AZANIA RISING: *The Soul of South Africa*

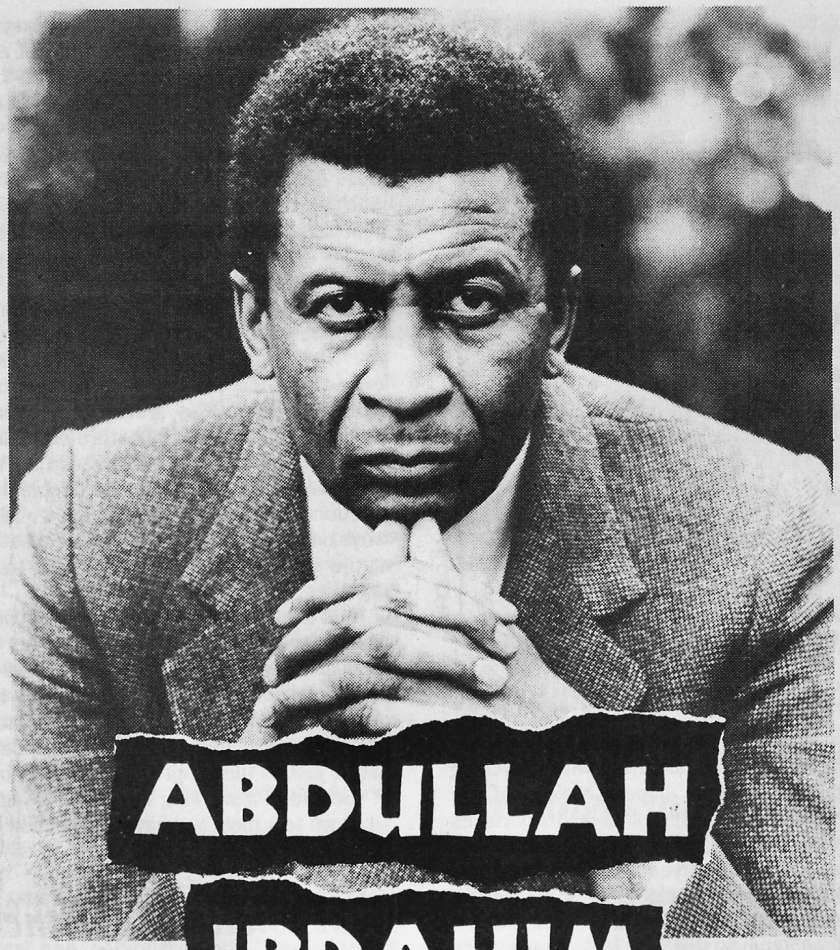


PHOTO BY VERYL OAKLAND

ABDULLAH IBRAHIM

The Revolution Will Be Improvised

By Tom Cheyney

The Catalina Bar & Grill crowd was locked in concentration on the presence behind the piano. In Hollywood, presences are around every corner, but something about this one had the modern-day hepcats' and born-again straights' rapt attention.

After his quartet had stomped through a scorching Azanian blues, Abdullah Ibrahim softly sang of "tender reunion. . .on that southern African shore." His chord-squeezing hands played a few bars, letting the notes resonate as he addressed the assembled. "This song is dedicated to the children of South Africa. . .10, 11, 12 year olds being tortured in South African prisons. There's no laughter. We know that we will be liberated. Please get used to the fact that your liberation is intricately intwined with ours. . . .See it in the hearts and eyes of the children. No more laughter, no more tears, no more sentiment. . .I'll cry tomorrow for *you*, Soweto. I'll cry tomorrow for you, *Soweto*."

The club was stone quiet. A siren wailed outside on the mean and weird Californian streets. The hush was filled with wet eyes, thoughtful expressions — so much intensity had shot from such gentle music and haunting words. The musical stream created by the Cape Town native had carried off all who had lined its banks.

Once known as Dollar Brand, a nickname given to him by merchant sailors in the Cape seaport, he was born Adolphus Johannes Brand. A resident of the (in)famous District Six of Cape Town (since leveled by the racist Pretoria regime), the young boy's musical start came when he was 7 years old, as he began piano lessons. When twice that age, Brand was already composing, drawing heavily on the inspiration of local dance bands who literally played from "Friday night right through to Monday morning."

But his musical affinities were also filled with jazz. First swing, then be-bop — the diasporic American improvisations entranced the budding bandleader.

Along with such kindred spirits as Hugh Masekela, Kippie Mokoetsi (the Charlie Parker of South Africa) and Jonas Gwangwa (current head of the African National Congress' Amandla choir), Brand formed the Jazz Epistles in 1959. The band recorded jazz-influenced original material but lasted only a few years. In 1962, unable to find anyone to help him create his burgeoning sound, the then 28-year-old Brand packed his bags and headed for Switzerland. This was his first period of exile from the apartheid state.

Three years after his exit from South Africa, Brand, along with singer (and wife) Sathima Bea Benjamin, met Duke Ellington. The master dug the South African's music and helped the young pianist record his first splash with American audiences, *Duke Ellington Presents the Dollar Brand Trio*. It was to be the first of *many* albums released in Europe and the States by the emerging African talent.

