

FRIENDS OF AFROPOP NEWSLETTER

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LET FREEDOM SING!

benefit concert inducts the Mahotella Queens, Dorothy Masuka, and Thomas Mapfumo into the *Afropop Hall of Fame*. Bonnie Raitt hosts and performs.

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Text and photos
by Banning Eyre

It was a night for the history books at the Bottom Line on April 29, when Afropop Worldwide presented *Let Freedom Sing*, two sets of music starring The Mahotella Queens, Dorothy Masuka, Thomas Mapfumo, and special guest Bonnie Raitt. The event was part awards ceremony, part fundraiser, part observance of South Africa Freedom Day--the anniversary of that country's first true election--and *all* spectacular music. Mapfumo, Masuka, and the Queens were all inducted into the

Afropop Hall of Fame. Funds were raised for

Afropop Worldwide, Voice of the People (Zimbabwe's only private radio station), and the families of Zimbabwean musicians who have died of AIDS in recent years. There were serious words spoken about the long path to achieve freedom from apartheid in South Africa, and the ongoing struggle to achieve freedom from newer forms of tyranny in neighboring Zimbabwe. But what most will remember is surely the music that came from one of the most dazzling lineups of southern African musical royalty ever assembled on a New York stage, and from one wild, American redhead with an African soul.

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*Ish Mafundikwa,
Sean Barlow,
Thomas Mapfumo
and Bonnie Raitt at
Let Freedom Sing!*

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LET FREEDOM SING! By Banning Eyre

Bonnie Raitt has been a Friend of Afropop since well before she joined the Afropop crew on travels in Mali and Cuba in 2000. By good luck, South African Freedom day (April 27) came just as Raitt was planning to be in the New York area promoting her terrific new album *Silver Lining* (Capitol). The album has a Zimbabwe connection via its cover of Oliver Mtukudzi's "Hear Me Lord," as well as a Mali connection via Raitt's collaboration with Habib Koite.

Afropop Worldwide host Georges Collinet, originally scheduled to be Raitt's onstage foil, was called away to an emergency assignment in West Africa, so Executive Producer Sean Barlow stepped up to the plate. Raitt found time to reminisce humorously about tent life in Timbuktu with Barlow and the Afropop crew. But she also returned often to the themes of the night: celebrating music, and reaching out to people suffering in southern Africa. "Our hearts go out to those in Zimbabwe who are struggling with so much," said Raitt. "We must let freedom sing, not just tonight, but every day."

The other business of the night was the inducting of artists into the Afropop Hall of Fame, which honors artists, individuals and organizations who have made extraordinary contributions to advancing understanding and appreciation of contemporary African music.

The Mahotella Queens bustled onto the stage with their backing band which they still call Makgona Tshole, the Jack of All Trades Band, but the members are no longer the gentlemen who first went by that name in 1964, but rather kids who weren't even born then. "This month, I turned 60 years old," said

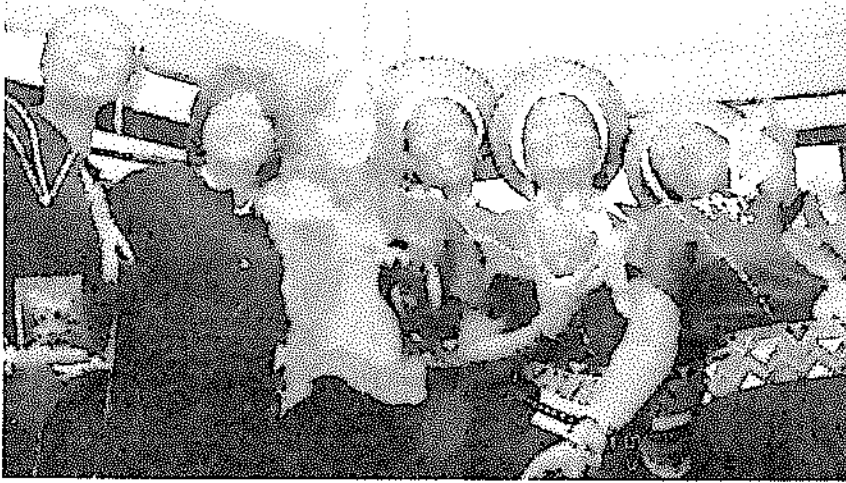
together in one of the richest, fullest, most disarmingly beautiful vocal sounds in pop music anywhere. After a selection of old and new songs, the Queens invited a special guest to the stage.



