

Festival sounds



Review of
the week
Struan Douglas

When Nelson Mandela opened the National Arts Festival's anniversary celebrations with his compassionate shuffle on June 29, African jazz started going mad all over town. Ebbing, flowing, dipping, peaking, threatening boredom, crying unprogressive yet ensuring its longevity.

We've had the retrospective perennials. July 1 was devoted to old timers — the marabi sound of the African Jazz Pioneers and the blue mbaqanga of Dolly Rathebe and the Elite Swingsters. Theirs is a beautifully intuitive sound that brings back all the enthusiasm, passion and love in a timeless expression of a painful yet vibrant past. Trumpeter Brian Thusi blasted out a salute to these acts in a mesmerising tribute to their brilliant contribution to South African music.

Later that night the University of Cape Town's College Big Band played at the specially laid-on Jazz Hotel, presenting an inventive set to a crowded audience, mixing swing classics with contemporary big band and funk. The second set featured a special guest appearance by Winston Mankunku, soloing to arrangements of his award-winning *Molo Africa* compositions. It was an intense hour of incredible performance. Mankunku mixed profound melody with wild and free blowing, swift syncopation and raging expression. It'll surely register as a great modern jazz performance from one of the great South African jazzmen.

Saturday July 3 saw an item dedicated to youth and school bands from across the country. Their youthful and ebullient spirit created

a sound so raw, so fresh it shifted jazz appreciation from the conventional to unbounded spontaneous applause after each solo, riff, melody or brass blast.

A week of intense tuition under the guidance of jazz experts led to the sharing of ideas, and the passion that these students had experienced resonated throughout the crowd. The energy was electric, so exciting that the band only stopped when the lights came on. Outside the audience for the next show was becoming restless.

Next up were No No Diet Bang from Zurich in Switzerland. Mixing in their profoundly avant-garde and European influence with their rugged funky edge, they created a spacious, free and wild groove for other musicians to jam around. Camillo Lombard on the piano produced a solo of infinite mirth, and local hero Robbie Jansen rediscovered his furious edge and enthusiasm for improvisation. Ready D on the turntables brought a whole new innovation into the jazz idiom. Real music met the synthetic sounds of scratching, scribbling, looping and sampling.

Meanwhile, on the main festival reedman Steve Dyers headed up an exciting new project simply called New Directions in South African Music. It was billed as a combination of different stylistic elements with musicians drawing on their collective African, Western and Eastern origins. This lofty mission was left to pianist Paul Hanmer, guitarist Menyatsa Mathole, bass player Marc Duby and trumpeter George Mari. Each player expressed personal and African influences in something very experimental, blending a diversity of sounds. Ultimately New Directions voices South Africa's unique accent, reminding us of the talent and ability just waiting to be aired.

The Sheer Sound label has been influential in recording the voice of South African jazz. On July 2 they launched their latest project, the Afro-Jazz All Stars, bringing some of their

leading players together — Paul Hanmer, M Coy Mrubata, Sipho Gumede, Errol Dyers and Franc Paco. The group are fresh, feeling the way with each other and preparing for the journey to the North Sea Jazz Festival.

A regular event at the festival is the Guitar Summit that also took off at the Jazz Hotel on July 2. This concert, however, failed to reach any great heights. The combination of three virtuoso guitar players — Jimmy Dlodlu, Errol Dyers and Johnny Fourie — was ineffectual and dull, throwing out standards in a predictable fashion. What was apparent was a lack of time for rehearsing, sharing ideas and exploring possibilities.

It would be a far better exercise to invite these players to perform alone, each being a master in his own right. Such commercial orientated formulas are becoming an increasing part of the festival. We've had the Beatles Broadway and Frank Sinatra all reworked.

The playing and arrangements at the Guitar Summit were indeed skillful, deft and often inventive. But the point of it all is a little bewildering, bearing in mind the youthful exuberance and talent sitting at home, just waiting for the opportunity to be heard.

If you're not sitting at home and are on in Grahamstown, you can still look forward to two more days of good homespun jazz, as well as two special events — the Jazz Party on the night of July 9, and the Jazz Closer at 9pm on July 10.

The 10th Standard Bank Jazz Festival has been well attended — something positive for the local and somewhat neglected music industry. One hopes, however, that the contrast between the successes of the innovative collaborations and the failings of the commercially orientated concept and cover collaborations will be noted. Let's hope for a dramatic mix-up of the perennial acts, a progressive outlook and further showcasing of youthful talent.

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