

# THE MAHOTELLA QUEENS



“Amid the plethora of packaged popsters that are deemed worthy of VIP treatment, stands a timeless trio that truly deserves the status of musical royalty!

Hilda Tloubatla, Nobesuthu Mbadu and Mildred Mangxola are indeed queens - **The Mahotella Queens** - 3 doyennes, who since the mid-sixties, have been singing, dancing and selling-out shows worldwide.

Theirs is not the artificially manufactured majesty of mass hype; instead it is innovation, hard work, perseverance and sheer musical magic that qualify them to wear crowns.

Together with the ‘Makhona Tsothle Band’, and the late, great, bass “groaner”, Mahlatini, they invented “Mbaqanga” - a potent mix of various South African and imported styles - an explosive sound; intimately regional yet widely universal, which not only changed the course of music in their country, but continues to captivate the world.

With the warmth of captivating songs and energetic dance routines, they carved their path through the 1960's, and across the '70's triumphantly, setting international stages alight by the mid-'80's, well into the '90's.... and onwards....

When asked how many recordings they've released, Hilda responds with:

“Whooo! ...it's too much...from our first hit in '64 'til now... I can't even estimate!”

1997 saw their final performance as the full band, because a series of tragedies struck. In 1998, on the very day they buried West Nkosi, a key member and co-producer who was killed in a car crash, their lead guitarist Marks Mankwane died.

And finally, when their famed counterpart, Simon "Mahlathini" Nkabinde died in 1999 after a lengthy illness, the Queens stopped singing and resigned themselves to retirement.

But spurred on by the hope of keeping Mahlathini's spirit alive, the trio returned, as undivided as always - together taking up the torch they illuminated their future, affirming their individual skills as soloists, songwriters and arrangers.

First they released "*Sebai-Bai*" in 2001, featuring a new backing band alongside World Music stars like Madagascar's accordion master, Regis Gizavo. They embraced international elements in this album dedicated to Mahlathini and the 'Makgona Tsohle Band'.

Then in 2004 came the electro-Mbaqanga explorations of "*Bazobuya*", followed in 2005 by "*Reign & Shine*" - a predominantly accapella album of naked beauty, interspersed with touches of instrumental accompaniment, but loaded with social and moral messages.

This was closely followed by *Kazet*, an international variation with a couple of delightful additions.

Using their decades-old style, they've traversed the fickle landscape of an unforgiving industry with resilience and inventiveness. Always willing to experiment, The Queens continually add new ingredients and everfresh adaptations to the deeply-rooted recipe of their 'mbaqanga' pot - giving them neverending appeal.

Now, as their latest opens with a church organ riff that swiftly turns to Mbaqanga swing, heralding in the invigorating presence of Nobesuthu's song - it's obvious that this is a gospel album.

Then come the harmonies of Hilda and Mildred, and 'Hallelujah!' responds an uplifting male voice.

And "Hallelujah!" it is - because while gospel is still the most widely popular, and best-selling genre of South African music, its flaw [in musical terms], is that it tends to be agonizingly formulaic, with endlessly repetitive renditions that mostly seem so mournful.

Well, here's the album for those that hanker for inspirational songs that celebrate spirituality and exuberantly express gratitude. This is a praise project that will fulfill followers of the faith, and possibly even convert a few secular musical sceptics.

The Queens didn't specifically set out to do a gospel album, but being born-again Christians, they'd had it in mind; so when the record company approached them, proposing such a release, they were elated.

And it makes sense, because moving through the album, it's clear that their church choir sessions form the basis of this sound. And perhaps it's the regularity of this religious ritual, that adds to the intimacy with which they converse in amazing overlays.

More likely it's the 40-plus years of performing together, that makes it seem that these sisters have been doing it forever! But the apparent ease with which they weave their vocals is also result of ongoing, and continued hard work – this is mastery inherent and earned!

As Hilda says:

*"I guess we are true musicians – born musicians – we're talented! We've got the spirit of true musicians, hence we know how to go about a song... how to do a song, like with "Town Hall" [a song we know how to sing]... & people ask, how do you do it, how do you start, cos we don't see anyone doing a sign to say now we're going to do this...? Its in us... we've been together for a long time, hence we know exactly what to do.."*

And as their voices interweave, so do the styles... assimilations embroidered into a tapestry of rich expression, which gently defy the limitations of local gospel, elevating it to a new level. Uncontrived, a sincerity seeps through as they blend sacred hymns with touches of marabi, soul, jazz, and of course Mbaqanga.

Overall, this is a joyful statement of faith - spiritual exuberance uncontained - but for those still in need of some serious 'praise', there are also some slower, more sombre songs.

Alongside the solid artistry of their regular band, the acclaimed bassist, Jabu Sibumbe is added. This longtime veteran of South African sound was fatefully called in to session after the Queens' bass player was involved in a car accident:

*"He was a blessing from god, hence we said, we need Jabu to be our producer, he's beautiful, he's done a great job."*

Then there's a glistening guitar that threads a Southern African rumba flavour throughout. In asking of this artist so distinctive but apparently unknown, the invisible force of destiny is again exposed, with Hilda responding:

*"Aaah! O my god... John... We just got this boy... he's new, very new, we rehearsed with him, for not even a month, maybe a week... what a beautiful guy,*

*my heart is sore... and when I talk about him, I say we found a guitarist who plays exactly like Marks Mankwane, our first guitarist.. it's like you're listening to him!"*

But tragically, after only a week of recording, John Papo died, so all that remains are his intermittent solos of such mindblowing excellence, that one wonders if he'd said all he had to, and then left...

Also noted is the regular reappearance of that powerful male voice first heard on the 'Hallelujah' of the opening track. On "*Usathane Uyadelela*", a traditional rearranged by Mildred, he's superbly featured in the same call-and-response style that made them so famous - but this is no would-be Mahlatini! While this voice also has a rich resonance, there's no gruffness here - it's beauty is smoother, more velvety, and yet there's something strangely familiar....

And no wonder, because this young star is Alfred 'Ali' Temo, Hilda's son – so the legacy continues...

But at the same time, this latest offering affirms that besides being icons of unity and empowerment, living legends that represent history ...the **Mahotella Queens** are still ruling now!

This recording has been described as [Valpre] the finest South African spring water, bottled at it's source. And having been cleansed by this purity, we come to the end, with Hilda singing "on the high level of the holy spirit" , so we can rest assured that ...

**"It is Well!" ( NICKY BLUMENFELD – MARCH 2007)**

**2008** saw the Mahotella Queens in a great line up with Freshlyground and Hugh Masekela perform at the AVO Session in Switzerland. Their concert will be presented on TV in over 40 countries worldwide in 2009.

**Exclusive booking Mahotella Queens – Europe:**

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