Imbued with a global reputation and recent acceptance of the Moslem faith, Abdullah Ibrahim (no more Dollar) returned to South Africa and established a music school in 1970. His stay lasted six years. During that stint, he recorded what many pundits and fans consider his strongest or at least most important work, *Mannenberg* (released as *Cape Town Fringe* in the U.S.). The title composition's ever-changing blend of jazz, South African township grooves, and Islamic and European harmonic reminders epitomized the unique creation played by Ibrahim and his comrades-in-the-muse. Following the Soweto uprising of 1976, as the strains of "Mannenberg" blared over speakers in or near shebeens, schoolyards and social halls across the troubled land, Ibrahim said his most recent farewell to the soil of his soul.

Since leaving South Africa and moving to New York City, Ibrahim has been a constant supporter of the ANC and has participated in numerous consciousness- and fund-raising concerts. Musically, he performs in anything from a solo piano context to a big-band blowout. He has released a steady output of albums, although many of them are available in import form only. (His lps can be found in cutout and used bins if patience and a keen eye are employed.)

His newest effort, *Mindif*, is the soundtrack for the film *Chocolat* (shot in Cameroon by Claire Denis), the official French entry to the 1988 Cannes Film Festival. Zagba Oyortey in *West Africa* magazine describes the musical process of the latest release: "What one begins to hear as a reworking of old tunes changes in midflight as

he moves into other areas."

On the concert front, Ibrahim joined Burning Spear and the Jazz Warriors at London's Westminster Cathedral in 1987 to honor the legacy and memory of Marcus Mosiah Garvey. He also played a part in Nelson Mandela's 70th birthday celebration in Central Park earlier this year, which was a Trans-Atlantic counterpart to the so-called Freedomfest in London.

Abdullah Ibrahim does not give interviews. Although I tried to set one up, I was unsuccessful. But he did permit a rare on-air talk with Tom Schnabel, host of KCRW-FM's "Morning Becomes Eclectic." The seldom-heard maestro showed it's not for a lack of something to say that he resists being interviewed.

You listen when one with the moral authority and aesthetic power of Ibrahim talks about the relentless struggle against the racist, degrading and unjust system perpetuated by the South African regime and its minions. So it's time to let him discuss the struggle, as he did that morning in Santa Monica.

"The struggle does not lie with one group. This is why a cultural boycott was instituted, for example, because there's always this belief that artists and sports people should not have any political inclination or make any kind of statement. But, if the schoolteacher says that, and the street sweeper says that, and the factory worker says that they cannot be politically involved, then where are we left?

"The struggle is the struggle of the people — it doesn't matter who they are. If they're trade unionists, if they're workers. . .just a family, just a mother, the sacrifice she does for her children — that's part of the struggle. It's not isolated or relegated to one specific group."

Now listen to the music. Its enjoyment and appreciation cannot be relegated to one specific group either. Communal calls are answered. ★

Selected Discography

(The following handful of records comprise my personal Dollar Brand/Abdullah Ibrahim collection. Except for a couple, all were found in used bins in several independent record stores in L.A. Many of Ibrahim's records are available on the Enja label, which is distributed in the States by Harmonia Mundi — TC.)

Anatomy of a South African Village (Polydor U.K. 2383 099, 1967)

Africa Tears and Laughter (Inner City 3031, 1980)

African Marketplace (Elektra/Asylum 6E-252, 1980)

Live at Sweet Basil, Vol. 1, with Carlos Ward (Ekapa/Blackhawk 50204 1-D, 1984/1986)

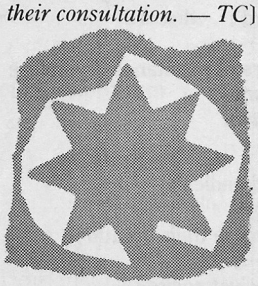
Ekaya (Home) (Ekapa/Blackhawk 50205-1D, 1984/1986)

Water from an Ancient Well (Ekapa/Blackhawk 50207-1D, 1986)

HUGH MASEKELA

"We Are The Lip"

[*The following excerpts come from a conversation I had with Hugh Masekela in March 1987 in Hollywood. He was in town as part of Paul Simon's* Graceland *revue. Masekela doesn't think the people of South Africa have been too impressed by some of the support moves made on their behalf,* without *their consultation. — TC*]



We have so much lip service, it bores me. Our revolution is so much lip service, but *we* are the lip. Nobody can lip it more than us. And we know what it [the struggle] is about. So it's a joke when anybody overseas tells me how and in what direction the situation should go when we've been working on it for so long, since before some of them were born. Where were they or their parents 30 years ago when we were saying help? Or 100 years ago when we were saying help? And now, instead of asking, 'What can we do,' they're saying, 'This is the way it should go.'

The one thing that I find ridiculous about the South African revolution itself is that nobody consults us. They have solidarity with us but they don't want to consult us on what direction their solidarity should be channeled into. . . . They always say, 'This is how we're going to support you.' They don't come and say, 'Can we consult with you, how can we help you?' They get emotionally disgusted with how inane they've been before and in the reverse process, they overreact. When you come as a liberation movement to their shores, they've already decided your policy for you. . . .

...We are not impressed anymore by seeing people being arrested near a bank or the South African embassy and being bailed out the next morning and then receiving a watch six months later for doing humanitarian work for South Africa. We are not impressed, because our people are being killed in the streets, and they don't get a watch. So if people have to help us, they have to understand how much sacrifice the people of South Africa themselves are putting into this thing and have put into it. And, of course, we expect to win the war on our own because lip is not going to help us. ★