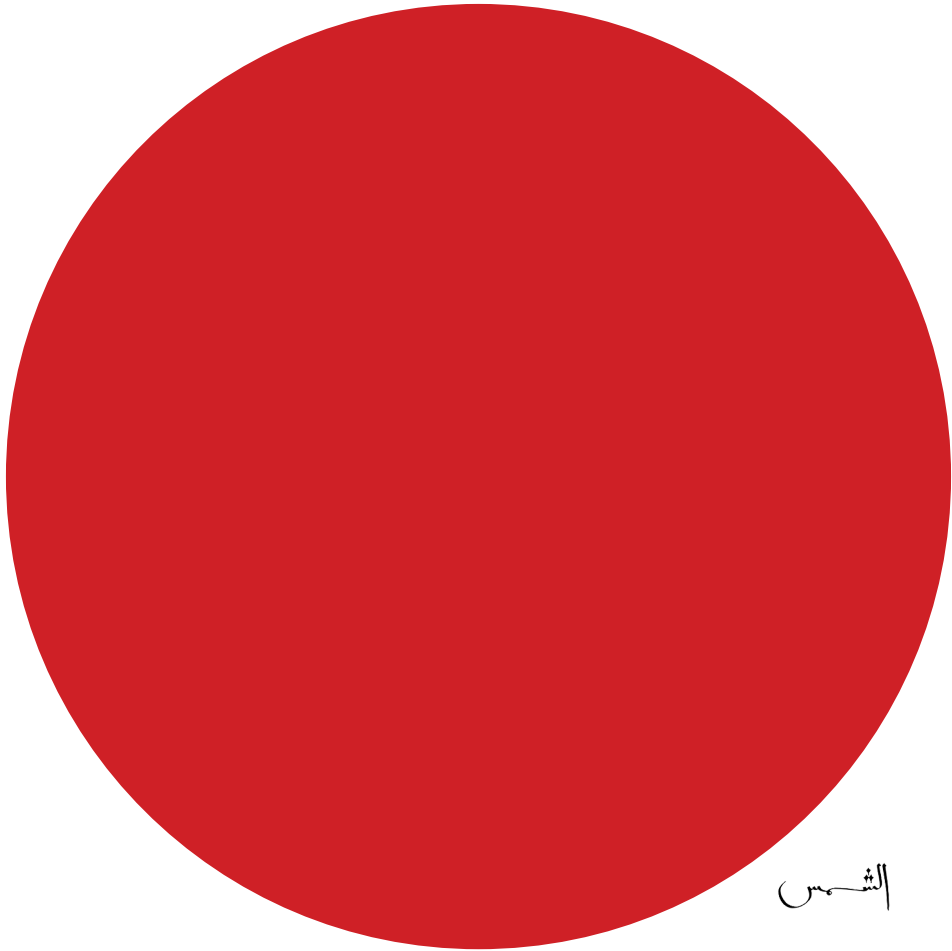


THE SUN RISING:



# *As-Shams*

and the story of  
South African jazz  
under apartheid

BY ANDY THOMAS



Tshona! Session (Gallo Studios), l-r: Basil Coetzee, Pat Matshikiza, Selby Ntuli, Rashid Vally, Siphon Mabuse and Alex Khaoli with Kippie Moeketsi (seated) during the Gallo Studios sessions for the album *Tshona!* in 1975. Photo from AS-Shams Archive.

In the wake of the Sharpeville massacre on March 21, 1960, when 69 South Africans were shot dead during a protest against the pass laws, the Nationalist Party's apartheid rule tightened, with jazz musicians taking the full force.

The ruling Nationalist Party had always feared the hip, urban aesthetic of jazz, preferring to promote the image of a compliant tribal African. When *Drum* magazine in 1951 asked regulars at the Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg what they wanted from their editorial they were told, "Give us jazz and film stars man! We want Duke, Satchmo and hot dames. Yes brother, anything American. You can cut out this junk about kraals and folk tales and Basutos in blankets - forget it. You just trying to keep us backward."

