

Ladysmith Black Mambazo on bringing music and harmony to Norwich and Bury St Edmunds

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Ladysmith Black Mambazo who are performing in Norwich and Bury St Edmunds. Photo: N&N Festival

Legendary South African a cappella male choir Ladysmith Black Mambazo, who found global fame on Paul Smith's Graceland album, tells us about bringing their rich harmonies to the Norfolk and Norwich and Bury St Edmunds festivals this month.



Ladysmith Black Mambazo performs at the concert to celebrate the Queen's 92nd birthday last month. Photo: John Stillwell/PA Wire

Ladysmith Black Mambazo has been spreading its message of love and harmony since farm boy-turned-factory worker Joseph Shabalala formed the group in the early 1960s. For over 50 years the legendary a cappella male choir have evoked the soul of South Africa with their intricate rhythms and harmonies and powerful, uplifting songs, becoming one of the world's most distinctive groups.

Formed in the apartheid era they were groundbreaking. A 1970 radio broadcast led to the group's record contract and they became the first black musicians to release a gold selling album in their homeland. They have gone on to record more than 60 albums.

They then shot to global stardom after Paul Simon featured their rich harmonies into his 1986 album Graceland album. The following year, Simon produced the choir's own Grammy-winning first worldwide release, Shaka Zulu. Last year they revisited the album and won another Grammy in the process, their fifth.

They continue to tour the world and this month will be performing at both the Norfolk and Norwich Festival and the Bury St Edmunds Festival.



Ladysmith Black Mambazo, with now retired founder Joseph Shabalala far right. Photo: Michael Crabtree

The first Ladysmith Black Mambazo album, *Amabutho* in 1973, became the first release in South Africa by black musicians to receive gold status. In the period of apartheid, was that a big breakthrough moment?

It certainly was. It showed the music business people that the black population could be an economic force. The music industry did not look at black music groups as a real source of making money. Once we did this then the music industry wanted to cater more towards this audience and give them what they wanted.

You rose to worldwide prominence following your collaboration on Paul Simon's *Graceland*. He was clearly a fan of your music, but had his music been popular in South Africa?

Not too much. He was a famous name but his music was not being listened to by the black population. The white population listened to his music a bit but they were more European based for their musical appetite.

*Ladysmith Black Mambazo found global fame after appearing on the Paul Simon album *Graceland*. Photo: Warner Bros*

Following *Graceland*, your 1987 album *Shaka Zulu* (produced by Simon) really brought you to international success. Last year you did *Shaka Zulu Revisited*. Why did you want to return to that music?

The first reason was it was the 30th anniversary of the original recording. We wanted to celebrate that event. Also, since the original release our founder, Joseph Shabalala, retired in 2014 and the group is now led by his four sons, who joined over 25 years ago but after the

original recording. They wanted to celebrate with the new voices Ladysmith Black Mambazo is since they joined the group. It is a way to honour their father and the original members and recording.

Shaka Zulu won a Grammy and Shaka Zulu Revisited did the same exactly a decade later. You have a remarkable record of nominations and wins. Why do the Grammys love you so much?

Yes, Shaka Zulu Revisited won the Grammy three decades after the original. This is so important to us because it is the Grammy Awards saying what we are doing is still powerful. We know the Grammy voters look for tradition and roots for our usual Grammy Award category (Best World Music). They aren't looking for Westernised world music, they want to hear traditional styles. So when they hear our singing they hear a group that is all about tradition, about staying authentic and true to the musical roots. When you listen to Ladysmith Black Mambazo in 2018 you still hear the singing from 30 years ago, 50 years ago or even further back. We honour our history and culture.



