

LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO



For more than forty years, Ladysmith Black Mambazo has married the intricate rhythms and harmonies of their native South African musical traditions to the sounds and sentiments of Christian gospel music. The result is a musical and spiritual alchemy that has touched a worldwide audience representing every corner of the religious, cultural and ethnic landscape. Their musical efforts over the past four decades have garnered praise and accolades within the recording industry, but also solidified their identity as a cultural force to be reckoned with.

Assembled in the early 1960s, in South Africa, by Joseph Shabalala – then a young farmboy turned factory worker – the group took the name Ladysmith Black Mambazo – Ladysmith being the name of Shabalala’s rural hometown; Black being a reference to oxen, the strongest of all farm animals; and Mambazo being the Zulu word for axe, a symbol of the group’s vocal ability to “chop down” all things in

their path. Their collective voices were so tight and their harmonies so polished that they were eventually banned from competitions – although they were welcome to participate strictly as entertainers.

Shabalala says his conversion to Christianity, in the '60s, helped define the group's musical identity. The path that the axe was chopping suddenly had a direction: "To bring this gospel of loving one another all over the world," he says. However, he's quick to point out that the message is not specific to any one religious orientation. "Without hearing the lyrics, this music gets into the blood, because it comes from the blood," he says. "It evokes enthusiasm and excitement, regardless of what you follow spiritually."

A radio broadcast in 1970 opened the door to their first record contract – the beginning of an ambitious discography that currently includes more than forty recordings, garnering three Grammy Awards and fifteen nominations, including one for their most recent recording "Ilembe: Honoring Shaka Zulu". Their philosophy in the studio was – and continues to be – just as much about preservation of musical heritage as it is about entertainment. The group borrows heavily from a traditional music called isicathamiya (is-cot-a-ME-Ya), which developed in the mines of South Africa, where black workers were taken by rail to work far away from their homes and their families. Poorly housed and paid worse, the mine workers would entertain themselves after a six-day week by singing songs into the wee hours on Sunday morning. When the miners returned to the homelands, this musical tradition returned with them.

In the mid-1980s, Paul Simon visited South Africa and incorporated Black Mambazo's rich tenor/alto/bass harmonies into his *Graceland* album – a landmark 1986 recording that won the Grammy Award for Best Album and is considered seminal in introducing world music to mainstream audiences.

In addition to their work with Paul Simon, Ladysmith Black Mambazo have recorded with numerous artists from around the world, including Stevie Wonder, Josh Groban, Dolly Parton, Sarah McLaughlin, Emmylou Harris, Natalie Merchant, Mavis Staples, Ry Cooder and Ben Harper.

Their film work includes a featured appearance in Michael Jackson's *Moonwalker* video and Spike Lee's *Do It A Cappella*. Black Mambazo provided soundtrack material for Disney's *The Lion King, Part II* as well as Eddie Murphy's *Coming To America*, Marlon Brando's *A Dry White*

Season, Sean Connery's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and James Earl Jones' *Cry The Beloved Country*. A recent film documentary titled *On Tip Toe: Gentle Steps to Freedom*, the story of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, was even nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary. The group is well known for its Life Savers candy commercials. Their performance with Paul Simon on *Sesame Street* is legendary and is one of the top three requested *Sesame Street* segments in history.

Black Mambazo has been invited to perform at many special events including events for the Queen of England and the Royal Family, two Nobel Peace Prize Ceremonies, a concert for Pope John Paul II in Rome, the South African Presidential inaugurations and many other special events.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo has been nominated for a Grammy 12 times ... and won it 3 times. Latest Grammy: 2009 – Best Traditional World Music Album.

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