In the early 1950s, Sophiatown in Johannesburg and District Six in Cape Town had become black cultural hubs where the urban pulse of jazz became the hip sound of resistance. Following Sharpeville, the silencing began with the strict and often farcical censorship of jazz on the radio by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Even more restrictive to jazz musicians was the strict enforcement of The Group Areas Act that banned mixed performances without special permission. Against a background of restriction, separation and intimidation, many artists fled the country.

After recording the seminal South African bop LP *Jazz Epistle - Verse 1* with the group The Jazz Epistles (alongside trumpeter Hugh Masekela, trombonist Jonas Gwangwa, and saxophonist Kippie

Moeketsi) pianist Dollar Brand moved to Zurich in 1962, before settling in New York. After converting to Islam and changing his name to Abdullah Ibrahim, his collaborations with avant-garde musicians and exposure to the black power movement saw him draw more deeply on his African roots.

Dollar Brand's Jazz Epistles comrade Hugh Masekela also moved to New York, enrolling at Manhattan School of Music after studying at London's Guildhall in the early sixties. There he became a figurehead of the struggle and an advocate of the ANC. The South African artists in exile, including members of Cape Town's multi-racial free jazz group Blue Notes, would play a major role in promoting South African jazz overseas, while spreading the anti-apartheid message. But some of the most important music during this turbulent period came from the musicians that stayed behind, creating jazz of great power and beauty that spoke loudly to the townships.

A central part of the South African jazz story under apartheid was the Gallo label. An astute businessman, Eric Gallo who passed away in 1998 at the age of 94, became a key figure in the marketing and distribution of South African jazz. The Gallo label had been responsible for the most successful African Jazz of the late fifties and early sixties releasing *The Jazz Epistles - Verse 1* album and the jazz opera *King Kong*. For smaller labels struggling against the restrictions of apartheid as the 1970s dawned, the distribution arm of Gallo became crucial to their music reaching a wider audience.

One such label was As-Shams (Arabic for The Sun, the label's alternative name). Set up by jazz loving entrepreneur Rashid Vally in 1973, this small independent label released a wide variety of cutting edge jazz from across South Africa over the coming decades - from spiritual jazz and hard bop to jazz-fusion

Its status as a small independent label meant it could release music that largely evaded the censors. "I think the scale of these records was too small for them to worry about too much," says Calum MacNaughton of Cape Town's Sharp-Flat label, who works with Vally as the archive manager and administrator of the As-Shams catalogue today. "These records weren't in the mainstream at all and the censorship typically took place at the level of the broadcaster. Then records were looked at very closely to decide what could and couldn't be played. But they didn't mind so much if these kinds of politically subversive records slipped through in small numbers to a small record buying community." This resulted in a deep back catalogue of socially conscious jazz that serves as an essential document of one of the key cultural arms of the struggle.

Despite the clampdowns, venues like The Pelican in Johannesburg and Club Galaxy in Cape Town had become vital hubs where covert politics mixed with jazz during the sixties. Another space where jazz musicians gathered to exchange ideas and phone numbers was Rashid Vally's Kohinoor World of Music, where the roots of As-Shams began. In the basement of a furniture store on Kort Street, the Kohinoor record shop that became such an important meeting point for South African jazz had humble roots. "Kohinoor had begun as a predominantly general store with a little corner my dad allocated for me to ply my album trade," explains Vally.

With Vally attracting serious record collectors alongside the many musicians who hung out there, the Kohinoor store became an incubator for talent. In 1970, Vally responded by forming the record label he had always dreamt of. Debuting with the killer Cape Jazz LP *Early Mart* by drummer Gideon "Mgibe" Nxumalo's big band (reissued by As-Shams in 2020), Souttown's early releases were mainly funk and soul 7"s by bands such as Elations and Dynamics.

On his return to South Africa Abdullah Ibrahim heard of Rashid's early success with the label and visited the store. "One day Abdullah says: 'I hear you doing great work in the recording trade my Uncle Pops tells me,' Vally remembers. "Why don't you record me'. My jaw dropped at what this giant was saying to me. So I stuttered: 'I can't afford you'. You see Atlantic Records had just released *Midnight Walk* led by Elvin Jones featuring Hank Mobley and Dollar Brand; and this man wants me to record him. Sensing my discomfort he gave his infectious laugh and I was immediately relaxed."

