

Universal Soul

Universal Men, the celebrated debut Juluka album, turns 21 this month. Richard Pithouse reports on an album that, despite being largely ignored at the time of its release, launched an inspirational career and become a national treasure.

In the mid 70's Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu started playing together as a duo under the name of Johnny and Sipho. Their infectious melodies and gentle presence didn't disguise the fact that this union between an illiterate gardener from rural Zululand and a Jo'burg academic was as radical a musical statement as it was possible to make at the height of apartheid repression. But Johnny and Sipho were a lot more than just Verwoed's worst nightmare. From the earliest days their music was infused with a remarkably perceptive engagement with their time and place that made it as timeless and universal as anything by Marley or Dylan.

Sipho Gumede, who was laying down bass grooves for the out-there jazz band Spirits Rejoice at the time, remembers that: "I saw Johnny and Sipho playing as a duo at the Market Cafe and I was excited by what I saw. It was the first time I'd seen a white guy playing African music and the music was very strong. We got talking and they invited us to join the recording project."

So Johnny and Sipho went into the studio with the country's best musicians - people of the calibre of Sipho Gumede; Mervyn Africa, who went on to play with Jazz Africa in London; Colin Pratley from the legendary Freedom's Children, who now runs a home for AIDS babies in Durban and Robbie Jansen, who, of course, remains the inimitable Robbie Jansen.

Their producer, Hilton Rosenthal, had a simple plan: "to avoid commercial pressures and to give the musicians a mandate to experiment and be spontaneous. I thought we'd just put them in a room and see what came out." And the gamble paid off, spectacularly. Johnny Clegg remembers that "The most incredible aspect of the recording process was that the jazz musicians from Spirits Rejoice managed to sound completely different to their normal sound. The whole project was, musically, completely new. No one had done this before - we were flying a kite and hoping to be struck by lightning."

21 years on Sipho Gumede enthuses that "Universal Men still sounds fresh. It's one of those albums that will be there for life. It was an innocent album. We went into the studio with the aim of making great music. No one was thinking about how many units we would sell. We just thought about the music." Hilton Rosenthal speaks for many when he says that "There've been other great moments - like Asimbonanga and Scatterlings - but Universal Men is my favourite album. I have a hard time thinking about Universal Men without the hair on my neck standing up."

The band believed, firmly, that they had produced something important but everyone in the industry told Rosenthal that it was "too black for whites and too white for blacks." No radio station under the jurisdiction of the apartheid state would play the album so Rosenthal took it to Capital Radio in the Transkei, who played the single, Afrika, to an enthusiastic but tiny listenership and to Radio Swazi where Mesh Maphetla burst in to tears when he heard Afrika.

The album duly hit the streets late in October 1979. The sleeve carried a picture of a two men - one white and the other black. They were dressed in paisley waistcoats, beads and car tyre sandals. But they weren't hippies. Sipho Mchunu looked into the camera with all the resoluteness of a revolutionary Johnny Clegg gazed into the distance with a questioning intensity.

The name of the band appeared as an engraving on a gold bar. It's shimmering glitz clashed, pointedly, with the more organic colours of the sky, the rocks, the men and their clothes. Juluka means sweat in Zulu and the message couldn't have been clearer: Johannesburg's

wealth and glamour is built not just on gold but also on the sweat of the men, the migrant labourers, who mined that gold. But *Universal Men* was a world away from the abstract sterility of Marxist dogma. On the contrary it was more like the words of an African Pablo Neruda had been set to the most sublime music - a very human response to an inhuman society.

Johnny Clegg explains that “*Universal Men* is about bridging two worlds. Going and coming. While the worker is on route, on a bus or a train, he is given the time to look over the distances, geographic and otherwise, in his life. Migrant labourers, in Africa, Europe, everywhere, are like universal joints. They are this incredible human resource who are just sucked up by the capitalist system and used anywhere. The system makes no concessions and so the workers have to create a whole new universe of meaning.”

The album is a largely acoustic mixture of Anglophone and rural Zulu folk. Clegg’s lyrics have an extraordinary rhythm, depth and emotive power and are, at times, a little otherworldly or perhaps old fashioned. Clegg explains that “There was so much hardness in the migrant life and yet I experienced incredibly human moments with my buddies. They lived such a rich and full life with a highly developed sense of humour and understanding of human nature. For me there was something magical and mystical in this bleak life and I felt that I needed another language to capture it and to humanize the suffering .”

