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Miriam Makeba 'Mama Afrika': 1932 - 2008
From Daily Independent (Lagos)
BlackCommentator.com In Struggle Spotlight

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Fittingly, the South African icon Miriam Makeba passed on after performing at a concert in Southern Italy against organized crime. The manner of her transition is a poignant testimony as to how her talents as a musician were always directed as part of the effort to uplift society.

Her demise represents a profound loss to the African continent. Her musical contribution was a factor in bringing down the obnoxious apartheid system. There is every reason to be grateful that she lived to see the unmourned dismantling of that system.

She could, of course, have taken the other route. Collaboration with the apartheid government would have made her life much more comfortable. She would definitely have saved herself the inconvenience of exile. The price was high. For example, in 1960 her attempt to return home to South Africa for her mother's funeral was rebuffed by the authorities. She suddenly discovered that her passport had been revoked. To lose the opportunity to bury her mother must have left emotional scars and yet she fought on with nobility for a cause she believed in.

By deploying her talents, she set an example for a host of other artistes and musicians. Activism such as hers was a precursor for later initiatives by musicians such as the "Concert for Bangladesh", "Woodstock" and the various band aid initiatives. She had began a trend and set a worthy example.

The process that people like Makeba initiated can best be captured in a statement by the American President-elect, Barack Obama, who stated during his election campaign that "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the change that we seek". Her noble role is in stark contrast to those (admittedly) lesser talented Nigerian musicians who repugnantly collaborated for pecuniary benefit in offering their services to Sani Abacha's so-called million man march.

Makeba's activism straddled the decisive phase of the anti-apartheid struggle. She entered international prominence when she appeared in the anti-apartheid documentary "Come Back, Africa" in 1959. In 1963, she made a moving speech when she appeared before the United Nations (UN) Special Committee on Apartheid calling for an international boycott of South Africa. Her non-stop activism cannot overshadow her greatness as one of the truly outstanding artists for our time. The South African foreign Minister - Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma - was absolutely correct in stating that, "One of the greatest songsters of our time, Miriam Makeba has ceased to sing."

She was awesomely talented. Some of her hit songs such as "Pata Pata", "The Click song" and "Malaika" are not just evergreen, they have become seminal classics.

She started her career first of all with an amateur group. In the 1950s she became a full time singer appearing with a band called "The Manhattan Brothers", before forming her own group, "The Skylarks" whose repertoire infused a blending of jazz with the traditional melodies of indigenous South Africa. This fusion created an original brew widely imitated and copied and still a significant theme in music today. As one observer, Laurence Ani, has perceptibly pointed out: "The true test of art is in its ability to stay evergreen. Makeba's music has remained appealing decades after, surviving the onslaught of disco, hip-hop and the sub-cultures they have inspired in Africa." She had great sessions and toured with contemporary musical icons such as Paul Simon, Nina Simone, Hugh Masekela, Pizzy Gilleptic amongst many others.

Not surprisingly, the singer as activist who was received by world leaders such as John F. Kennedy, Fidel Castro, Francois Mitterand, Haile Sellasie amongst others has been showered with accolade since her demise at home and abroad. In her own country of origin, the African National Congress (ANC), which spearheaded the struggle against the apartheid regime was fulsome in its tribute. "The ANC will forever treasure the contribution made by Miriam Makeba in the struggle for liberation and building of our democracy", the Party stated.

Younger artists for whom she was an endearing role model also mourned her passing. The South African diva, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, stated that "she is a legend. We will surely miss her." Here in Nigeria, Lagos State Governor, Babatunde Raji Fashola, captured the mood of the moment when he expressed his disappointment that Africa's greatest songster would not be alive to sing at the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States.

This newspaper salutes the indomitable courage of Mama Afrika. Her life is a testimony to courage and the use of God-given talents for the benefit of humanity. She made us all feel so proud to be Africans.

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