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A feeling for swing

Kwanele Sosibo speaks to South African songstress Tutu Puoane about her penchant for "old people's music"

Last year, the Cape Town International Jazz Festival's de facto homecoming queen was Mpho Skeef, daughter of Spho "Hotstix" Mabuse and starlet of London's future-soul/nu-jazz scene. This year's prodigal daughter, Tutu Puoane, stands at the other end of the musical spectrum.

Based in Europe since 2002, Puoane was born in Atteridgeville in 1979 and raised in Mamelodi, near Pretoria -- a township that is to jazz pretty much what Zola is to kwaito. Growing up in a musical family, which included a grandfather who played classical piano, the sounds of John Coltrane and Cannonball Adderley were commonplace on the family's record player, cementing Puoane's fascination with "old people's music" (as she called jazz) from a young age.

By the time she finished school, a career in music was a no-brainer. "I come from a family where you do what you want to do, but whatever you do you go to school for it," she says. After a year at the Fuba Academy, Puoane enrolled for a performance diploma at UCT's school of music, where she was put through rigorous vocal training by Jelena Revishin.

"One of the first things she said to me was, 'If you're starting out sounding like Whitney Houston, that's the first thing you're going to have to get rid of,'" Puoane says, remembering the beginnings of her light-footed alto.

Today Puoane lists her chief influences as Sarah Vaughn (because "she could swing like



Tutu Puoane

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crazy"), Billie Holiday (for the emotion she could squeeze from a phrase) and Joni Mitchell (for the poetry in her lyrics).

During our phone conversation -- which takes place while Puoane directs a driver through traffic from Cape Town's airport, where she had just fetched a band member -- she reiterates her predilection for big-band swing.

After a musician friend she met at UCT offered to put her up at The Hague in The Netherlands for a year while she completed her studies, she found herself rehearsing with the Frits Bayens Big Band (FBBB), led by Frits Bayens, an experienced conductor and a producer for the Holland-based Metropole Jazz Orchestra.

"I had met him in Cape Town in 1999," she says, "When I moved to Holland he invited me to sing with his band, which was an honour for me. In the times of Ella [Fitzgerald] and Sarah [Vaughn], playing in a big band was a growing thing for an artist, but now that big-band tradition has died. Musically, it was old-style swing music, which I love. Young singers my age don't get that opportunity."

Since FBBB is an amateur project, she credits the often unfavourable stage conditions they weathered as a sort of vocal boot camp. "I've done a few gigs with them where I have had no monitor and my microphone was not good and with a big band you have to sing over the instruments. So it was really a vocal training camp."

Last year, Puoane appeared on the first five tracks of the FBBB album *Sail Away*, which features a lush, languid rearrangement of the South African standard *Lakutshon'ilanga*.

Although she has returned to South Africa intermittently (the last time was to perform in a rendition of Todd Matshikiza's *King Kong*), she has been based in Antwerp, Belgium, since 2004 -- the same year she won the Standard Bank Young Artist Award for jazz. "It's a much smaller scene," she says of her adopted home. "There are not so many jazz singers there so there is a lot of regular work. It has also been easier to make friends in Belgium than in Holland, but I moved there particularly for the work."

When I ask her how a small scene affects her creatively, Puoane reminds me that the festival circuit is quite busy in Europe and she often finds herself rubbing shoulders with masters of the art form. Her debut album, *Song*, recorded with her band the Tutu Puoane Quartet, features arrangements that owe a debt to

Puoane's big-band tenure and showcase her trademark playful intonation and light but confident touch.

She is looking at this weekend's Cape Town bash as a sort of local album launch when she will do selections from *Song* -- with Ewout Pierreux on piano, Clemens van der Feen on bass and Jasper van Hulten on drums.

If you think that the proximity of forward-looking cities such as Amsterdam might sway her from her old-fashioned outlook, she assures me that this will not be the case any time soon. " If I get a chance to do something that feels good and grooves nicely, I might try my hand at it. But right now I just want to keep doing what I do, which is swing the hell out of a tune."

Cape Town International Jazz Festival

It was somehow fitting that an artist who has come to symbolise mass appeal closed off last year's Cape Town International Jazz Festival.

Hip-Hop Pantsula's performance at the Bassline stage was cancelled because the venue was too small for the crowd that turned up. The show was rescheduled for the outdoor Basil "Mannenberg" Coetzee stage and, for the duration of the performance, Jabba showed just why he is the heavyweight crossover champ. Whatever you make of his kwaito, hip-hop and, dare I say, jazz mishmash what is clear is that his charismatic performance last March had an impact on the festival programmers.

Organiser Rashid Lombard agrees. He says that for this year's festival (at the Cape Town Convention Centre on March 28 and 29), the youth-oriented Bassline stage has been moved outside to a bigger venue, as the festival is "fast becoming popular with a younger audience".

This year, popular hip-hop act Skwatta Kamp and kwaito star Zola have been booked for closing sets at the Bassline for Friday and Saturday night respectively.

The Moses Molelekwa stage, which previously seated 600, has been moved to the Bassline stage, doubling its capacity. This, for Lombard, is proof that the festival has not betrayed its purist crowd.

Lombard would not be drawn into discussion on whether this year's lineup is weaker than last year's, but the prominent billing of the Manhattans and the Bassline stage headliners, who are past their prime, raises a few eyebrows. "We try to take cues from our audience and we are happy with the mix that

we have," he says, adding that requests for Sergio Mendez and The Manhattans have been overwhelming.

The festival is already three-quarters booked up and parking, security and catering services have been beefed up for the swelling numbers.

For more information visit
www.capetownjazzfest.com

