

Lars Rasmussen: AN INTERVIEW WITH TROMBONIST MALINDI BLYTH MBITYANA

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This interview took place in Blyth's home in Bronx, New York. It was to be included in volume two of my anthology *Jazz People of Cape Town*, a book which, regrettably, never materialized.

MBM: I was born on 27 February, 1929. My parents were Esther and Paul Meku Mbityana. I have two brothers, one is born 1918, same age as Nelson Mandela. My elder brother became a school teacher and very popular in the political scene in the Eastern Cape. These are people who also made names for themselves in the community. And my sister was the twin to my elder brother; she died a couple of years ago. I didn't know it until just over Christmas, we called a cousin of mine who is in the Transvaal. That was a sad Christmas I had, because she was the only blood relative I had left.

I grew up in Bo-Kaap. There was nobody in the family who played music. I was the first one to venture into the music scene. The kind of music we were listening to ... my friend Max used to buy a lot of records and we used to listen very, very attentively. The solos that we listened to were written out exactly as they were on the record.

So we formed this big band, The Tuxedo Slickers. The band leader was in his early thirties, the rest of the band were in our late teens, early twenties. We were two altos, two tenors and a baritone. Most bands did not have a baritone. The most popular band was The Merry Macs, they didn't have a baritone. They only had two trumpets and one trombone.

In the city, a friend of mine, Max Copiso, I think he is late now, he played tenor in the band. Unfortunately for me, I wanted to play saxophone, but the only available instrument that didn't have a player was a trombone. So I settled for the trombone, that's how I came to play trombone. I don't think much of my playing, but I made a name for myself in any case.

The leader of The Tuxedo Slickers was Robinson Mazibuko. He played alto sax. He was very good in leading the reed section. We played quite a lot of popular tunes during the swing era. We had a good clarinet player, Johnson Sigcali. He is in Johannesburg now. We played a lot of Benny Goodman and Woody Herman stuff, because we had a clarinet player. We had everything written out. *Tuxedo Junction* was our signature tune which we played every night; we took our name from that tune.

We didn't struggle to listen to records - we did listen to records, but all the solos were written out for instruments in a particular section of the song.

When I got into The Tuxedo Slickers, I started learning how to read trombone music by listening to the alto player, that's Robinson Mazibuko. He used to read my parts and transpose at sight, you know, so I learned the positions of the instrument. He taught me the instrument, and he taught me to read. Robinson came from Natal, I don't know what area of Natal, not Durban. He played good alto. It was his first band. When he left, the band broke up.

It was kind of difficult to get hold of instruments. When I got to the band, there was an old trombone, but later on, I got myself a new instrument at a place called Bothner's in Cape Town. In fact, I still have the

instrument and I used it until I got to Berklee. At Berklee, it was silver, the style had changed, and the students looked at me and said, What kind of instrument is this? Even Jonas Gwangwa used to borrow it from me.

I remember the guy who played drums, Ben Tuswa. I kept the drums at my place where I used to be. Whenever there was a gig, we used to have jam sessions, even with the white musicians. There was this tall guy, he was a good drummer, Cecil Ricca.

All the Tuxedo Slickers came from the inner city. Some of the band lived in Stakesby Hostel, that's where we used their dining room and rehearsed there. We rehearsed every night and every weekend, Saturdays from after one, when everybody came from work and started practising our parts. We got so good that, as I said, there was The Merry Macs band in Langa, which was the most popular band then; when we got out, we were so well rehearsed, because we played everything they played. We used to order music from London, everything was written down, solo parts, just like you hear it on the record. They didn't like it, in The Merry Macs! We were a threat to them! [laughs].

We weren't actually competing, we were just playing according to our ability, but they thought we were competing. It's like boxing, if you don't go to the gym and do your exercises, someone will come and knock you out! So it was with The Merry Macs. I remember one night we went to play in Langa, which was their stronghold, they lived in Langa. When we finished, we were using what they called a lorry - now we call it a truck - we put a step ladder to it and as we were putting our instruments on top of the lorry, a guy called Larry Hobongwana who used to play first alto for The Merry Macs took the ladder and was just about to smash our instruments! Because we were so popular and we got the crowd in Langa! It didn't go down very well with them!

An other band at that time were De City Jazz Kings which was led by Moses Molelekoa. He was originally from Pretoria, that's why he had a Sotho name. Molelekoa is Sotho. He had Vellgin Totongwana on trombone.

