

Power To the Woman

Pre-task: Breaking free from low self-esteem

Music is called the mother of all arts because it is the only art form that is created and destroyed in the moment, or so say the great Sufi poets. Sathima Bea Benjamin, the musical mother and South African Jazz singer supreme, describes the birth of jazz as being when a mother sang while she hung her family's washing on the line. When song comes straight from the heart, that is the essence of music.

Bonny Zulu has a bright natural singing talent. This, combined with a powerful fighting spirit, has enabled her to conquer all obstacles before her and, eventually, in her late 30s, she became a bandleader in her own right.

Bonny was adopted into a well-respected but strict church home in the dusty rural community of Ladysmith and her natural singing talent was suppressed as far back as she can remember. Her big bass voice was such an anathema to her family that she was hardly allowed to talk, let alone sing. It was a huge voice for a small girl, something most unusual. She was teased and insulted so that she began to believe she had a bad voice and was a horrible singer. But her own inspiration was so strong, she did not give up just like that. She would go and hide under the great trees that grew in her grandfather's yard and would practise singing alone every day. That was her secret corner, her spiritual cave. When she eventually emerged for good from under those trees, even her grandmother couldn't believe it. "What happened?" she exclaimed when she heard Bonny's confident new singing voice.

When Bonny arrived in Johannesburg, her talent was commented on by a taxi driver when he heard the rich textures and deep tonality of her voice in his van one-day. The taxi driver advised her to enrol for a degree in music at FUBA. Having taught herself to sing under the trees, Bonny was hesitant at the thought of formal training in a rigorous music education. She imagined music was a natural talent and a gift from God and that was enough. However, she soon realised school was probably cool and began learning the piano basics for voice training.

Just as the light expands, so the darkness grows in opposition. Bonny's talents were, sadly, undermined by jealousy and the criticism of her peers. The self-esteem issues that had plagued her as a child in the family were once more provoked.

It is at times like these, tough and hard, that most people quit. Bonny nearly did. Suffocating within the music industry, she felt forced to leave and she took a job at Truworths. Yet her powerful spirit could not be silenced. She managed the fragrance section of the store and it came so vividly alive with noise and also record perfume sales that the manager recognised her talent.

He said, “You are here because of your cruel industry.” That was true. Although Bonny did well in retail, it was not really for her. She quit and returned to her real career, to struggle though, as a backing singer.

Finding your inner voice, the magic within, is not just about mastering your technique or releasing your self-expression, but about releasing trapped energies. Bonny then had a chance encounter with the magnificent storyteller Gcina Mhlophe. She heard Bonny speaking one day, noticed the sultry tones and the big presence of a diva. Gcina hired her on the spot to join her story-telling classes.

Story-telling was a healing intervention for Bonny. She’d been wounded as a child. She had not been allowed to play with other children and had grown up not knowing them and so not liking them. Now, by playing and laughing with the children, Bonny began to rediscover what she had never had. She began to come out of her shell. She realised she had been dead all that time and that to be alive again was wonderful.

Now for some exercises:

1. Bringing Emotion into Song

When Miriam Makeba’s in-laws vilified her, she was forced into a proverbial “cave.” Her sad, crying song Umhome tells this story.

- What is the sad crying song you love to sing?
- Why do you think this song touches you so deeply?
- Sing or play this song. Write down the lyrics and meditate on it for a moment?
- How does this song relate to you and your life?

2. Activity: Journalistic writing

Music often plays a significant role in the lives of people, whether they are musicians or not, and certain kinds of music can be attached to strong memories and emotions. The voice is a major instrument in South African music.

- What is your favourite vocal music from South Africa?
- Is there a lot of information about it, scores of it or instructions on it available?

Perhaps you can help add to our research database with a podcast, video or article on the vocal style of South Africa music you love. Why don’t you experiment with making your own mini archive by using the video and/or voice recorder on your phone? You can start by asking three or more older people

in your family or community (e.g. parents, aunts or uncles, grandparents, etc.) about what kind of music they played or listened to when they were growing up. If your phone has a video editor, try putting the videos together to create a mini documentary.

3. Reflection

What do you need, to fulfil your own full potential?

- Take a blank piece of paper and draw a line down the middle.
- On the left, write all the things you want and need but don't have.
- On the right, write down all the things you have, love and are grateful for.
- Now, take a colour pen and circle three things you simply cannot do without.
- Perhaps you might like to compose a poem, a melody or a mantra of your own about this?

4. Podcast: Your Life Story

In the beautiful life story of Bonny Zulu we see how the universe expresses itself through chance encounters, inspiring her to reach deep within and release her talents.

- What are the chance encounters that have helped fashion your true inner purpose?
- Make an audio recording of your story about these messages about your inner purpose and your gratitude for them.