Mahotella Queen Hilda Tloubatla, in a boast that went down very well with Raitt. Raitt has been telling interviewers all spring that so far her 50s are her best decade yet. Just the same, when Hilda found a moment to propose that Raitt sing a song with the Queens on their next album, the American singer replied that she would need to take heart medication for the session.

Heart is certainly in long supply in the Queens' act. They still spring and cavort like school girls in joyously synchronized moves. Better still, their voices still come

Dorothy Masuka recorded her first hit—at age 16—in 1951, when the Queens actually **were** school girls, and Raitt was just a baby. After a storybook life of young musical glory, protest and confrontation with the South African authorities, decades of exile, and a triumphant return to Johannesburg in 1992, Masuka cuts a truly regal presence. To her, the Mahotella Queens are "the girls," but when she came on stage to join them for two songs, she definitely held her own, both in the cavorting and singing departments.



After this breathtaking set, South African Consul-General, Nomathamsanqa Xoliswa Ngwevela came to the stage to induct the Mahotella Queens (Hilda Tloubatla, Mildred Mangxola and Nobesuthu Mbadu) and Dorothy Masuka into the Afropop Hall of Fame. Then it was Raitt's time to shine. With her tight, rocking 5-piece band, she opened with a soulful read of the reggae-tinged "Have a Heart." Raitt's closer, was Oliver Mtukudzi's "Hear Me Lord." With its plaintive, gospel plea for divine guidance, the song seemed to encapsulate the evening's complex mix of hope, sadness, and celebration.

At the close of that first show, Dorothy Masuka and the Mahotella Queens returned to the stage to sing the South African national anthem, "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika". This time, no costumes or dancing, just one of the most beautiful female vocal ensembles ever, singing what may be the world's most soulful national anthem. Already, the night felt like a triumph.

The second show turned the spotlight from South Africa to Zimbabwe, with a long, spiritually charged set from Thomas Mapfumo and the Blacks Unlimited. Raitt and Barlow introduced the set putting the spotlight on the two Zimbabwean beneficiaries of the

evening, the independent Voice of the People radio service, and a new fund to be administered by the highly regarded Island Hospice in Harare to help pay for the education of AIDS orphans within Zimbabwe's musical community. "It costs just \$30.00 a year to send a child to school in Zimbabwe," said Barlow. "Well worth it, don't you think?"

Mapfumo is unquestionably a survivor, and he took the stage that night with seven musicians most of whom are less than half his age. With the exception of Thomas and his brother Lancelot on congas, today's Blacks Unlimited contains no members who played during the liberation struggle in the 1970s, nor even during the first decade of independence, when the band evolved to include mbiras in the lineup.

Mapfumo was inducted into the Afropop Hall of Fame by Ish Mafundikwa of Zimbabwe's brave new private radio station, *Voice of the People*. VOP airs non-partisan information on voter and consumer rights, environmental and gender issues, as well as varied music programming, including Afropop Worldwide. But in the paranoid environment of Mugabe's Zimbabwe, where independent voices are feared deeply by the powerful, VOP faces long odds.

Having flown from Zimbabwe specifically to be at Let Freedom Sing, Mafundikwa conveyed a deep sense of honor and import in presenting Mapfumo, a cultural icon, with his award.

Then Raitt and her band came back with a cooler set, including a smoldering slow blues, her shuffling 1990s radio hit, "Love Letter," and of course, "Hear Me Lord," which once again raised the rafters.

Let Freedom Sing did not guarantee a future for Voice of the People. It did not solve the problems of the AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe's musical community. And it did not rescue Afropop Worldwide from its own financial challenges. But it brought together a New York community, and indeed a worldwide community, in a powerful observation of life, history, and the music that binds all of us together. As Raitt told a reporter from *allafrica.com*, "It is important to support something that lets the rest of the world know where rock'n roll, R'n B, jazz-- where it all started from." Indeed, the lines that divide musical genres, cultures, countries, and people seemed to grow a little thinner that night.

*If you missed the event, but you still want to support the causes of Let Freedom Sing, you can make donations electronically from our homepage— afropop.org. Click on **Let Freedom Sing**, just below Reviews. Of course, you can always write a check as well. Just send it made out to World Music Productions marked "Let Freedom Sing" to: World Music Productions, 688 Union St. Brooklyn, NY. 11215. Thanks for your support. Every dollar helps!*