The album opens with *Sky People*. The title refers directly to the amaZulu - the people of the sky (iZulu). One man’s story rolls, like a wave on the ocean, across the larger story of his people - their past and their hopes for the future. He asks

Where did the time, time, time go ?
My old eyes can hardly see the green fields leaving me behind
I worked the earth and turned the blade with a strong heart and steady hand
Seasons wheeled across the sky
I turned around and found that I was old
Trembling heart body cold
Wind and rain take their toll

The album was recorded just months before Zimbabwe won independence and Clegg remembers that “there was a huge fight in the studio. “I wanted to use the line ‘The drums of Zimbabwe speak/They roll across the great divide’ but everyone was convinced that would lead to the album being banned so we eventually changed it to “The drums of Zambezi speak.” But the next lines remained: ‘Smiling spear with teeth of white/Give me strength to face the night/Ancient Song Bless My Life/See me through to see the morning light.’ This was a world away from the ‘happy native’ crap of IpiTombi.

Many of the themes in *Sky People* were developed further on later albums and this is also true of the second track, *Universal Men*. Clegg explains that the title track is the pivot on which the whole album turns. It pays respect to the workers with whose sweat prosperity was built:

From their hands leap the buildings
From their shoulders bridges fall
And they stand astride the mountains and they pull out all the gold
The songs of their fathers raise strange cities to the sky

And the chorus is a meditation on separation and home coming.

I have undone this distance so many time before
That it seems as if this life of mine is trapped between two shores
As the little ones grow older on the station platform
I shall undo this distance just once more

My brother and my sisters have been scattered in the wind
Dressed in cheap horizons which have never quite fitted
And for centuries they've traveled on that pale phantom ship
Sailing for that shore which has no other shore

For a while the vision seems bleak.

The rivers of their homelands murmur in their dreams
They're shackled to that distance till heaven lets them in

But then Clegg finds a way to defend hope.

Well they could not read
and they could not write
and they could not spell their names
But they took this world in both hands and they changed it all the same
And from whence they came and where they went nobody knows or cares
Cast adrift between two worlds they could still be heard to sing

The third song, Thula 'Mtanami (Hush My Child), has all the evocative power of an archetypal lullaby. It is beautifully sung by Sipho Mchunu and was included on the album because, according to Clegg, "Sipho knew that his wife would be singing it to their child back home." One can't help but wonder if migrant workers don't also sing lullabies to parts of themselves.

The fourth track, Deliwe, was overlooked for years but it was taken to a large new audience when it featured on the carefully put together Putumayo compilation, A Johnny Clegg and Juluka Collection. It has recently been worked into the Juluka set list and many now rate it as their favourite Juluka song. It's the only song on the album which doesn't deal directly with the migrant labourer experience but it is part of the broader theme of movement and separation

in that it's about a person, Deliwe, deciding whether or not to leave South Africa. It warns that not all waters wash us on the inside and that, in a foreign land, Deliwe will be haunted by the melodies of Africa and, eventually, judged by the north winds (a metaphor for the winds of change sweeping down from the north). The song's simple prayer has haunted more than a few expatriate South Africans and persuaded just as many to return home and live in hope:

Oh, Bless this water
Bless this land
Give us food to eat
Let our herds span the hills
Let them graze in peace
If soldiers march across our fields give them eyes to see
The children singing in the sand
Songs in the north wind

The next song, Unkosibomvu (The Red King), begins with a sound that is somewhere between Malombo and Amampondo, and develops a slightly ominous tone - as though there's danger beneath the surface. Clegg explains that it deals with the martial psyche which is able to generate enormous power but also has a dark side. The Red King refers to "a romantic iconography of a mythological bloody king whose ability to force his will on others is admired."

Africa, which was Capital Radio's first ever number No. 1, remains a live favourite. Its sing along chorus, means, in translation, "in Africa the innocent are always crying." Clegg describes it as a cryptic song which refers to the strong rural belief that good is limited while evil is pervasive and so the good suffer while the bad prosper.

