

HERBIE MOTLATSI TSOAELI –b. 28 November 1964 in Cape Town, Western Cape.

bass

‘Herbie is a highly skilled virtuoso musician, extremely complementary and supportive accompanist, a gifted composer and generous ensemble player. More than all of these, Herbie is a pure joy to be with because of his joyous personality, sunny disposition, infectious laughter and friendly accessibility. I love Herbie Tsoaeli like a brother I never had. ’ –Hugh Masekela

From the country’s most prolific upright bass player, band member and consummate sideman, in recent years Herbie Tsoaeli has extended his illustrious roles to those of bandleader and recording solo artist in his own right. He has become one of South Africa’s elder statesmen of jazz, a torchbearer for a successive generation of jazz stylists. Tsoaeli was raised in Nyanga East, one of the politically charged black townships in the Western Cape. It features prominently in the history of the anti-pass protests of 1960. More significantly, it’s one of the communities that had produced a rich jazz legacy.

Tsoaeli took formal music lessons from jazz pianist Merton Barrow at the Music Action for People’s Power (MAPP), an academy that was formed by activists who organised music events for political rallies and community functions in the eighties. It’s based at Athlone’s Joseph Stone Theatre, Cape Town. A number of influential Cape Jazz artists have served as an inspiration. These include Bucs Gongco, Gambu Pasiya, Tete Mbambisa, Mankunku Ngozi, Basil Moses, Ephraim ‘Cups n’ Saucers’ Nkanuka. He was part of the Nyanga Arts Centre, a community arts establishment that was founded in 1979 and where he did his apprenticeship as a musician. One of the groups he played with in the early years was an Afro-pop outfit known as Ikhwezi. But his professional career took off in 1986 with the band, Peto. The Cape Town-based Afro-fusion outfit gained a national spotlight after winning first place at the annual Shell Road To Fame talent search in the best group category for their stirring song, Kaya –Where the Heart Is.

The eight-member ensemble consisted of Ringo Madlingozi (lead vocals), Cyril Ngcukana (keyboards), Alan Cameron (keyboards), Mxolisi Mayekana (guitar), Thulisile Ngozi (trumpet), Greg Italian (alto), Percy Kunene (drums), Chris Tokalon (alto) and Tsoaeli on bass. Babes Ndamase was the original drummer. The band also won the Autumn Harvest Personalities of the Year in 1987 and was nominated at the OKTV Awards for best township music. They were subsequently invited to perform at the King’s Trust Concert in Swaziland as Eric Clapton’s supporting act. Musically, Peto was in the league of Afro-fusion super-bands like Bayete and Sankomota. It’s unfortunate that the members didn’t stay together for long. Individually, they have moved on to become great artists.

The largely self-taught artist also took lessons at Jazz Workshop, another Cape Town-based music academy founded in 1965 by Merton Barrow. In the mid-nineties Tsoaeli was involved in the landmark project, Mahube (Dawn), a cross-cultural collaboration of twelve of Southern Africa’s finest musicians including Steve Dyer (saxophone/flute), Oliver Mtukudzi (Zimbabwe), George Phiri (Malawi) and South Africans Suthukazi Arosi (vocals), Feya Faku (trumpet), Sydney Mavundla (trumpet), Phinda Mtya (vocals), Scorpion Madondo (saxophone), Barry Van Zyl (drums), Andile Yenana (piano) and Sean Fourie (keyboards).

Mahube appeared in several high profile music events on the local and international stages, notably a 2002 partnership with British rock superstar, Bono to produce the Third World debt

alleviation album aimed at Africa. The CD Mahube –Music from Southern Africa, was launched on the Sheer Sound label in October 1998. While he has performed as a sideman with a number of illustrious musicians such as Winston Mankunku Ngozi, Abdullah Ibrahim, Zim Ngqawana, Hugh Masekela and Sibongile Khumalo, to mention a few, he is best known for his membership of the highly acclaimed jazz ensemble, Voice alongside Sidney Mnisi (sax), Marcus Wyatt (trumpet) and drummer, Morabo Morojele. In 2001 they recorded their debut album, Quintet Legacy: Volume One with the late Lulu Gontsana on drums. The main purpose of the Voice project has been to keep alive the rich South African jazz heritage as initiated by great musicians like Kippie Moeketsi. Tsoaeli was also part of the star-studded band of instruments who recorded Suthukazi's SAMA-winning album, Ubuntu (Sheer, 2001). He composed, arranged and played all the songs on the album.

Their second album, Songs for Our Grandchildren (2003) was nominated for best traditional jazz album at the South African Music Awards. They played as a featured group at the 2003 Cape Town International Jazz Festival. Tsoaeli has toured the United States and Europe with the late Zim Ngqawana and was involved in a number of cultural exchange programmes, notably with Ngqawana's Ingoma alongside British jazz pianist Keith Tippett and his band Mujician. Launched in the mid-nineties, these collaborations were aimed at introducing the free jazz idiom of South African exiles like the Blue Notes. In recent years he has teamed up with a younger generation of jazz artists and re-launched his career as an exceptionally talented leader with a lot to offer the contemporary jazz scene. His first two albums reflect peerless creative imagination and artistic maturity.

Discography

As a leader

- African Time (Sheer Sound/African Time Music, 2012).
- In Concert (Gallo/Sheer Sound, 2014).

As a band member

- Voice –Quintet Legacy Volume 1 (2001).
- Voice –Quintet Legacy Volume 2: Songs for our Grandchildren (2003).

As a sideman

- Oliver Mtukudzi –Tuku Music (1999).
- Suthukazi Arosi –Ubuntu (2001).
- Various Artists –Live At The Market Theatre (2002).
- Mankunku Ngozi –Abantwana Be Afrika (2003).
- Vusi Mahlasela –The Voice (2003).
- Zim Ngqawana –Vadzimu (2003).
- Miriam Makeba –Reflections (2004).
- Various Artists –African Jazz Men (2014).