The pair quickly developed a close bond and began discussing potential releases by Ibrahim on Souttown. "I mentioned how I enjoyed his composition 'Tintinyana' on *Midnight Walk*, and Abdullah replied that he will do me a better version," Vally says. "Abdullah contacted drummer Nelson Maqwaza and bassist Victor Ntoni and that was the birth of *Peace* by Dollar Brand +2 the main track being 'Tintinyana'. This was the first album Abdullah recorded for me."

Another two Dollar Brand LPs followed on Souttown, *Dollar Brand + 2* and *Underground in Africa*, but the label needed a new name that suited the times. The original name Vally came up with was Mandla, a variation of the word Amandla meaning power, which had become a rallying cry during apartheid. The Mandla label's logo of African tribal weapons chimed with both the title of the label and its first release *Underground in Africa* (released in tandem with Souttown) which according to discographer Lars Rasmussen referred to the armed underground struggle. "Rashid told me how the term Mandla and Underground were part of this theme (in apartheid South Africa) of hidden political messages," adds Calum MacNaughton.

Perhaps conscious that the overt political message in the label title would draw unwanted attention from the authorities Vally listened to Ibrahim who had a new name for the label in mind. Echoing both their shared faith and positive spirit under the dark cloud of apartheid, As-Shams, Arabic for The Sun was the name proposed by his friend. The label debuted with an album from the pianist that would resonate across the world.

In the mid-1960s, the clearances of the culturally vibrant District Six in Cape Town as part of the Group Areas Act saw thousands of people torn away from their multicultural roots, and dumped into townships, split up along racial lines. Manenberg was the name of a township in the Cape Flats where low income Coloured (a racial classification during apartheid) families were relocated and the LP *Mannenberg - 'Is Where It's Happening'* was a tribute to the struggle of those people.

Rashid Vally picks up the story. "Roundabout the second half of 1974 I was in Cape Town to record Abdullah Ibrahim. I think it was on the third day of recording during a short break that Abdullah's attention was diverted to an upright piano that had drawing pins attached to the hammerheads. This piano was used to record commercial jingles; hence the almost harpsichord sound. He started playing around and called the horn players to join in and the first strains of *Mannenberg* began to emerge. Almost infectiously, the mood became joyous."

Produced by Rashid Vally, the two track LP (with "The Pilgrim" on the flip-side) was recorded in a studio on Bloem Street with some of the heaviest players on the South African scene (Robbie Jansen, alto saxophone/flute, Paul Michaels on bass, Monty Weber on drums, and Basil Coetzee on tenor saxophone/flute). "We recorded for five or six days, enough for five albums," says Vally. "That was a great band. We also had Morris Goldberg on the session, as he was standing in the wings as a spectator and wanted to jam too. His is the last solo on *Mannenberg*. Not being a member of the group he was not credited in the sleeve notes sadly."

Fresh from the studio sessions, Vally played an acetate of *Mannenberg* from speakers outside Kohinoor. When people rushed into the shop demanding to know what it was he went away and pressed 5,000 copies. Such was the demand in the townships that Vally made a deal with Gallo Records and with their distribution sold over 40,000 copies in South Africa alone. Featuring a soaring saxophone



The newly renamed Harari (formerly The Beaters) performing live in Soweto in 1976. Siphso Mabuse (drums), Selby Ntuli (keyboards), Alec Khaoli (bass). Photos from As-Shams Archive.

solo from Basil Coetzee, *Mannenber* was a joyous piece of Cape jazz with an empowering message. It would take on more significance in the next decade when it became a rallying anthem for the anti apartheid movement as Rashid explains: "Yes, the youth in the township used to put words to the tune and it soon became a struggle song. Basil Coetzee and Robbie Jansen played it at almost all the UDF rallies around the country."

