

## Music

# Almighty talent of Dyantysis

The musician has an electric stage presence, but his studio album *Somandla* captures that same spirit

Kwanele Sosibo

In an online video titled *Mandisi Dyantysis Somandla*, the artist — clad in a rugby jersey with his trumpet cradled in one hand — gives us the origin stories of the tracks on his album. Watching it, you soon realise that he is actually imagining himself live on stage, translating the recorded material for an imaginary audience.

*Somandla*, Mandisi Dyantysis's album released earlier this year, is perhaps best imagined as a theatre production or a musical in which the tunes are deftly threaded together by interludes, which may function as dialogue.

On stage Dyantysis becomes the actual thread, using humorous anecdotes and spontaneous banter to cajole, heckle and, ultimately, bewitch his audience. From watching Dyantysis perform during the Jazz Encounters concert at The Mix in Sophiatown, it was clear that the theatre world he is steeped in (he is the musical director for the Cape Town-based company Isango Ensemble) and his ambitions as a recording artist combine to generate a hybrid creation greater than the sum of its parts.

He's a vocalist, trumpeter and all-round raconteur and *Somandla*, a collection of jazz odes, love ballads and folk songs, showcases Dyantysis's rounded experience of music, from the choral training he's had since a child to the classical and jazz training he's subsequently undertaken.

On a linguistic level, it is also a treasure trove of isiXhosa culture, with folkloric traditions rubbing shoulders with more urban iterations. "We got taught the language, as much as we learnt it esikoleni and what have you, but we got taught the importance of the language in church," says Dyantysis, somewhat surprisingly.

"I come from a traditional Methodist church. When we were studying in model C schools we'd come to church on Sunday and they'd expect us to be able to read ibhayibile yesiXhosa, you understand what I mean?" he asks. "There was a time when vernacular languages were not being sung: people were shy to sing them because they felt that they were dividing people. And to me, it's not about that. For me to say without a shadow of a doubt — to say this is my story — it needs to come out in the language that I think in."

As a theatre practitioner, Dyantysis pays particular attention to mood in his music, but sometimes he complicates this to deepen his sociological analysis of the conditions he lays bare. A case in point is the delivery of the song *Kuse Kude* (a tune about incestuous rape), which at face value is a jovial song until the

melody develops in earnest, with emotive vocal stacking and shifting tones.

"All of these atrocities that are happening in our society — they are happening in a society that is ignoring them," he says. "A kid is raped and people are still continuing with their lives. Parents are raped, and people are still continuing with their lives, as long as it is not affecting them," he says. "Maybe the rhythm is a metaphor for our society ... We're not gonna stop. There is a new phenomenon now, older people ezilalini are getting killed because they are thought to be witches. So if ugo wakho is caught outside at night, maybe wandering because she is old, she will be killed and all these things are continuing to happen in a society that doesn't want to stop and say, 'Hang on? Are we animals or what? What is happening to us?'"

Dyantysis says people often confess to being caught off guard by his admonishing lyrics, set to a danceable song that seems to encourage movement. "And that's why people are surprised by it, like, 'We are dancing, Mandisi, but whenever we sing the words, it hits us like, 'Oh man, okay, okay, okay.'"

At some point in our chat, we discuss the ephemeral nature of music and how its transcendental qualities fade in the face of some of society's ever more pressing ills.

The idealism and earnestness that are part of Dyantysis's stage persona, are framed, if one considers the album's title song, by a man deferring to a higher power.

"For me, music opens me up and it makes me aware of all these things. Therefore, I sing about them all the time and they hog a certain space in my mind," he says.

"I hear people, in their everyday lives, quote lines [from] the songs that we sing. So, for me, that is a huge achievement: when someone is feeling like nothing is going for them and for someone else it's fine. And then you see people tweeting *Kode Kube Nini* (the title of one of his songs).

"I always say, before you guys have connected with the songs and they have touched you in certain ways, they have messed me up. When I come and perform them, I have already been flipped by them."

While Dyantysis is aware of his social currency as a singer and musician, his rising fame has, to a degree, altered his relationship with some of his repertoire. The burden to create, he confesses, can be heavy.

"So we released the album, right? And then I said to myself, 'I'm not writing anything.' Things would creep up and I was like, 'No. I'm not gonna write. I'm not gonna write. I'm not gonna write.'"

"There are three songs I've written that just hog my everything. They



**Man of the street: Mandisi Dyantysis in Salt River, Cape Town. The vocalist, trumpeter and musical director uses rising fame to comment on South Africa's sociological problems.**

Photo: David Harrison

**"I always tell people that, for me, a song must work hard to come out. I don't just write for the sake of it, no"**

debilitated me because they just wanted to come out," he says. "And then I wrote them because I felt like if I write them then I can just chill."

"I wrote them, felt a bit fine and then I had a gig at Café Rouge. So I went to the band and we were rehearsing for the gig. I wasn't going to play those songs but we were just not gelling. Then one guy asked me, 'Are those new songs in your file?' and I was like, 'Ja.' He was like, 'Okay let's just try them and play them.'"

"And so we played them," Dyantysis says. "The one was *Ndixolele*. Two was *Isigidimi* and the third was *Ndibonise Indlela Yami*. And now they are just part of the set."

From the August 10 set, it was clear that *Ndixolele* and *Isigidimi* have become dominant songs in Dyantysis's set, providing ample opportunities for segues into gags about the nature of male-female relationships and how we pay tribute to and honour our mothers.

"Before the album, we would

play gigs and we would swop songs because I write all the time. It's a gift that I have and I am very grateful for that," he says. "But we didn't have an album, so there were no songs that people wanted more than the others. So every gig we would change them, depending on our mood."

"And then we released an album, so people had favourites. And we had to be cognisant of the fact that even when we didn't feel like playing this song, we had to," Dyantysis says.

Perhaps the true magic of Dyantysis's approach to performance and songwriting is making all the weighty statements he delivers feel as gentle as the breeze. It is clearly a skill honed over his entire career.

As for *Somandla*'s momentum, don't let the humbling YouTube numbers fool you. The album, its intentions and the charisma it is delivered with are all becoming a movement unto themselves — even as the country capsizes.