

MAHOTELLA QUEENS



Not many musical groups can lay claim to defining an entire genre. One of the most famous names in South African music, the **Mahotella Queens** arose in **1964** to become the country's premier **mbaqanga** vocal harmony group. Led by the deep, bass 'groaning' vocals of **Mahlathini** and backed by the **Makgona Tsohle Band**, this dynamic instrumental and vocal combination became the most popular musical attraction in South Africa in the **1960s** and early **1970s**. Dozens of hit singles and countless tours of the country and neighbouring **Lesotho**, **Botswana**, the then-**Rhodesia**, **Malawi** and **Mozambique** helped to cement **Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens'** position as the yardstick by which other **mbaqanga**

groups were measured. Now in their **61st year**, the **Mahotella Queens** are revitalised, renewed and ready to bring the exciting sound of South Africa back to a world audience.

The origins of the **Queens** are rooted in the apartheid-stricken conditions of **1960s South Africa**. Veteran producer and talent scout **Rupert Bopape**, then one of the country's most influential music executives, joined record company **Gallo Africa** in **1964** with the instruction to create a fresh-faced, exciting new musical act for the African public. As fate would have it, all of these elements coalesced under **Bopape's** leadership almost immediately. Firstly there was **Simon 'Mahlathini' Nkabinde**, born in **1941** in the latter-day **KwaZulu-Natal**, who was already a hugely talented star. Then there was trumpeter **Shadrack Piliso**, a musical arranger with a unique knack for melody and vocal harmony. The band that **Bopape** later christened the **Makgona Tsohle Band** (a **Sesotho** reference best translated as "the band that can play anything") comprised true musical innovators: lead guitarist **Marks Mankwane**, rhythm guitarist **Vivian Ngubane**, electric bassist **Joseph Makwela**, drummer **Lucky Monama** and alto saxophonist/pennywhistler **West Nkosi**.

The final component of the new act was the **Mahotella Queens**, formed by **Bopape** from daily auditions at the **Gallo** building. The very first line-up of the **Queens** comprised **Hilda Tloubatla** on lead vocals, backed by **Ethel Mngomezulu** and **Nunu Maseko**. The name was inspired by the roadside hotels in which **Bopape's** girl groups made regular stage appearances. The line-up of the **Queens** was soon augmented by **Juliet Mazamisa**, **Windy Sibeko**, **Mildred Mangxola**, **Thoko Nontsontwa** and **Nobesuthu Mbadu**. The sweet, joyous close harmonies of the **Queens**, counteracted by **Mahlathini's** deep bass 'groaning' and **Makgona Tsohle's** lilting guitar accompaniment, became one of the most loved and prominent musical attractions in South Africa in the **1960s** and **'70s**. For the rest of the **1960s**, such evergreen jive numbers as "**Pitsa Tse Kgolo**", "**Sithunyiwe**", "**Dikgomo**", "**Jive Motella**", "**Izulu Liyaduduma**", "**Bantwanyana**", "**Lilizela**", "**Mahlare**", "**Guga Mzimba**" and countless other gems dominated the radio airwaves. Their stage act was not to be missed either. **Mahlathini** commanded the audience with his 'bushman' act, offset by the ladies' winning combination of traditional African war and wedding dance with American twist and jive, all performed with girlish self-assurance.

Inevitably, the good times came to an end in the mid-**1970s**. The original **Queens** dispersed into rival groups after a payment dispute; **Mahlathini** quit **Gallo** for another label; **Bopape** and **Piliso** retired from the music business; and the **Makgona Tsohle Band** split to fulfill new producing roles in **Gallo**. **West Nkosi** went on to produce some of the best South African popular music acts of the day, including a then unknown **Durban**-based **Zulu choir** named **Ladysmith Black Mambazo**. **Marks Mankwane**, the excellent guitarist and budding arranger, kept the **Mahotella Queens** brand alive with new members through a difficult late **1970s/early 1980s** period of soul, disco and bubblegum music.

But while **mbaqanga** was at its lowest ebb in South Africa, its uplifting beat had started seeping into the public consciousness overseas. In **1983**, **Malcolm McLaren** utilised the services of **mbaqanga** session players on his crossover album **Duck Rock**, which 'borrowed' several backing tracks from **Mahotella** singles released in South Africa in the **1970s**. Then, in **1986**, **Paul Simon** recruited a number of famous South African names to produce his seminal **mbaqanga**-driven record **Graceland**, awarded **Album of the Year** at the **1987 Grammys**.