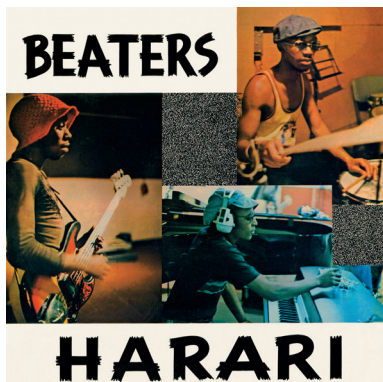
The LP that created firm foundations for Vally's new label was the first of a series of powerful albums from Dollar Brand on *As-Shams* in the mid 1970s that resonated with township youth, thanks to their themes of black empowerment and defiance. The LPs *African Herbs*, *Black Lightning*, and *Blues For A Hip King* were recorded alongside Robbie Jansen, Basil Coetzee and other South African jazz heavyweights. These included Sprints Rejoice bassist Siphon Gumede and tenor saxophonist Duku Makasi, a regular sideman for Brand who appeared on a string of *As-Shams* releases.

Over the next two decades, the small indie, with its distinctive logo designed by Rashid's brother-in-law, released a raft of heavyweight LPs from the many corners of South African jazz, most recorded at the famous Gallo Studios in Johannesburg. Released with striking design that chimed with the times, including the beautiful cover art of Hargreaves Ntukwana and Winston Saoli, the albums serve as a testament to the bravery and resolve of the players who stayed in South Africa. "It was very hard to make a career out of jazz during the apartheid era because your audience were curtailed by the Group Areas Act," says Calum MacNaughton. "There weren't many spaces where jazz performers could try to tap into a middle class white jazz audience. So to make a living was very hard and these guys had to really hustle during that era."

Developing from a blog by Matt Temple, Matsuli Records has played a large part in spreading the music of *As-Shams* and that of other South African jazz recorded under apartheid. The label's association with *As-Shams* began with the release of drummer Dick Khoza's mighty Afro-Jazz album of 1976, *Chapita*, and has included a string of releases that showed the depth and diversity of *As-Shams* during its golden years.

Spurred on by the success of the Matsuli releases, in recent years Rashid Vally has revived *As-Shams* with great help from Calum MacNaughton. As well as licensing archive albums to labels such as Toronto's *We Are Busy Bodies*, Vally and MacNaughton have been reaching deep into the archive to find unreleased music. Then in 2020, on the 50th anniversary of the label, they turned their attention to some of the new artists who are part of an exciting South African jazz renaissance. "These artists are speaking to the legacy and yet carving a very new sound of their own," says MacNaughton.

With the first compilation of *As-Shams*' music due for release early next year and a new series of re-issues we focus on some of the highlights from across the label's history.



## The Beaters

### *Harari*

1975 / Reissued by Matsuli Music, 2021

The first As-Shams release after Dollar Brand's *Mannenberg* "Is Where It's Happening" signalled their intent to be a label of the times. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, youths in the townships found their modern Pan-African identity through the music, style, and politics of black America. The Soweto Soul movement was headed by groups like The Beaters whose drummer Sipho Mabuse told Gwen Ansell. "Soweto soul music came from the American soul[...] because we could not relate to mbaqanga."

In 1974 the group set off for what would be a transformative three month tour of Zimbabwe (then known as Rhodesia). "We rediscovered our African-ness, the infectious rhythms and music of the continent. We came back home inspired! We were overhauling ourselves into dashikiclad musicians who were Black Power saluting," Mabuse recalled.

Recorded for As-Shams in 1975, *Harari* was the group's fourth in the original line up of Mabuse with singer Selby Ntuli, bassist Alec Khaoli, and lead guitarist Monty Ndimande. The title track is a brooding piece of Afro-Jazz funk that sets the tone for an album that was every bit as hip as the clothes the band wore.

Through this LP, first released on cassette before going double gold on vinyl, the group were renamed Harari by their fans in the townships who heard their Pan African message loud and clear. A year later they recorded the much sought after Afro rock album *Rufaro Happiness*, their final LP for As-Shams, before moving to the Gallo label.



## Pat Matshikiza & Kippie Moeketsi

### *Tshona!*

1975 / Reissued by We Are Busy Bodies, 2022

After recording with The Beaters on *Harari*, Sipho Mabuse and Alec Khaoli were invited to appear on this heavyweight LP for pianist Pat Matshikiza and alto saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi. Original member of Jazz Epistles in the late 1950s, Moeketsi, unlike fellow bandmates, had stayed at home to become a legend of South African jazz. First working with Rashid Vally on the *Dollar Brand + 3* album for Soultown in 1973, he would be a pivotal figure in the early days of As-Shams.