Ladysmith Black Mambazo performing in Christchurch Park in Ipswich in 1999. Photo: Andrew Hendry

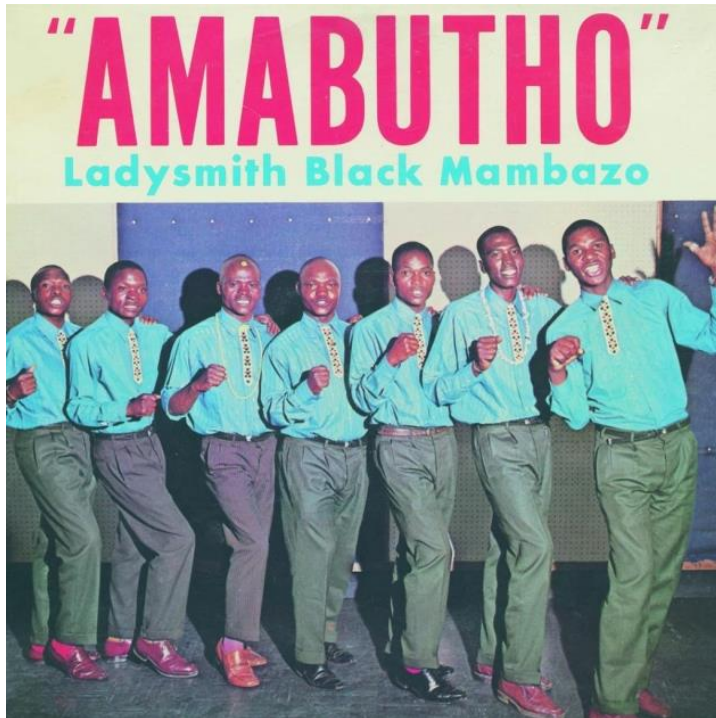
As well as Shaka Zulu Revisited, last year you also released Songs of Peace and Love for Kids and Parents Around the World, also Grammy nominated. How did you approach making music for children?

We wanted to present some of our songs, that are about peace and love, to children to listen to. We recorded introductions for each song so the kids can understand the message within each song and how they should live a life that is centred around peace and love. We think it's wonderful for parents to listen to with their kids and to talk about these things. Children have such pressures on them these days and they need to know its OK to feel positive. Kids are the future, the saying goes and we know music is a big influence for them.

At the time you emerged internationally many global artists were labelled 'world music'. What were your feelings about that term, and do you think listeners are now more open to what they will listen to?

The world is certainly becoming a smaller place and the ways we all connect to each other are getting easier and faster. The music we can find is broader. Nowadays if you want to find

out new music that is beyond your borders it is just a click away. However, the term world music is probably still a good thing. To us this term means something powerful and authentic. We think there is seriousness to that term that “pop music” or such does not convey. You can listen to pop or other local styles but if you want something different and interesting you can look for world music. Just that term can send you on a journey through all of Africa, or through Asia and its many styles.



