

For the love of JAZZ

Vocalist, instrumentalist and composer **Mandisi Dyantyi** has captured audiences with his musical versatility and storytelling

Words by **Shannon Manuel**
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BORN AND RAISED IN GQEBERHA, PREVIOUSLY PORT ELIZABETH, Mandisi Dyantyi says music was part of his daily life when he was growing up. He'd participate in family choirs and bands, learned to play the trumpet at eight years old, studied classical music in school and attended the University of Cape Town (UCT), graduating with an Honours degree in Jazz Studies and playing in the university's Big Band. Dyantyi is a multifaceted musician, composer, arranger and producer, not only in Jazz but Western-classical and indigenous African music.

He's performed with numerous well-known musicians, including Jimmy Dlodlu, the Abdullah Ibrahim Big Band, Robbie Jansen, Max Vidima and Moreira Chonguiça, and has performed at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival and the Joy of Jazz festival. Since 2008, he's been the musical

director for the theatre company Isango Ensemble, with whom he's travelled the world working on productions including 'The Magic Flute', 'Carmen', 'Venus and Adonis' and 'A Christmas Carol'.

In 2018, he released his first album *Somandla* to rave reviews. It features his work with the Isango Ensemble. He released a second album, *Cwaka*, last December.

GQ: Tell us about your experience of creating your debut album?

Mandisi Dyantyi: *Somandla* is a culmination of a journey that took many years, an opportunity to bring the songs to life I'd been writing since I was a boy. While at university, I participated in theatrical performances, subsequently as a musical director, so, for a long time, I wasn't performing as a musical artist. But I'd accumulated numerous songs



because I never stopped writing. When we started performing in small jazz venues and clubs in Cape Town, I began formulating the music I intended to include on my album.

When we decided to record that first album, we thought about what we wanted to say to people and took it from there. We didn't say, oh, we're going to record now, let's write songs. They were already there, and the band was familiar with them, making the recording process seamless. By the time we went to the studio, we knew what to do.

GQ: Given that *Somandla* was so successful, was there an added pressure to make *Cwaka* even better?

MD: I think, for any musician, recording a second album is one of the hardest things to do, especially if your first one has done well. So, I needed to wait until I was in another space, far removed from my first album, because I didn't want what I'd done before to cloud what I did next. And I had to work on myself. A lot happened in between those two albums, including the pandemic. As musicians, we had to find new ways to create and perform. My band and I started 'The Living Room Sessions' to perform and converse about music – and the series attracted a decent audience. It also allowed me to introduce new music, which I included on *Cwaka*, and the response was positive, which helped the process of creating it.

GQ: Where do you draw inspiration for your songs?

MD: I used to say to people – and they never understood it – that I run away from songwriting. Songs seek me out. I never wake up and think, *today I need to be an artist and write a song*. People, life, watching the world and your feelings toward other people inspire songs. I believe inspiration is everywhere, and I don't pressure myself to make something. Creating is part of our daily lives; it finds us when it needs us.

GQ: To which of your songs do you feel most connected?

MD: All my songs are special to me. Even when my recording company would ask me to reveal my favourite single, I couldn't pick one. I view my albums as books, stories with a beginning, middle and end. You can turn to any page, but I can't because it's a true story for me. I write about the times in which I'm living.

Back in 2018, when I wrote *Somandla*, we were dealing with uncertainty about the government, wondering if it would positively change the economy and lives. So the lyrics in my songs were laced with queries, confusion, dark spaces conveying loneliness, searching

for acceptance and love, and social commentary.

The pandemic brought with it so much loss and uncertainty about the future. *Cwaka's* themes are rebuilding and dealing with grief and loss.

The song 'Isigidimi' talks about the call I received to tell me my mother had passed away. I wrote about that day, how it transpired and my first thoughts. The song 'Xola Ntliziyo' says, heal my heart. I wrote a song for a colleague whom I lost, Zamilé, to help me make sense of my loss. Most of the songs I write are *my* stories.

GQ: Has theatre influenced your music?

MD: It's helped me to focus and create a certain work ethic. In theatre, you learn that not all your ideas *have* to go on stage. You have to edit because sometimes all your ideas are decent, but the show's only so long. And it's challenging to start as a youngster and have to say, nope, that song or part isn't going to make [the final cut]. Theatre encourages storytelling and its importance, as it's based on stories. You might use different mediums to tell a story – song, dance, acting – but it always has a central theme with which the viewer can connect. »





I use stories and narratives in my writing, jazz and performing. If people understand *why* and can hear the words of your song, it makes it easier for them to connect with it. I love seeing an audience engage with my music – and with *me* because, as a musician, you don't want to perform *at* your audience but *for* them and *with* them.

GQ: What do you love most about performing?

MD: I love the energy of it – seeing people singing my songs will always be one of the best experiences of my life. Playing for people is an honour, and if it's for

those who are familiar with your music, that's extra-special.

GQ: You've performed with great musicians. What have you learned from them?

MD: I like watching them at work more than speaking with them. I enjoy being in their presence when they're rehearsing with their bands. I sit at the back of the room, watching them interact with their band, instruments and music. That's how I get to understand them and their psyche concerning their artistry. The truth is that, as artists, we can't explain our art because it's something you can't put into words.

The most important thing for me is watching an artist work, how they introduce a song to their band, practice it, their pre-performance rituals and how they carry themselves at a gig.

GQ: What's your opinion of South African jazz?

MD: We can do more to remove stereotypes attached to jazz. In America, so-called jazz musicians want the genre to be named Black American music. I think the word jazz has many connotations and layers. The genre needs to be more accessible because it's beautiful regardless of its name. It represents

our country, incorporating its many cultures: Malay, Zulu, Xhosa, Tshwane. It encourages creativity and collaboration.

GQ: What do you enjoy listening to?

MD: I listen to everyone and everything across genres. Lately, I've been intentionally listening to African musicians, such as Richard Bona, Lionel Loueke, Baaba Maal, Salif Keïta, Angélique Kidjo, Thandiswa Mazwai, Simphiwe Dana, Ringo Madlingozi and Oliver Mtukudzi. And I listen to amapiano.

GQ: What do you love most about music?

MD: Good music changes us, and it's like a mirror that shows us our lives, our emotions, while we're listening to it. You might start crying when you didn't know you were sad. Or it might make you happy for no reason. Music grows with us and transports us to moments in our lives. As part of my set, I sing a hymn or two because it takes me back to the memory of when my family and I would sing hymns before we prayed at night. Music carries history.

GQ: What's your most memorable career highlight, and what's next for you?

MD: Everything, including this interview, feels like a highlight right now. I'm still here to perform and have the ability to create. Before the lockdown, I was supposed to perform at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival and the Joy of Jazz festival, two of the biggest events in South Africa. Playing for a full house pre-Covid-19 is also worth mentioning. People always talk about how they connect emotionally with music, and that's wonderful. It makes all the hardships and the emotional journey of writing and producing songs worthwhile. My future goal is to be and do better. ❌