These projects sparked major international interest in **mbaqanga** music. In the wake of **Graceland**, two **French** music promoters visited South Africa in **1987** with the intention of returning home with some thrilling African musical talent. **West Nkosi** reassembled the original golden trio – **Mahlathini**, three of the original **Mahotella Queens** (**Hilda Tloubatla**, **Nobesuthu Mbadu** and **Mildred Mangxola**) and **Makgona Tsohle** – to perform for the **French** visitors. Before the '80s were over, **Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens** were one of the most active live performance acts from South Africa, with regular visits to **North America**, the **United Kingdom**, **France**, **Germany**, the **Netherlands**, **China**, **Japan** and **Australia**.

For the next decade, **Mahlathini and the Queens** were kept busy both in the studio and with a string of international tour dates. These included a live performance before **500,000** people in **New York's Central Park** in **1991**; an appearance at **Nelson Mandela's 70th Birthday Concert** in **Wembley Stadium** in **1988**, before an estimated global television audience of **600 million**; numerous appearances at **WOMAD festivals**; and a special performance at **Mandela's presidential inauguration** in **Pretoria** in

1994. This busy work schedule continued until the untimely, successive deaths of **West Nkosi, Marks Mankwane** and **Mahlathini** in the late **1990s**.

After a period of mourning, lead vocalist **Hilda** took charge of the act, keeping the show on the road in memory of their fallen comrades. The return of the **Mahotella Queens** saw the release of their first album without **Mahlathini** and the **Makgona Tsohle Band, Sebai Bai**. This was followed in **2000** by the **2nd annual WOMEX Award** for outstanding contribution to world music. In **2005**, the **Mahotella Queens** were each honoured with the prestigious **Order of Ikhamanga in Bronze** for outstanding contributions in traditional music. In recent years, eclectic collaborations with **Idris Elba, Coldplay, John Legend, David Byrne, Gotye** and South African luminaries **Hugh Masekela, P.J. Powers, Lance James** and hip-hop megastar **Cassper Nyovest** have helped to both sustain the **Mahotella Queens** brand and enhance their appeal.

The unavoidable passage of time has seen group regulars **Nobesuthu** and **Mildred** retire due to ill health. At the grand age of **83**, **Hilda Tloubatla** has lost none of her musical prowess and vivacious stage energy. As the last remaining original member, she recruited two young performers, **Amanda Nkosi** and **Nonku Maseko**, training and educating them in every aspect of **mbaqanga** music and of the **Queens'** journey. The result has injected the stage act with youthful and renewed vigour, while securing the integrity of the group.

In **2025**, after decades under the management of major record companies, the **Queens** signed exclusively to **Umsakazo Records**, a **UK-based** label dedicated to the heritage of pure South African **mbaqanga jive**. **Umsakazo** has released several albums of new music as well as quality reissues and compilations of historic material from the **mbaqanga archives**. This joining of the oldest and newest advocates of **mbaqanga** marks a momentous new chapter in both of their stories and that of South African arts and culture in general. The group's first album of new material in two decades, **Buya Buya: Come Back**, is out on **Umsakazo** on **25 July** on digital, vinyl and CD. The album is the centrepiece of the **Queens'** tour of **Japan**, scheduled from **5 to 16 August**, the group's first overseas performances since **2019**.

More than six decades since their formation, the **Mahotella Queens** continue their astonishing journey far and wide to audiences young and old.

The MAHOTELLA QUEENS are: HILDA TLOUBATLA AMANDA NKOSI NONKU MASEKO

accompanied by: KAGISO 'BOIKIE' MONAMPANA (lead guitar) **KHOLA PHALATSE** (bass guitar) **JACKIE MOKOATLO** (keyboards) **TSHEPA DIALE** (drums)



The Mahotella Queens will be on tour with their new album again in 2026. This in cooperation between their new label & management (with name Nick Lotay) and Griot GmbH.

Griot started working with the **MAHOTELLA QUEENS** in 2008 when we invited them as a special guest for a concert with **HUGH MASEKELA** in Basel. **FRESHLYGROUND** was already part of this concert and we were thinking of Busi Mhlongho as the other guest - while it was actually Matthias Müller (former director of The AVO Session - now Baloise Session) who had the fabulous idea to invite „THE QUEENS“. That's how our cooperation started ...

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