With Eastern Cape pianist Pat Matshikiza, he was reviving a creative partnership that began in the mid-1960s with the group The Jazz Dazzlers. Supported by the serious rhythm section of Mabuse and Khaoli with special guest Basil Coetzee, *Tshona!* was a milestone of mid-1970s South African jazz.

A Moeketsi composition built around an infectious Cape Jazz piano line by Pat Matshikiza and soaring saxophone soloing by Moeketsi and Coetzee, the title track became the label's most famous number after Abdullah Ibrahim's "Mannenberg". Moeketsi and Matshikiza continued to record together for As-Shams, with Moeketsi featured on Pat Matshikiza's *Sikiza Matshikiza* album in 1976.



## Pat Matshikiza

### *Sikiza Matshikiza*

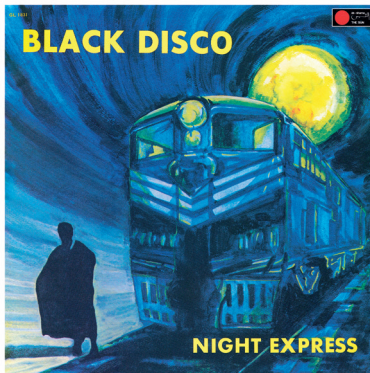
1976 / Reissued by We Are Busy Bodies, 2022

Growing up in Queenstown in the Eastern Cape, Patrick Vuyo Matshikiza first heard jazz through his uncle. A jazz columnist for Drum magazine, Todd Matshikiza had composed the music for *King Kong*, the all black musical that, alongside The Jazz Epistles LP, did much to promote South African jazz to the outside world when it played in London's West End.

He moved to Johannesburg in 1962 and joined the black jazz community of Dorkay House, headquarters of Union Artists. It's where he met Kippie Moeketsi and the other members of saxophonist Mackay Davashe's big band The Jazz Dazzlers before sessions with the likes of the Early Mabuza Quartet led by the esteemed jazz drummer and member of The Blue Notes.

Recorded shortly after *Tshona!*, this 1976 session continues where that collaborative LP with Kippie Moeketsi left off. Those unmistakable Cape Jazz licks are augmented by some killer jazz guitar by Sandile

Shange who appeared on the cover in the studio alongside Matshikiza and Moeketsi. The other players included Duke Makasi on tenor sax, Siphon Gumedde on bass, and Gilbert Mathews on drums. This trio went on to play on the cultish Spirits Rejoice LP *African Spaces* from 1977, re-issued by Matsuli in 2021. A player of great lyricism and poise, Matshikiza also appeared on Kippie Moeketsi's *Blue Stompin'* album released on As-Shams in 1977.



**Black Disco**  
*Night Express*

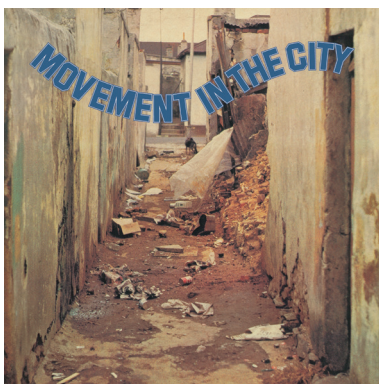
1976 / Reissued by Matsuli Music, 2016

Sandwiched between Pat Matshikiza & Kippie Moeketsi's *Tshona!* and Dollar Brand's *African Herbs* LP, Black Disco's *Night Express* was the brainchild of one Ismail "Pops" Mohamed.

Raised in the East Rand to a Muslim father and mother of Xhosa and Khoisan heritage, Pops Mohamed drew deeply from his mixed heritage and the shared musical language the apartheid regime did its best to stop. Another student of Dorkay House, he earned his spurs on the Soweto Soul scene of the early 1970s, in a group called The Dynamics. For his debut for As-Shams, he called the bassist Siphon Gumedde, an old friend from Dorkay House, and a new one he had been introduced to by Rashid Vally at his Kohinoor record store, saxophonist Basil Coetzee.

