

Maskandi: Preserve and Innovate

Pre-Task: From traditional to cross-over maskandi

Maskandi is a very rich and varied musical style. It carries within it the spirit of traditional instruments and the arrival of the Portuguese in what is now KZN (KwaZulu Natal) with their Western guitars. Today the maskandi industry is huge, yet it all started with Zulu arts, culture and heritage practices.

Zulu praise poetry, Zulu rites of passage, warrior regiments, different dance styles, romance, life experiences, Zulu calendar ceremonies, wedding ceremonies, Zulu beliefs, morals and values have all contributed to the evolution of maskanda music.

Music often plays a significant role in the lives of people, whether they are musicians or not and certain kinds of music are attached to strong memories and emotions. Poetry and melodies, together, have always been a way of vocalising issues within villages, districts and in the kingdom and towns. The issues could be personal, social, community, political and emotional. Maskandi is a platform from which to spread your word and make your voice heard.

200 years ago, the Zulu was a very proud warrior nation and so many of these songs were traditional war songs. The heart of many of these styles was, and still is, the very powerful war songs, amahubo. Such songs show off the pride of the people and nation.

The different maskandi styles originated from dance and song styles, indlamu and ingoma. Maskandi began with traditional dancing and singing. Different styles of dancing and singing develop from different locations in South Africa. SiBhaca is from the Mzimkulu area. Mpondo is from the Eastern Cape. There is traditional Mzansi music from Bergville and isiKhuzwe from Bulwer.

The new-age style of maskandi is from Ladysmith or Colenso and is called isiShameni. It is dominant and, once you cross the Tugela and head towards Empangeni, it is easy to hear how very popular this shameni style is. The shameni style follows the typical marabi chord progression of 1-4-5. Shameni is a jivey, vibrant style popular today.

The early 1900s were the very early days of maskandi. Migrant workers started experimenting with playing traditional music on Western instruments. They did not change anything melodically but took the guitar and worked around the traditional melodies and traditional chord progressions.

The name, maskanda, came about on the railways. It is a derivation from the Afrikaans word 'musikante' or musician, often a travelling one. It is a suitable name because Maskandi is considered as walking music. According to David 'Qadasi' Jenkins, "There are specific styles that were literally formed, in a sense to create a walking style."

He describes the early days of migrant labour in Johannesburg where musicians walking the streets with their guitars was a common site. Maskandi musicians playing songs are basically transported to their destinations. The music makes the time go faster and it's that much easier to get to your destination."

Maskandi has been a brilliant medium for giving fans new cross-over genres, like maskandi-scathamiya, maskandi-Western folk fusion, maskandi Zionist gospel, maskandi-reggae, maskandi-po and maskandi Afro-Soul.

"The only insight you find on top of a mountain is the one you take up with you." said Johnny Clegg.

Coming from Western folk music and from traditional Zulu guitar music, the allure and attraction for Maskandi artists like the legend Johnny Clegg and current upcoming stars Qadasi and Maqhing, is its grounding in Indigenous Knowledge from the Nguni traditions. And how this old music undergoes transformations and fusions. For Clegg, it is the ancient knowledge system that predates colonisation and European modernity. It is a world view based on their culture. With Qadasi and Maqhing, the fascination was with the very strong Zulu tradition of warrior values, such as being tenacious, stubborn and determined. When confronted by a situation, Zulus attack it from all angles until they get around it, over it or through it. Just like the tenacity of S.A. music. Despite the reality that Apartheid S.A. was a pariah in the world, and was punished with a world cultural boycott, S.A. music's evolution remained stubborn and unbroken in linking to the music trends of the continent and the world. Maskandi took guitar, concertina and violin and re-configured them in innovative ways. They changed the tuning, changed the strings, bridged them with wooden capers so that some strings would be free and others would be held down, converting these Western instruments for African music.

Now for some exercises:

1. Maskandi music on radio?

To assist you to respond to questions that will test your knowledge of maskandi music, find out about SABC radio or TV stations' pro-programmes about maskandi music. Listen to them and the DJ's commentary.

- Is there an artist or a music style that you've never heard of being talked about on the radio or TV programmes or other online platforms?
- Did you learn something new?
- What can this music tell you about the period of history during which it was made?
- Were there any examples of music bringing people together in the answers you got?

2. Listening, imitating and singing in isiZulu is best for learning the language.

Qadasi's fascination, listening and attraction to Zulu songs opened him up to what was a new language for him. He imitated, danced and asked for meaning behind the words, so as to immerse him-self in the isiZulu language.

- Choose a maskandi tune with clear, uncluttered vocals and a simple chorus. Play and listen, humming with it. Sing what you can hear. Do the same with the chorus. Are you happy with his?
- Use a dictionary as an actual book or online, to look up translations of the lyrics. Is the meaning anywhere near to what you expected?
- Is there a Zulu speaker in your friendship circle? Can he or she sing or pronounce the lyrics of the song for you? Can he or she share with you his or her understanding of the story behind the song?
- Practise on your own or with your group, singing the song again. Sing for your Zulu-speaking friend. Should he or she think you are doing well, record your voice over the instruments. Share and keep this as your archive.

3. Activity: Biography writing

Research Qadasi and Maqhingga online, the many awards they have won, the albums they have created and their journeys in music.

4. Archive experiment

The questions, activities of discovery and journeying through the past and present of maskandi can set you on the path to taking notes, recording the music and commentary that you like. All this can happen while you watch as the old Zulu strings instruments are being played.

- Experiment with making your own mini archive by using the video and or voice recorder on your phone?
- If your phone has a video editor, try putting the videos together to create a mini documentary.
- Consider asking yourself and your workshop group how you are receiving this new music called maskandi. Ask questions. From what you have seen and heard, who is your favourite artist and why?
- Which is your favourite style of maskandi and why?
- Can you play or sing one of the songs for your phone camera?
- What does it mean to be introduced to Zulu arts, culture and heritage?