I never met Tem Hawker. He is the man who taught Jimmy Adams. Jimmy Adams later had a very good band, consisting mainly of saxophones, very good. Our drummer was Andrew Veldmann, he came from Tem Hawker. He was a good drummer. He also was trying to get into the modern jazz swing.

The Tuxedo Slickers were formed in the late 'forties, into the early 'fifties. We took a tour of South Africa, we went from Cape Town, stopped over in Wooster, Kimberley, from there we went to a rural place called Bethlehem, I think it was in the Free State, and from there we went to Durban. The popular band there was The Harlem Swingsters. I don't know if you ever heard of a tenor player from Durban, Dalton Khanyile, a very good player. I played with him later, when we got to Johannesburg. We took the tour 'round about 1953. From Durban we went to Johannesburg. During that time, the most popular band in Johannesburg was The Jazz Maniacs, but by the time we got there, they were no longer together. But there was The Harlem Swingsters, which was lead by Gwigwi. The only band we met at our show in The Bantu Men's Social Centre in Johannesburg was The Merry Blackbirds, which was led by Peter Rezant. He died in his eighties. I think he was about eighty-nine when he died.

When we went to Durban and Johannesburg, Dollar Brand was in the band. In fact, we recorded with him. Our first recording was made under that tour. Dollar wasn't composing yet. He started composing when he went to Jo'burg.

Before he joined the band, we met him in Kensington in Cape Town. Life was very tough for us then. It was a very dirty slum area. In winter, Cape has a Mediterranean climate, so it rains in winter. Kensington was a very dirty slum, full of mud and everything. One night, we went and played there. So we saw this young fellow, tall and skinny, playing the piano. And, fortunately for us, we didn't have a pianist. We had a pianist who could not read. So we asked Dollar if he could read, and then we asked him to join the band. That's how he came to join us.

He left, later on, for Europe, with a brilliant bass player, Johnny Gertze. If he had come here to the States, he would have shown the bass players that are popular here a thing or two. He was very good.

But then Abdullah, as he is known now, Abdullah Ibrahim, he was no longer in the band. He was playing solo. There was a vocal group, The Manhattan Brothers, from Johannesburg, which were accompanied by Mackay Dvashe and The Jazz Dazzlers. Somehow, he got involved, and that's how he got to be very popular in Johannesburg. Later on, he got involved with Jonas Gwangwa and Kippie Moeketsi.

So Abdullah started with us indigenous African musicians. He was classified as coloured, but he looked like a black man, so no one noticed the difference. Other than that, I don't think Abdullah would have been in the jazz scene. He was first taught to play classical piano.

LR: Did Tuxedo Slickers ever play modern jazz?

MBM: Not exactly. We were together as a band when modern jazz was just coming to the country. We were aware of people like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker but most of their music was not written down. I remember we had one song, kind of incorporating jazz influences, it was called *Bebop Spoken Here*; that was the only thing we ever played in the band that was related to modern jazz. I bought the first record of Charlie Parker in Pietermaritzburg when I was visiting my home in the Eastern Cape. Quite exciting! There was something new, very exciting. I wonder what the youth today listen to. To me, there is nothing as challenging and exciting as modern jazz did to us. I don't like rock'n'roll! It's frightening. Sometimes I sit here late at night and watch what's going on on TV, but it's just a lot of noise, They make a lot of money.

After The Tuxedo Slickers finished our tour and returned to settle in Cape Town, our band leader left and went to settle in Johannesburg, and we disbanded.

I just continued playing on my own, other musicians would come and invite me to a concert, like trumpet player Banzi Bangani. He stayed in Cape Town for a while, until this play after *King Kong*, we played together in the band, *Shebeen*.

I played with a lot of guys, like Harold Jephtah, even before he left the country, and many others. His brother, Kenny, played a beautiful guitar. I never played at the Zambezi, but at the Ambassador. In fact, that's where Dollar Brand used to play. Many years later, in the 'eighties, I played on his record *African Market Place* and, after that, I played a couple of night club gigs with him. I remember we had this very famous bass player in the band, Cecil McBee, he's a giant!

