

The all-rounder

# MANDISI DYANTYIS

South African  
singer, songwriter,  
trumpeter,  
fashion icon and  
thespian excels at  
it all.

If creativity was personified, it would be South African jazz maestro Mandisi Dyantyis. He has penned two albums: his 2018 debut titled *Somandla*, masterfully followed up by his 2021 sophomore *Cwaka*. The sultry singer and trumpeter is also a musical theatre director and a fashion icon. If the roaring twenties had jazz dresses and the nineties had unisex styles, then modern South African jazz and contemporary gospel has Dyantyis Dapper.

It is his natural, effortless manner that elevated this Gqeberha native to a place where he is simultaneously revered in multiple disciplines. On the one hand, he manages to seamlessly flow between choral folk songs, jazz, gospel, and classical, while on the other, he oozes elegance and



understated flair. With all the attention he is receiving, he says he has a simple story to tell, using creative outlets.

"I was raised by a single mother and my grandmother, along with many other children. Because we did not have much growing up, we ate food from the same dish, shared all we had, and the kitchen table was the genesis of it all," says the Cape Town-based artist who wrote the music for last year's film, *Rise: The Siya Kolisi Story*, as well as for the US ballet "Nina: By Whatever Means", detailing the life of jazz all-rounder Nina Simone.

"My grandmother was a staunch Christian, and she would often wake up at 3am to pray, and then ask someone to sing with her. That person was often me. I did not see it as creativity at that time, but an opportunity to simply be with my grandmother," he says.

Dyantyis goes on to say there was even a time in his life when he thought secular music from abroad was the standard, something he quickly learnt to correct.

"I studied classical music throughout my schooling career and received a BMus Honours degree in Jazz Studies in 2005 from the University of Cape Town. While studying music and musicians from outside of Africa, I elevated them over South African compositions. But the turning point was when I keenly observed that all the successful artists in the world had something in common: their offerings had a sense of home, which they all incorporated in their environment. That was major for me," enthuses the artist who has recently gone on to garner his Masters degree in music.

On every single one of his songs, from the romantic "Molo Sisi" and "Ndimthanda", to the heartbreaking ode to his late brother, "Olwethu", Dyantyis sings exclusively and intentionally in his home language of isiXhosa.

"I often joke with friends when they ask me if I have listened to some or other song from abroad, and I ask in jest if that person has listened to South African songs. As much as I appreciate music from all over the world, I think South Africans suffer from feeling inferior. We think we are not as great as the rest of the world, and we really are that good, if not better.

"We live in a country where parents want what's best for their children, and this often means taking these children to schools that do not teach African languages. So, it gives me great pleasure when I hear children singing my songs like 'Isithandwa Sam'. I would also like to think I am part of the movement that is leading to so many South African artists celebrating their mother tongues by singing in vernacular. By this, we are validating all South African languages, not just one," he says.

What will stand Dyantyis in good stead is to be one of the finest to have ever contributed to South African and global creativity, and not limiting himself to being a lyrical and spiritual balladeer. He is branching out and collaborating with other like-minded individuals and collectives.

The award-winning composer has shared projects with choreographer and dancer Mthuthuzeli November, visual artist Banele Khoza (for an animated show broadcast on MTV), and visual artist Nelson Makamo.

He is also Musical Theatre Director at Isango Ensemble and has been with the theatre company since 2006. He has been arranger and composer of all their productions, including *The Magic Flute – Impempe Yomlingo*, *A Christmas Carol – iKrismas Kherol*, *Venus and Adonis*, *The Mysteries – Yimimangaliso*, *Aesop's Fables* and *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists – Izigwili Ezidlakazelayo*.

"Theatre helps me with storytelling, especially in my music. In theatre, if a character or part of a show is not telling a particular story, it gets cut. That continues to help me harness the storytelling power of music," he concludes. As the name and musicality of Mandisi Dyantyis edges closer to icons such as Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela and Abdullah Ibrahim, his socially conscious lyrics, Xhosa-inspired threads, and respect for all humans will be his legacy.

