

LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO

In 2011, Ladysmith Black Mambazo – led by founder and front man Joseph Shabalala – celebrates forty-five years of joyous and uplifting music that marries the intricate rhythms and harmonies of their native South African musical traditions to the sounds and sentiments of Christian gospel music. In those years, the a cappella vocal group has created 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 four 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 Shabalala – then a young farm boy 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 won an additional two Grammy Awards (2005 & 2009) and received fifteen Grammy Award Nominations.

In addition to their work with Paul Simon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo has recorded with numerous artists from around the world, including Stevie Wonder, Josh Groban, Dolly Parton, Ben Harper and many others. Their 2006 CD, “Long Walk To Freedom” had guest singers join them, such as Sarah McLachlan, Natalie Merchant, Melissa Etheridge, Emmylou Harris, Taj Mahal and others. Their film work includes an appearance in Michael Jackson’s Moonwalker video and Spike Lee’s *Do It A Cappella*. They provided soundtrack material for Disney’s *The Lion King, Part II* as well as Eddie Murphy’s *Coming To America*, Clint Eastwood’s *Invictus*, Marlon Brando’s *A Dry White Season*, Sean Connery’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and James Earl Jones’ *Cry The Beloved Country*. A documentary film titled *On Tip Toe: Gentle Steps to Freedom*, the story of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, was nominated for an Academy Award. The group is also well known for its Life Savers candy commercials as well as adverts with Heinz Beans and IBM. Their performance with Paul Simon on *Sesame Street* is legendary and is one of the top three requested *Sesame Street* segments in history. They have appeared on Broadway in their show “*The Song Of Jacob Zulu*” which received six Tony Award Nomination as well as a Drama Desk Award for Best Music. They followed this performance with “*Nomathemba*” a theatrical musical based on the first song written by Joseph Shabalala.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo has been invited to perform at many special occasions. Nelson Mandela made certain, that when he went to Oslo Norway to receive his Nobel Peace Prize, he had his country's premier singing group by his side. As well, by special invitation from 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 another Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony, a concert for Pope John Paul II in Rome, South African Presidential inaugurations, the 1996 Summer Olympics and many other special events. In the summer of 2002, they were 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.

After receiving their second Grammy Award, in 2005, for *Wenyukela: Raise Your Spirit Higher* Mambazo went on to grab their third Grammy Award in 2009 for their last release *Illembé: Honoring Shaka Zulu*. The album is a stirring musical 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.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo returns to its roots with *Songs From A Zulu Farm*, a January 25, 2011 a cd that marks their move to self releasing their recordings in partnership with the Listen 2 Entertainment label. *Songs From A Zulu Farm* is a collection of traditional songs from the group member's childhoods on the farms of Zululand South Africa, *Songs From A Zulu Farm* recreates the idyllic world in which the members once lived and shares it with audiences around the world.

Just when one thinks the group should be slowing down they are entering what will be the busiest years of their career since "Graceland." After four and a half decades of inspiring audiences worldwide, the group continues to work on fresh material and new recordings. No, time is not slowing down for Ladysmith Black Mambazo. As Joseph Shabalala says, "We are teachers. We travel the world spreading our message of Peace, Love and Harmony. What could be better or more important than that."



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