Johannesburg and Cape Town are different. In Jo'burg, if you knew anybody, you could be busy. There were so many bands, if they knew you, they would come and ask you to play over the weekend. That way, you were kept active. I'm not sure if it inspired one more than I would have been inspired in Cape Town. But Cape Town is more laid back. We used to have jazz concerts at the City Hall, in fact, that's how I met some of the white musicians in Cape Town like Bob Tizzard, Sammy Maritz, he was a good bass player. And the Schilder family, Tony, there were three brothers, Richard and Chris, very good jazz musicians.

There was a white guy who used to frequent jazz concerts and all that, Paul Meyer. He used to go around on a motor bike. I think he was responsible for having Abdullah and Bea Benjamin going to Europe. She used to be a school teacher not far from where I used to live. I lived on Dixon Street, which was off Waterkant Street. She used to teach at a school which belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, I think.

I left Cape Town for Johannesburg after *King Kong*, the play, had been to Cape Town. I played in the last *King Kong*, before they left for London. I even auditioned for the stage in the chorus. It wasn't meant that I should go with them. I remember I had a very sad day when they left from Jan Smuts Airport in Jo'burg, a very sad day for me. I was very close to Jonas Gwangwa, we embraced each other and cried. We were close, even in the band of *King Kong*.

After *King Kong* had gone to London, Mackay Davashe came back to Jo'burg and led again The Jazz Dazzlers. I joined him; in fact, in 1962, it was the first jazz festival in South Africa. It was held in Soweto, a place called Jabula Stadium. The Jazz Dazzlers won the price then.

After that, there was a popular variety show called *African Jazz and Variety*, led by Alfred Herbert. Immediately after *King Kong* left to Durban and other centres, Alf Herbert decided to have a show similar to *King Kong*, and that was *Shebeen*. I was in that, and Jimmy Adams was in the band on alto, Nick Moyake was also on alto, Elijah Nkwanyana on trumpet, and Banzi Bangani, both very good trumpeters. Banzi became religious. A very beautiful trumpeter. He used to play very touchingly, *An American in Paris*. That trumpet of his sounded sweet and nice, man! Oh! [sings].

After that, some company wanted a black band to go around and play at their centers. They had a hotel in Durban, Hotel Edward. We went to play at that hotel; that was the best job we'd ever had. Seeing what the other half of the society lives like. They had a big dining room and dancing audiences. There was a cartoonist from a Durban paper who cartooned us playing there. At the end of the dining room was the scene; we could hear the waves dashing against the hotel. It was something else, it was an experience to a black. The way those people were living, it is heaven, man!

By that time I didn't even think I would ever come out of the country. When I got to Jo'burg after '59, I found opportunities to study music. There was a social centre, The Bantu Men's Social Centre, which was run by the city council in Johannesburg, they catered for artist in terms of teaching drama, music and what else. So I took advantage of that. I studied at Royal School of Music in London, mail courses. I still have diplomas from The Royal School of Music and University of South Africa. I made use of the free time when we were not playing to go to the juvenile social center and practise and practise. Once a year, The Royal School sent out diplomas throughout the Commonwealth, that was before this monkey, Verwoerd, took South Africa out of the Commonwealth and called it a republic. Those were bad times for us.

If I go back in time, to the 1948 election, I was still in Cape Town. There is a street, St. George's Street, which runs all the way down to Strand Street. The Cape Town morning paper, The Cape Times, and The Cape Argus were on the same block. And that evening they had a big board and they were showing results from whatever area they came. The United Party, they lost very badly. Malan won that day.

The big crowd were looking up at the board and shouting, Come on, United Party, come on! But nothing was happening. That day, we could see that we had no future as blacks in South Africa. The crowd was dispersing, going down St. George's Street. We saw, going the opposite direction, going uptown, towards the Saint George's Cathedral, wave after wave of people, just giving way, like if someone was pushing them this side, that side. When we got closer, we saw two of these Afrikaaner guys, we called them boers, short sleeves, they were beating anybody that came across them, that's why the crowd was moving this way and moving that way.

It forebode ill for us. This was the beginning of over forty years in hell. And still things are not as normal as one would like them to be. There is still a lot of work to be done in South Africa. Even the ANC that took over leaves a lot to desire. Even now, I think the ANC is using the same tactics that were used by the apartheid regime, intimidating people.

I got involved with politics after I got to America. It started in Boston. At least one could express oneself freely without fear that the so-called special branch visited you, knocked at your door. A lot of people suffered, man, oh, my God! And the music suffered too.

