

Twin Cities Arts Reader

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REVIEW: Ladysmith Black Mambazo Still Smithing Strong (State Theatre)

• **Arts Music** by **Dan Reiva** - February 12, 2017



Photo by Luis Lea.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo's recent performance at the State Theatre was as much about educating the audience on the group's African musical heritage as it was about entertainment. Most of the songs they performed were from their most recent album *Walking in the Footsteps of Our Fathers*, which has been nominated for Best World Music Album of 2016 and marks the group's 17th Grammy Award nomination. Their performance was a delightful *a cappella* experience.

This ensemble of nine men sings in a call-and-response style developed out of a traditional South African style called *isicathamiya* (is-cot-a-me-ya) that features tight harmonies and vocal polyrhythms. The performers stated that the style came from South Africans who worked the mines. Ladysmith tours the world with this music and a stated goal of promoting peace, love, and harmony. As they performed their music, you almost believe it could have such an extraordinary influence.



Photo by Shane Doyle.

My exposure to music from the continent of Africa is highly filtered through pop culture. There is the second side of Neil Diamond's *Tap Root Manuscript* featuring work inspired from his personal journey to Africa in search of the musicological roots of rock'n roll. New rhythms and background vocal stylings can be found on the better tracks of the album *Band on the Run* by Paul McCartney and Wings when they recorded at EMI's studio in Kenya. Mick Fleetwood (of Fleetwood Mac fame) even put out an album of African music he recorded on the continent.

Ultimately, it was Ladysmith's collaboration with Paul Simon on his 1986 album *Graceland* that turned the intricate sound of South African musical traditions into world music. Paul Simon produced Ladysmith's first worldwide release "Shaka Zulu," which won a Grammy Award in 1988 for Best Folk Recording.

Since then, the group has toured worldwide and has been awarded three more Grammy Awards for "Raise Your Spirit Higher" (2004), "Ilembe" (2009), and "Singing for Peace Around the World" (2013).

Some of the songs performed in Saturday's concert were sung in their original language. This posed no impediment to the audience's enjoyment. The full-sounding vocal interaction of rhythm, melody, counter melody and harmonies enveloped the listener. The lead singer for the songs was changed several

times, moving back into the ensemble so as to demonstrate the communal nature of their music.

The titles of the non-English songs did not stay with me, but they also performed several songs that contained English lyrics that helped my understanding. “All Women are Beautiful” and “Because I Love You” were wonderful ballads with the ensemble singers at times stepping forward to dance or add some comic touch through movement.

“Homeless” was the work that the audience most connected with, having been on Paul Simon’s “Graceland” album. It was here that movement in rhythm with the singing created a powerful empathy for the poorest-of-the-poor around the world.

“Tough Times Never Last” was the climactic musical-theatrical gem of the concert. It told the story of the black workers in the mines of South Africa who were taken by train to mines far away from home and family. The ensemble members sang and enacted vignettes to show the poorly paid miners’ backbreaking, spirit-crushing work without respite. The miners often sang from Saturday night to Sunday morning in search of hope and solace.

Halfway through the concert, the audience was introduced to Albert Mazibuko, who has been with Ladysmith for 48 years and is the oldest member of the ensemble. At the end of the final encore, he restated the positive message that we all need to relate to each other and work together for peace. As I exited, I bought one of Ladysmith’s CD’s to share this enlightening music with my family.

Dan Reiva

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