

# Maskandi: Preserve and Innovate

## Post-Task: Innovating with maskandi

Qadasi and Maqhing lead by example. In many performances in South Africa and abroad, they conduct musician workshops. There they introduce Zulu traditional music and emphasise the need to read, write and play instruments. Their teachings are about learning music properly through the classes: the history and background; the repertoire used for teaching maskandi and folk fusion; and learning to sing, move and to dance in the appropriate styles. The duo advocates the introduction of maskandi as a course for music students in schools, music academies and in community centres.

Qadasi and Maqhing have a passion for preserving and exhibiting the old style maskandi from the 1970s to the 1990s. The compositions of pioneers like John Phuzushukela Bhengu, Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu, Phuzekhemisi and Mfaz'Omnyama provide a musical journey into those maskandi styles and expressions.

Qadasi says the power of the traditional maskandi styles is in the chord progressions. More traditional styles, such as isiBhaca and Mzansi are a TWO / ONE chord progression, such as between a G and an F, or an A and a G. Qadasi, says this is, “a very powerful progression, even though it’s only two chords.”

The two-chord progression is based on the traditional bow instrument. On single string bows, including umakhweyana, ugubhu and umrhubhe, a player can get those two notes.

These bowed instruments have a chord progression of two dominant notes. These two notes accompanied Zulu melodies and traditional songs. The traditional bow instruments were very popular and pre-dated the arrival of Western instruments. Today they are less prevalent but still very important.

The maskandi musicians also innovated in guitar tuning. This unique maskandi tuning technique was used by Phuzushukela and is called the ‘drop D’.

“That was the high E to a D,” explains David. “That single string change was able to create a drone effect. One was able to sound more traditional just by dropping that. And that is basically the start of maskandi. All players still use that tuning today: that standard drop D tuning, with slight changes.”

Maqhing also points out, “Maskandi singing does not use the Western harmonies like tenor and alto. In maskandi they say a person sings number 1. Maskandi does not talk of alto and tenor, they talk of voice 1 and 2.”

When Maqhing sits and listens to the recordings of maskandi from the 1960s and the 1970s, he notices the difference in the tuning between those times and today.

“Today strings are flexible and easier to play. These strings are anchored to

facilitate playing easily,” he explains.

“Now, as we play these guitars, it is maskandi with strings that have no manipulation. That is the difference. In the 1960s to the 1980s, there was little tuning of the guitars. Today string 3 is set and you can play without changing the bass string. That is the difference.”

Modern maskandi has been hit hard by the digital wave. In 2022 performing to a backtrack at a festival is commonplace. These backtrack performers don't even need to know how to play a musical instrument. They just get on stage and act. Imagine what this is doing to the quality of the music?

Remember, maskandi is about showing off and showing off your skills. In the Zulu warrior regiments' tradition, ukungcweka is a game of two, with shields and sticks. It is mock fighting. Maskandi grows from that tradition. This is not vengeful rivalry. This is healthy competition that allows for real skills to rise above the fake skills. The use of backtracks is creating half-baked musicians that are rushing for stardom. It has created a rivalry in the maskandi industry built on money and hype, as opposed to a collaboration built on music and culture.

However, with musicians like Qadasi and Maqhingga, we can be sure that the backtrack generation may be just a passing phase and that the music will remain inextricably linked to its Zulu community heritage and practice for ever.

Maskandi is the music for healing, making peace, creating cultural bridges and better understandings within our multi-cultural society. A maskandi musician has to know the craft of playing a musical instrument. He also has to know the Zulu approach to singing and to feel the dances that go with it.

## **Now for some exercises:**

### *Listening to maskandi music of your choice:*

Move to a piece of maskandi music of your choosing, preferably not shorter than 3 minutes. Settle on the song you choose before you start the exercise.

- On your own or in a workshop group, take your selected maskandi tune. Search and find the dances that go with it. Teach yourselves how to play this.

### *Step 1: Noting*

Take a moment to note how you are feeling, both in your body and your mind. Are you tired or are you energised? How do you feel emotionally? Are your breaths deep or shallow, fast or slow? If you want to, you can write this down.

### *Step 2: Movement*

Now you have married a style of maskandi music to its particular dance. Next, try and move to the song you have selected! You can do this completely

privately or with friends. Your dance doesn't have to be 'good' or 'on the beat'. It might not even look like anything you would normally consider dancing. It can be slow, fast, serious, silly, but it mustn't be a set of pre-rehearsed movements. Don't worry about what it looks like. It's not about choreographing a beautiful dance. The point is to let go of your thinking mind and just be in your body, to be led by your heart rather than your brain.

### *Step 3: Reflection*

Once you are done, take a moment to note how you are feeling again, as in Step 1. How does this compare to what you were feeling before? What changed? What stayed the same? What kinds of movements did you make? Were there any kinds of movements you've never tried before?

### *Bonus*

Try the same task again with a different piece of music, again noting how you feel afterwards. How does this compare to the first song? Did this new music ask for a different kind of movement?

### *Documentary exercise: Making a traditional instrument*

Which old Zulu string instrument appeals to you? See if you can find the difference between the umakweyana, ugubhu and the umhubhe? At some point you would like to learn how to make one of these instruments. How are you going to start the process of making your favourite bow instrument?

**Tip:** Find an expert to teach you. And if you do, please share with us:

### *Meditation: The power of music to heal*

- What does the word 'healing' mean to you?
- Do you think music can be healing? If so, how?
- Have you felt music to be a healing force in your own life?
- Does maskandi affirm your healing? If so, how?
- Now, express this journey into maskandi creatively. Be playful with your art, whether it's painting, writing or playing an instrument?