I was teaching at FUBA Academy in Jo'burg. It is an acronym for Federated Union of Black Artists. It was formed just about when I was about to leave the country. I was teaching under African Music and Drama Association, AMDA was the acronym for that. It was situated in Dorkay House and formed by the late Trevor Huddleston. That was the first band that was formed, The Huddleston Band, in the 1950s, where Hugh Masekela and Jonas Gwangwa started. Later on, they joined The Jazz Epistles, with Kippie Moeketsi, Abdullah Ibrahim, Johnny Gertze and Makaya Ntshoko. The Jazz Epistles was quite a band during the modern jazz era. Those were the years that were very, very exciting in South Africa, as far as the jazz scene was concerned. We concentrated on music; music was the life blood of us musicians. It is a pity that one can not bring back that time and relive it, it was very exciting to us, you know!

In 1973, while I was teaching at AMDA, I met a young woman from Boston whose father was a musician, and he was teaching at some Boston music college. One day we were discussing, I said to her, I would like to go and study. She wrote to her father who went to the administrator of Berklee College of Music and got me the scholarship. I'd long given up that I would ever go out and study. One finds obstacles everywhere in one's life. The leader of AMDA didn't like me. There had been scholarships to go to Europe. I had wanted to go and study in Germany. This guy, Ian Bernhardt, he would block every effort to let me go. Because he wanted somebody who was his favourite to get the job and teach. But this guy had been to London King Kong, then he got a scholarship to study stage management here in New York. But he couldn't teach music, that is the advantage I had over him.

There's a guy who used to work at AMDA, sort of a caretaker. I wanted to keep it a secret that I had a scholarship to go to Berklee. But it came out and I started applying for a passport. One morning I got to AMDA; this guy, Tembo was his name, comes up to me, he says, I know you're going to get your passport! I

asked him, How do you know that I am going to get a passport? Because there was already a rumour that he was selling out to the Special Branch. He couldn't answer my question, which already confirmed that he was being friendly with the so-called Special Branch.

My first experience of seeing ordinary white people who were not being elevated to godly status, it was in London, on my way to America. That was early '73. We flew from Johannesburg. At that time South African airways could not land anywhere on the African coast. Our first stop was Luanda. I only got out of the plane to stretch my legs. And from there, straight to London Heathrow. I was still paranoid.

So when I got to London, and this tall white guy came to me and wanted to talk to me, I tried so hard to avoid him. I was going to visit one of The Manhattan Brothers who had gotten there with *King Kong*. This man started talking to me in one of these vernaculars, Sotho or Swathi, How are they at home? I was panicking. Those people can trace you anywhere! There is no place to hide! That was terrible days for us.

That era is over, but there is still a lot to be done.

My favourite trombone player is J.J., and Curtis Fuller, Slide Hampton, a left-handed guy, Jimmy Cleveland - his picture is up there! [points at the wall], and this guy from The Jazz Crusaders, Wayne Anderson, he's also a good trombone player. I come from the traditional trombone players like Tommy Dorsey. In fact, Bob Tizzard, trombone player from Cape Town, introduced me to J.J. and said, Forget about Tommy Dorsey, he's the old style, sweet style, with the vibrato! But J.J. was an innovator on the instrument. He came up with new phrases and was very crisp. He made the instrument sound so easy and yet it is a very difficult instrument. But there are people who play so well that it sounds easy. You have to have patience with yourself over the instrument.

I was very fortunate to get that scholarship to go and study music at Berklee College. I have a master's degree in music education. I went from Berklee to Columbia University and came to live in New York, where I am now. By the time I finished my master's degree they were reluctant to continue financing my education. I had applied for a Ph.D. program. A lot of students wasted a lot of money from the United Nations by just taking courses, and that is spoiling chances for other people who are serious. They keep taking courses just to stay in school!

1977, when I graduated, Woody Herman was there. It was such a pleasure, so exciting to be able to shake his hand! Other than that, my history is not exciting as I would like it to be. Though I was in the middle of a very exciting jazz scene.

Further reading: Ike Magashule's portrait *One Man and His Horn* in ZONK, June 1964. The article mentions Blyth's role as band leader in the stage drama *Dingaka*, and his appearances as band member in other Johannesburg stage productions like *Back In Your Own Backyard*, *Township To-nite* and *Swinging the Blues*.