While the strident and soulful sax of Coetzee coupled with the rhythm section of Siphon Gumedde and drummer Peter Morake make this one of As-Shams most funky releases, it's that Yamaha organ of Pops Mohamed that first gets under your skin. It features heavily on the opener "Yasmeen's Blues" and "Super Natural Love" with their Timmy Thomas style organ riffs and drum machine patterns.

Recorded at Gallo Studios in 1976, the album's standout was the Basil Coetzee composed "Night Express". This soaring 11 minute slab of spiritual modal jazz funk carried a revolutionary message that somehow evaded the censors. Both mournful and menacing, the track echoes the urgency of the times in the year that townships exploded in Soweto and across the country. The LP was originally titled *Black Discovery* and the rather random and paranoid SABC made them change the title. One listen to the scorching radical jazz and a glimpse at the LP sleeve, though, and the townships would have been in no doubt about where the train was heading.



**Movement In The City**  
*Black Teardrops*

1981 / Reissued by Sharp-Flat Records, 2020

What Pops Mohamed describes as his "experiments in jazz" resulted in three LPs for As-Shams as Black Disco before he turned his attention to a more radical project. "In 1979, when the political situation got worse, I decided to go underground and fight the system in my own way," Pops Mohamed told me for the sleeve notes for the 2002 compilation *Afrika Underground: Jazz Funk & Fusion Under Apartheid* on the Counterpoint label.

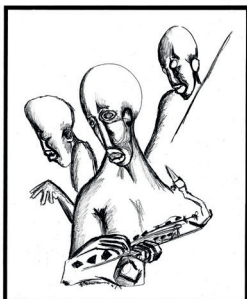
"One of the things I did was to form a concept and that was Movement In The City, which meant 'let's fight the regime'." During the 1960s, it was usual for messages to be hidden in both the music and song titles. Censorship tightened further during the seventies and between 1976 and 1986, 60% of recordings were banned. "We were not allowed to perform before a white audience using that name," Pops explained. "One had to get written permission from a police station closest to the white club to perform."

Movement In The City's eponymous debut album was released on As-Shams in 1979, quickly followed by one of the deepest and most poignant albums recorded for As-Shams. Featuring Pops on Rhodes and acoustic piano, Basil Coetzee on flute, Robbie Jansen on alto sax and flute, Siphon Gumedde on bass, and Roger Harry on drums, *Black Teardrops* was dedicated to those killed in the Soweto Uprising of 1976. "We had problems with the censor board over that name," Pops remembers. As well as the title of the LP, the Board would surely have heard the message in the haunting "Lament" written by Pops as a healing song for his people. Elsewhere, on the killer "Camel Walk" the group created brooding and funky modal jazz that featured on Gilles

Peterson's The 20 South Africa Jazz on Worldwide FM from 2021.

In 1983, the United Democratic Front was established to co-ordinate the struggle against apartheid and to promote the work of the ANC. Jazz artists both home and abroad played a major role in raising both political awareness and funds for the UDF. Movement in The City joined in the fight by performing at UDF concerts and rallies.

## DID YOU TELL YOUR MOTHER



**Tete Mbambisa**

*Did You Tell Your Mother*

1979 / Reissued in 2019

The Eastern Cape pianist Tete Mbambisa came to prominence alongside Dudu Pukwana in the Jazz Giants before forming his own band with the help of Chris McGregor whose Blue Notes Mbambisa would later join. One of the leading pianists of Cape Jazz, alongside Abdullah Ibrahim, Tete appeared with many South African jazz heavyweights in the late 1960s, including saxophonists Winston Mankunku and regular As-Shams sideman Duke Makasi in The Soul Jazz Men.

In the midst of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, Mbambisa took an Octet into a studio to record the LP *Tete's Big Sound*. It included his dedication to his nation's "Black Heroes", Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo.

By the late 1970s, Mbambisa felt South Africa's acoustic jazz tradition was in decline as many musicians turned to more electronic sounds. Released in 1979, *Did You Tell My Mother* was the pinnacle of Mbambisa's mission to preserve that tradition. A landmark in South African spiritual jazz, the session featured Mbambisa at the peak of his powers with a serious quartet of Basil Coetzee on tenor sax, Zulu Bidi on bass and Monty Weber on drums.