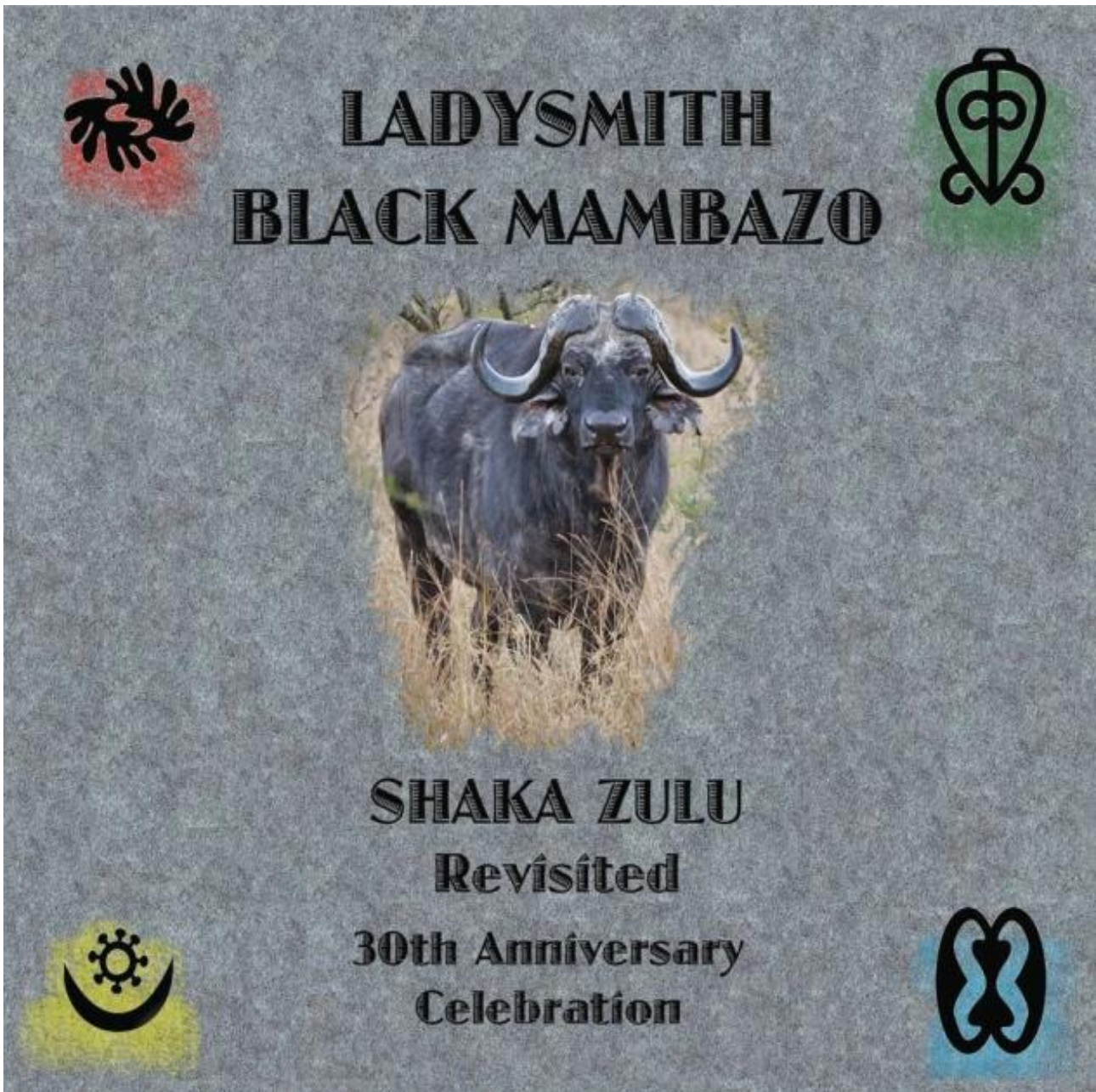
The first Ladysmith Black Mambazo album, Amabutho, was the first by black musicians to receive gold status. Photo: Gallo

How has the retirement of founder and musical director Joseph Shabalala changed the group and did you bring new ideas to the music?

Joseph handed the future of Ladysmith Black Mambazo to his four sons. Since they have been in the group, already, for over 25 years, they are very instilled with the traditions and styles their father set for Ladysmith Black Mambazo. They honour this deeply. We would not say the style has changed at all. It's become stronger within what it always has been. The passion is strong and alive.

Your music of emerged during a period of political turmoil in South African. Is the group's message still as relevant and has it changed over the years?

Our founder, Joseph Shabalala, wanted the songs to be about honouring one's culture, one's roots and to be respectful to others. Live in peace and love. It remains the message of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. It's a never ending mission for us to spread this message. We think it is one of the main reasons people still want Ladysmith Black Mambazo. The message to be honourable and to live in peace and love is never-ending.



Ladysmith Black Mambazo won their fifth Grammy last year for Shaka Zulu Revisited. Photo: Warner Bros

What can the audiences at the Bury St Edmunds and Norfolk and Norwich Festival expect to hear?

The beautiful music of South Africa, deep with history and respect. Powerful traditional dancing that began long ago. A trip to the South African homeland without needing an airplane ticket.

You have an incredibly extensive back catalogue of albums and music. How do you go about choosing what you will perform on each tour?

We know there are songs that people love from years ago and those happen to be our favourites as well. Songs like Homeless, Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes, Rain Rain Beautiful Rain, The Star and the Wiseman. Plus some newer songs that we think have important messages for people to hear. When we've been singing the new songs we see our audiences respond to them. It's very exciting.

Another artist who carried South African music to the world, Hugh Masekela, who himself performed at the Norfolk and Norwich Festival in 2014, died earlier this year. What are your memories of him and his musical legacy?

Hugh was a long time friend of ours. When we first went overseas with Paul Simon, in 1987, Hugh helped us understand life on the road. He was our guide for many years and his influence for us and for many others will never end. He was the greatest musician to ever come from South Africa and he always flew our flag high. We will always honour Hugh Masekela.