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MAHOTELLA QUEENS TOAST THEIR GOLDEN JUBILEE IN 2015

In 2015, legendary South African female vocal ensemble the Mahotella Queens are celebrating 50 remarkable years of music making – and yet they show no signs of slowing down.

The Queens, formed in 1964, are world-famous for their distinctive multi-part vocal harmonies, guitar-led mbaqanga music and fast-paced dancing.

They have been through several line-up changes over the decades, evolving from a studio recording “girl group” of five or six singers to the trio of in-demand international superstars they are today.

The three original “Queens” who rejoined the line-up in 1987 following a global explosion of interest in South African music – **Hilda Tloubatla, Nobesuthu Mbadu and Mildred Mangxola** – have continued with the group’s legacy despite setbacks that included the death of frequent collaborator **Simon “Mahlatini” Nkabinde**.

In 2013, Mildred retired from the group due to ill health, and the Mahotella Queens have entered 2014 and 2015, their golden jubilee year, with a new member, **Amanda Nkosi**, and a renewed focus on making musical magic.

Introducing Amanda “Ntunja” Nkosi

Amanda, whose stage name is Ntunja (meaning “the fortress”), is a traditional singer who hails from KwaThema, near Springs in Ekurhuleni. For this young artist, being taken under the wing of legendary artists such as the Queens, and touring and performing as part of the group, is a dream come true.

From an early age Ntunja was never shy to perform for friends and family, and honed her vocal talents as a member of the school choir as well as participating in plays and recitals. In her matric year at Nigel High School, she decided to study music – a decision that has paid rich dividends.

Ntunja is grateful to have been given the golden opportunity to contribute to and enrich the country's music landscape with the Queens. She says: "There is no shame in being a cultural artist in a westernised world, because your culture is a part of you."

About the Mahotella Queens

The Mahotella Queens originated in 1964 as the brainchild and creation of Rupert Bopape, a music producer and talent scout at the Mavuthela Music Company, the Gallo Record Company's division dedicated to "black" music at the time.

The Queens were the record company's resident girl group, and were often led by the deep, *basso profundo* male vocals of Mahlatini and backed by the Makgona Tsohle Band, which included West Nkosi on alto saxophone and Marks Mankwane on lead guitar. This dynamic instrumental and vocal combination went on to chalk up several hit records during the 1960s.

In the 1970s, the Queens experienced a rocky patch due to contractual disputes, but remained active and productive, albeit with a fluid line-up.

Their international breakthrough came in 1987, in the wake of the success of Paul Simon's seminal *Graceland* album. Interest in "world" music exploded and the international community sat up and started taking serious notice of South African indigenous sounds.

The Queens regrouped with three of the outfit's original members – Hilda Tloubatla, Nobesuthu Mbadu and Mildred Mangxola – and, as Mahlatini and the Mahotella Queens, they took South Africa and the world by storm with their mbaqanga-laced musical stylings and stirring harmonies. They became renowned as South Africa's first mbaqanga "supergroup".

Sadly, just as their decades of hard work were starting to pay off, Makgona Tsohle Band members Mankwane and Nkosi, and subsequently Mahlatini, passed away in quick succession during the late 1990s.

Devastated by these tragic setbacks, the Queens briefly considered retiring for good – before resolving to keep their late collaborators' legacy and spirit alive by carrying their artistic torch into the 21st century. True to their pledge, they have continued writing and arranging music, recording and touring, wowing fans at home and around the world with their energetic performances and placing mbaqanga music firmly on the global map.

The Mahotella Queens are firmly entrenched as an integral part of the South African music landscape, and are true ambassadors for traditional music – keeping it alive, vibrant and relevant for modern audiences.

Over the years they have successfully navigated the fickle and ever-changing music industry with resilience and inventiveness. Always willing to experiment, the Queens continually add new elements to their signature sound, further enhancing their appeal.

Now, as the Mahotella Queens commemorate 50 years with a new recruit adding a fresh injection of youthful vigour, this trio remains as committed to their cultural roots as ever – while continuing to chart brave and exciting new musical territory.

Recent highlights

Always prolific, the Mahotella Queens have recorded several albums in their 50-year career – too many for even them to count! They remained with Gallo until 2005, when they joined independent record company AS Entertainment, led by former Gallo managing director Antos Stella.

Following the deaths of their bandmates in 1998 and 1999, the Queens returned to the limelight with *Sebai-Bai* in 2001, dedicated to the memory of Mahlatini, West Nkosi and Marks Mankwane. This album embraced international elements and featured a new backing band, as well as world music stars such as Madagascar's accordion wizard, Regis Gizavo.

This release was followed by the progressive electro-mbaqanga explorations of *Bazobuya* in 2004, and the naked vocal beauty of a cappella album *Reign & Shine* in 2005.

Always versatile and musically adventurous, they followed up these albums in 2007 with the gospel-themed *Siyadumisa* – an inspirational album celebrating spirituality and giving praise, imbuing Zulu traditional hymns with elements of marabi, soul, jazz and mbaqanga.

In the first decade of the new millennium, the indefatigable Queens showed no signs of slowing down due to age. Among their many international tours was a trip to the United Kingdom as the support act for Ladysmith Black Mambazo, as well as performing at various WOMAD music festivals across Europe.

In 2010, they appeared in Pee Wee Ellis's show *Still Black, Still Proud: An African Tribute to James Brown*, and toured the UK with Hugh Masekela the same year. In 2013, the Queens proved that they have their finger firmly on the pulse of contemporary music, recording a modernised version of *Gazette/Kazet*, one of their best-known hits, with singer Zamo and kwaito star Brickz for the MTN8 football tournament.

What keeps the Mahotella Queens going strong after five decades – and making music with such apparent effortless ease? Says Hilda: "I guess we are true musicians – born musicians – we're talented! We've got the spirit of true musicians, hence we know how to go about a song, how to do a song.

"People ask: how do you do it, how do you start? 'Cause we don't see anyone doing a sign to say 'now we're going to do this'. It's in us ... we've been together for a long time, hence we know exactly what to do."