The album's front cover was a painting by Hargreaves Ntukwana, whose wonderful art featured on other As-Shams releases and adorns the walls of the Kohinoor record store.



**Dick Khoza**

*Chapita*

1976 / Reissued by Matsuli Music, 2010 / The Tooth Factory Music, 2021

Born in Malawi and raised in Durban, drummer Dick Khoza got started in the 1950s in an East London jazz group that would become the Four Yanks with Tete Mbambisa, Dudu Pukwana, and Johnny Dyani.

Moving to Johannesburg he was a regular both at the famous jazz institution Dorkay House and The Pelican, becoming a talent scout and Stage Manager. During this time he joined As-Shams as a session player on albums like Tete Mbambisa's *Tete's Big Sound*.

Two months after the Soweto Uprising, Khoza took a band of musicians from the Pelican house band (including members of the Jazz Pedlars) into the studio to record the almighty Afrocentric jazz album *Chapita*.

The title track that had often closed sessions at The Pelican was a storming slab of Afro funk with a vocal as raw and rough as Prince Far I. It tells the story of a meeting between two migrants in the city and would have been close to the heart of the Malawi born Khoza.

Other killer tracks included "Zumbwa (Baby Tiger)", a storming piece of South African jazz funk, and "African Jive", a stone cold funk jam to tear up any dance floor.

Thanks to Matsuli this album reached beyond the ears of the collectors and DJs, for whom "Chapita" had been a secret weapon for years.



**Sathima Bea Benjamin**

*African Songbird*

1976 / Reissued by Matsuli Music, 2013 & 2016

When Sathima Bea Benjamin sadly passed away in August 2013, the world lost not only one of South Africa's greatest jazz artists, but one of the great female voices in jazz.

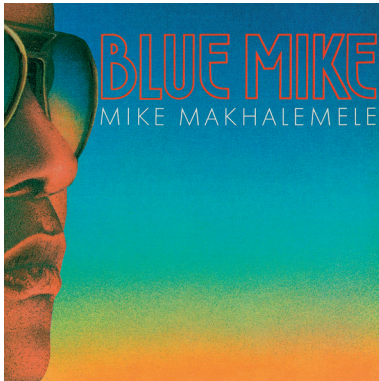
Recorded in 1976 with her husband Dollar Brand and a band that included three bass players and two drummers, *African Songbird* was Sathima Bea Benjamin's spiritual jazz masterpiece. "I've gone



much too long, and I'm glad to say that I'm home to stay," Sathima sings on "Africa", a hauntingly beautiful dedication to her people.

This monumental piece of spiritual jazz is almost matched by "Music", all sparse percussion augmented by the stripped back beauty of Sathima's pure voice. The clarity and directness of that voice reaches a pinnacle on the closing "African Songbird", a spine tingling acapella.

The spiritual jazz of Sathima Bea Benjamin reached a new audience in the months leading up to her death, thanks to a re-issue of this incredible LP on Matsuli.



**Mike Makhalemele**

*Blue Mike*

1982

From the township of Alexandra, North-East Johannesburg, Mike Makhalemele was inspired to pick up his horn in the 1950s by his neighbour, the great saxophonist Zacks Nkosi. A member of the soul jazz group Drive founded by saxophonist Henry Sithole and guitarist Adolphus "Bunny" Luthuli, "Bra Mike" became a stalwart of The Pelican throughout the 1970s, remembered by owner Lucky Michael as one of the most important musicians in helping rally other players to meet at the club's jam sessions.

In 1975, he started to record under his own name, releasing his debut solo LP *Peacemaker* for the Jo-Burg label, re-issued by As-Shams in 1981. After more albums for Jo-Burg, Gallo and RPM, he recorded his first original album for As-Shams in 1982 with Pops Mohamed, Basil Coetzee and Robbie Jansen. Dedicated to Henry Sithole the standout track "I Remember You" is a glorious Latin flavoured jazz dance number with a nod to the fusion scene in South Africa, particularly in Cape Town with bands like Pacific Express. The polished sound of tracks like "Spring is Here" is testament to the refinement of the South African jazz scene during the darkest days of apartheid. This would be the last release in the golden age of As-Shams that began back in 1974 with *Mannenber*g.



