

## **PROFILE**

For more than thirty years, Ladysmith Black Mambazo have married the intricate rhythms and harmonies of their native South African musical traditions to the sounds and sentiments of Christian gospel music. The result is a musical and spiritual alchemy that has touched a worldwide audience representing every corner of the religious, cultural and ethnic landscape. Their musical efforts over the past three decades have garnered praise and accolades within the recording industry, but also solidified their identity as a cultural force to be reckoned with.

Assembled in the early 1960s in South Africa by Joseph Shabalala – then a young farmboy turned factory worker – the group took the name Ladysmith Black Mambazo – Ladysmith being the name of Shabalala’s rural hometown; Black being a reference to oxen, the strongest of all farm animals; and Mambazo being the Zulu word for axe, a symbol of the group’s ability to “chop down” any singing rival who might challenge them. Their collective voices were so tight and their harmonies so polished that they were eventually banned from competitions – although they were welcome to participate strictly as entertainers.

Shabalala says his conversion to Christianity in the ‘60s helped define the group’s musical identity. The path that the axe was chopping suddenly had a direction: “To bring this gospel of loving one another all over the world,” he says. However, he’s quick to point out that the message is not specific to any one religious orientation. “Without hearing the lyrics, this music gets into the blood, because it comes from the blood,” he says. “It evokes enthusiasm and excitement, regardless of what you follow spiritually.”

A radio broadcast in 1970 opened the door to their first record contract – the beginning of an ambitious discography that currently includes more than forty recordings. Their philosophy in the studio was – and continues to be – just as much about preservation of musical heritage as it is about entertainment. The group borrows heavily from a traditional music called isicathamiya (is-cot-a-ME-Ya), which developed in the mines of South Africa, where black workers were taken by rail to work far away from their homes and their families. Poorly housed and paid worse, the mine workers would entertain themselves after a six-day week by singing songs into the wee hours on Sunday morning. When the miners returned to the homelands, this musical tradition returned with them.

In the mid-1980s, Paul Simon visited South Africa and incorporated Black Mambazo’s rich tenor/alto/bass harmonies into his *Graceland* album – a landmark 1986 recording that was considered seminal in introducing world music to mainstream audiences. A year later, Simon produced Black Mambazo’s first U.S. release, *Shaka Zulu*, which won a Grammy in 1988 for Best Traditional Folk Album. Since then, the group has scored eight more Grammy nominations.

In addition to their work with Paul Simon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo has recorded with numerous artists from around the world, including Stevie Wonder, Dolly Parton, The Wynans, Julia Fordham, George Clinton, The Corrs and Ben Harper. Their film work includes a featured appearance in Michael Jackson’s *Moonwalker* video and Spike Lee’s *Do It A Cappella*. Black Mambazo provided soundtrack material for Disney’s *The Lion King, Part II* as well as Eddie Murphy’s *Coming To America*, Marlon Brando’s *A Dry White Season*, Sean Connery’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and James Earl Jones’ *Cry The Beloved Country*. A recent film documentary titled *On Tip Toe: Gentle Steps to Freedom*, the story of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, was nominated for an Academy Award. The group is well known for its Life Savers candy commercials. Their performance with Paul Simon on *Sesame Street* is legendary and is one of the top three requested *Sesame Street* segments in history.

Black Mambazo has been invited to perform at many special occasions. By special invitation from South African President Nelson Mandela, they performed for the Queen of England and the Royal Family at the Royal Albert Hall in London. The group has also performed at two Nobel Peace Prize Ceremonies, a concert for Pope John Paul II in Rome, the South African Presidential inaugurations, the 1996 Summer Olympics and many other special events. In the summer of 2002, Black Mambazo was again asked to represent their nation in London at a celebration for Queen Elizabeth’s 50th Anniversary as Monarch. They shared the stage with Paul McCartney, Rod Stewart, Eric Clapton, Joe Cocker and Phil Collins.

Amid the extensive worldwide touring, the ambitious recording schedule and the numerous accomplishments and accolades, tragedy struck the group in 2002 when Nellie Shabalala, Joseph’s wife of thirty years, was murdered by a

masked gunman outside their church in South Africa. “At the time that this happened, I tried to take my mind deep into the spirit, because I know the truth is there,” Shabalala recalls. “In my flesh, I might be angry, I might cry, I might suspect somebody. But when I took my mind into the spirit, the spirit told me to be calm and not to worry. Bad things happen, and the only thing to do is raise your spirit higher.”

Out of this dark chapter came *Raise Your Spirit Higher - Wenyukela*, Black Mambazo’s brilliant debut recording on Heads Up International, released in 2004 to coincide with the 10-year anniversary of the end of apartheid. The album, Shabalala’s message of hope and unity to a troubled world, scored a 2005 Grammy Award for Best Traditional World Music Album, and was nominated for Best Surround Sound Album in a first ever category in 2005.

The group followed this success project with *No Boundaries*, a classical crossover recording with The English Chamber Orchestra that scored a Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary World Music Album. Released in January 2005, *No Boundaries* merges the group’s isicathamiya singing with the likes of Mozart, Schubert and Bach.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo celebrated twelve years of democracy in the Republic of South Africa with the January 2006 release of *Long Walk to Freedom*, a collection of twelve new recordings of classic Mambazo songs with numerous special guests, including Melissa Etheridge, Emmylou Harris, Taj Mahal, Joe McBride, Sarah McLachlan, Natalie Merchant, and Zap Mama.

Two years later, the group paid tribute to Shaka Zulu, the iconic South African warrior who united numerous regional tribes in the late 1800s and became the first king of the Zulu nation. *Ilembe: Honoring Shaka Zulu* was released in January 2008.

The newest offering from the group is *Ladysmith Black Mambazo Live!* (HUDV 7149), a DVD set for release in January 2009. The visual feast captures fourteen songs performed on the stage of EJ Thomas Hall at the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, as well as forty minutes of in-depth interviews with Shabalala and other members of the group.