

Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Cadogan Hall review - peace, love and harmonies

by Liz Thomson Sunday, 30 July 2017

On a dreary evening in what passes for summer, the news unutterably grim, an evening in the company of [South Africa](#)'s greatest export can't help but lift the spirits. The nine singers that comprise Ladysmith Black Mambazo are mostly blood family, sons of Joseph Shabalala - who founded the group in 1960 following a series of dreams in which he heard traditional Zulu *isicathamiya* - their cousins and two friends, and what an amazing stage act they are.

It's not just their [sound](#) – instantly recognisable, fixed in the mind's ear – but their look and their athleticism: leaping, high-kicking, dancing; acting out the lyrics of some of their songs; even at one point offering a wonderful recreation of Chuck Berry's famous duck walk. In their green-blue ethnic tunics, black trousers, bright-white shoes and cardinal-red socks they are dressed to catch the eye but the whole "package" is something of a surprise to anyone who has not previously seen them live on stage.

They bounded on promising an evening of "peace, love and harmony" from South Africa to the world and surely no one failed to pick up the joyous vibes as they sang and joshed with one another, and the audience. Numbers included "King of Kings" from their 1987 Grammy-winning album *Shaka Zulu*, "Shosholozo", a song in call-and-response style about diamond mining, which Nelson Mandela recalled singing during his enforced labour on Robben Island, and a song dedicated to South Africa's first black president, "Long Walk to Freedom" from the 2006 album of the same name featuring the likes of Emmylou Harris, Sarah Lachlan, Taj Majal and Hugh Masekela.

Inevitably Paul Simon's *Graceland*, a collaboration that led to both Simon and Shabalala being accused of breaking the cultural boycott of South Africa, but which paved the way for LBM's international success, featured, with "Homeless" and "Diamonds on the Soles of Their Shoes". A rendition of "Amazing Grace", rescued from the cliché it has become, closed the evening.

Opening it, previously unannounced, was a remarkable duo from whom we need to hear much more: Redi Hasa, an Albanian cellist, well-known for his work with Ludovico Einaudi, and Italian singer Maria Mazzotta, previously with Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino. Their fusion of Baltic and Southern European music was spellbinding, eastern and western tonalities combined to remarkable effect. Mazzotta displayed a breadth of range and technique – laments, scat, ululation – counterpointed by Hasa's cello, which at times he played on his knee, like a guitar. However he held it, he employed feedback, bent notes and harmonics, often picking out a bass line on the lower two strings and melody, in counterpoint to Mazzotta's vocal line, on the

uppers. He also used looping, while Mazzotta added percussive touches with a bodhran-style drum. The audience, some of whom had appeared to feel cheated when the duo was announced, was clearly won over.

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