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Jazz

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THERE's often an enthralling moment in jazz improvisation when a new soloist picks up as subject matter not the melody but a phrase from the previous solo. That variation is itself stretched, explored and danced on — and the solo ends by bringing it all back home to the original chords.



There's a moment like that on Tutu Puoane's new album, Quiet Now (Jassics). On Mark Fransman's song, Hlompha Bophelo, the singer bases her improvisation on a solo recorded by saxophonist Buddy Wells with Tribe in 2003. Across continents (Puoane is based in Brussels; Wells in Cape Town) and across years, the community of South African jazz shares and grows.

That solo demonstrates why Puoane must be described as one of our few genuine jazz singers.

This column has been criticised in the past for arguing that some much-hyped performers do not qualify for either the label or the accompanying South African Music Awards (SAMAs) as jazz artists. The criticism misunderstands the argument. It does not imply that these artists cannot sing or play. Even less does it imply that their chosen idiom is inferior to jazz. All genres are equal — but equally, each genre has its own language and process. To be correctly identified with it, you have to speak the language and participate in the process. And Puoane speaks jazz magnificently.

But Quiet Now is also evidence of something else: that jazz is at root an African art form. Jazz performance is a communal effort whose rhythmic structure owe as much to the silent footfalls of unseen dancers as to the explicit beats of many drums. Soloists step out of the ring to express themselves. Meanwhile, the rest of the band holds the structure, intervening, picking up ideas, making sure the soloist feels both supported and free.

Those processes are as old as the traditional African modes of expression they grew from — and which we today divide with terms such as "song", "dance", "rhythm", and "solo". So while the label of jazz is too often used as a marketing device to imply Amerocentric superiority, the process of jazz always asserts Africa.

Puoane has used fewer standards for this second outing than for her first CD, Song. Most of the tracks are co-written with members of her current group, pianist Ewout Pierroux, bassist Nicholas Thys and drummer Lieven Venken.

Puoane employs traditional extended vocalisation technique as part of her improvising repertoire, moving seamlessly between earthy growls, ululation, speech and more internationally shaded scatting.

It's hard, beyond the spine-chilling creativity of Hlopha Bophelo, to select standout tracks. On different tracks, we hear Puoane's intense swing sensibility; her almost Ray Charles-ish gift for blending gospel feel and jazz imagination; her soft, carefully thought way through a ballad and her joyous ascent of faster tempos.

While Puoane's Belgian base and European sidemen may bar her from SAMA nominations, it will take a quite remarkable release between now and year-end to displace this as unquestionably the South African jazz album of the year.

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