**Barney Rachabane**

*Tegeni/ Mafuta*

Recorded 1978, released 2022

As Calum MacNaughton started to reach deeper into the As-Shams/ The Sun archive he began to discover music that was unreleased at the time, but serves as part of a missing piece of the label's jigsaw. The first of these revealing discoveries was a recording by alto saxophonist Barney Rachabane.

Anyone familiar with the As-Shams back catalogue might have seen his name on some of the label's biggest releases, including Dollar Brand/Abdullah Ibrahim's *African Herbs*, Tete Mbambisa *Tete's Big Sound* and Kippie Moeketsi's *Blue Stompin'*.

It was with the latter giant of South African jazz and the Spirits Rejoice lineup of bassist Sipho Gumede, drummer Gilbert Matthews and tenor saxophonist Duku Makasi that Rachabane recorded the two tracks here. Recorded in 1978, the Rachabane compositions "Tegeni" and "Mafuta" are right up there with the best of the joyous and unmistakably South African, Marabi influenced jazz.

This EP, with a beautiful black and white cover photo of Barney blowing with all his might, was released with the blessing of Rachabane's family after his passing in 2021. MacNaughton is still not sure if there are more Rachabane tapes to be discovered. Such is the depth of the As-Shams archive.

**Sisonke Xonti**

*uGaba the Migration*

2020



Over the last few years South Africa's jazz scene has once again been sending ripples across the world, from pianist Nduduzo Makhathini's spiritual jazz LP *The Spirit Of Ntu* that launched Blue Note Africa in April 2022 to Shabaka Hutchings Impulse! recordings with The Ancestors. One of the artists who is treading in the footsteps of giants while walking his own path is saxophonist and composer Sisonke Xonti.

Winner of South Africa's Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Jazz after moving to Johannesburg in 2013 where he hooked up with players like Nduduzo Makhathini, Xonti's LP *uGaba the Migration* became the first LP by a new artist on the relaunched As-Shams in 2020.

Produced by Xonti and featuring a stellar band of young players drawn from the Johannesburg scene, the album's centrepiece is "Migration Suite", a companion piece to Gideon Nxumalo's *Early-Mart*. Over 30 minutes this four-part spiritual jazz epic, in the words of the label, "explores rural and urban identity and the perilous spiritual journey from homeland to the global village". It does so with a soaring intensity and lyrical beauty that make this a powerful yet sublime return for As-Shams as it celebrates its 50th anniversary.

### BirdSong Ensemble

#### *Imvuselelo*

2020



Best known as a member of Shabaka Hutchings & The Ancestors, composer and trumpeter Mandla Mlangeni is a formidable player and scene straddling bandleader whose projects include *Amandla Freedom Ensemble* and *Tune Recreation Committee*. This latest ensemble of Swiss players came together following Mlangeni's 2017 Afro Jazz LP under the name *Bird Song Project*.

His debut for the relaunched As-Shams should see his name mentioned alongside better known members of The Ancestors pianist Nduduzo Makhathini and drummer Tumi Mogorosi, whose *Group Theory* album on South African label Mushroom Half Hour is one of the standout releases of the latter part of 2022.

With nods to greats like Ornette Coleman and home grown free jazz titans The Blue Notes on numbers like "AmaChokolette" and killer modal pieces such as "Homelessness", Mlangeni and his Swiss band create an immense, but at times mournful sound that reaches its peak on the title track "Imvuselelo".

Like with many of the classic old As-Shams releases, the LP came with a sleeve featuring evocative art courtesy of South African designer Baba Tjeko.

[as-shams.bandcamp.com](http://as-shams.bandcamp.com)

[as-shams-org.blogspot.com](http://as-shams-org.blogspot.com)

[matsulimusic.bandcamp.com](http://matsulimusic.bandcamp.com)

*Album covers courtesy As-Shams/The Sun.*

*Photos courtesy of As-Shams Archive (Used with Permission).*

AS-SHAMS ARCHIVE VOL. 1  
SOUTH AFRICAN JAZZ, FUNK & SOUL 1975-1982



As-Shams Archive Vol. 1 - South African Jazz 1975-1982 to be released early in 2023.



Keyboardist Pops Mohamed (bandleader and composer for the groups Black Disco and Movement in the City).