Uthando Luphelile (Love has Gone), the 7th track, has a much harder edge than anything else on the album and, musically, it anticipates the Juluka inspired African rock movement of the late 80's led by the likes of Via Afrika and éVoid. The lyrics have a tight, edgy, urban feel. Clegg describes it as "a very weird song" and explains that "I was trying to look at the problem of prostitution at the migrant hostels - at the power of the slick city girls and to make the point that bourgeois men are also trapped by the same illusions about fantasy women." The song warns that once you've "seen her in the disco club busting out all over" she "infiltrates your desire and makes you open wide/ She walks down the convolutions of your cerebellum/And tickles the right hemisphere with an electric tongue...You will persound her like a fly" but "you will never get to hold that woman because she's a phantom in your mind."

The profoundly moving Old Eyes is about homecoming. Clegg explains that, for the migrant labourer "home coming is everything - you're carrying presents and it's the moment when you reveal yourself to your community as a successful person. You become a source of abundance; it's an elevated and life giving moment in the migrant universe. There is redemption. All the degradation and alienation which you've endured is redeemed and transformed into a hugely meaningful event when you arrive home.

But in this song, the longed for redemption is out of reach - shattered between the anvil and hammer of apartheid. The returning worker finds that he is the "only one to witness my homecoming" and reflects that:

When I left that mountain land so gold and green
I was a sturdy 16 years
The work was hard and the wage was low
And the seasons past me by one by one
And I dreamed Maria you would wait for my return
We'd build a home upon the rock beneath the smiling sun

He finds an old man who remembers from his youth who tells him that:

Son I'll be old until I die now
And then I will join our people in the sky
I am not the one to ask why our people have been scatted in the wind
Yyou've got old eyes - amehlo madala - you've seen much too much for one so young

The album ends with Inkunzi Ayihlabi Ngokumisa which is a reworking of an ancient war song sung by Mchunu and adapted to the evocative sounds of the Clegg's mouthbow. The title refers to a traditional idiomatic expression which means, in translation, "A bull doesn't stab by means of the way in which its horns have grown." It's an exceptionally beautiful piece of music and their gentle, meditative interpretation speaks of a softness - an openness to new ways of being. It was an inspired way to end the album.

Universal Men sold only 4000 copies when it was first released. But two years later radio stations on both sides of apartheid's colour line gave in to a ground swell of popular demand and allowed Impi, off the second Juluka album, African Litany, to become a massive hit. As Hilton Rosenthal remembers, rather ruefully, "Universal Men was suddenly the great first album." It soon went gold and has never stopped selling.

Part of the magic of Universal Men is that it was the start of a brilliant career for Juluka. Each of their increasingly militant 6 studio albums, with their stories of hope and struggle, is a coherent and powerful statement. There's not a single song that doesn't remain a captivating listening experience. It's a remarkable achievement.

With the exception of the incandescent Heat, Dust and Dreams none of the Savuka albums were as artistically potent as the Juluka albums. The lyrics were always well crafted, intelligent and important and there were fragments of transcendent insight. But the records tended to sound like collections of songs rather than focussed artistic projects and their use of the pop sounds of the time give them a slightly ephemeral feel. The Savuka period did produce one magnificent song though - Asimbonanga: a soaring tribute to the then imprisoned Nelson Mandela. It was on the first ever Savuka release, a 4 track ep, and is clearly up there with Mannenberg and Weeping as one of the greatest South African songs ever. But the poppier Savuka material did win major international success which, in turn, won the band; their vision of transcendence; and their back catalogue; major respect in white South Africa. Such are the sad ironies of colonial culture.

Juluka reformed in the late 90's and released the forgettable Ya Vuka Inkunzi in 1997 which was later rereleased as Crocodile Love. They are set to release another album shortly and are still, through their live performances, a vital force in South African culture. Clegg and Mchunu are still passionate people and may well make great music again. Perhaps, as with Bruce Springsteen's Ghost of Tom Joad, they may reinvent themselves by returning to their acoustic roots and record another album with the gentle potency of Universal Men.

The world has changed a lot in the last 21 years but lives are still shattered by the machinations of inhuman forces. A new vision of hope and humanity from Juluka would be rain in the desert.

*Sipho Mchunu was not available to be interviewed for this article as he was on holiday in Paris at the time of writing.