

# SIPHO HOTSTIX MABUSE

RAYMOND PRESTON

The legendary musician on playing the flute, playing for the Russians, and going back to school in your 60s

**A** CONSUMMATE musician and part of South Africa's rich musical heritage, Sipho Hotstix Mabuse has gone from rocking the townships to rocking Russians and Brits to finding the meaning of life.

**Music is a peaceful haven.** People always expect me to play drums because of my nickname, Hotstix, but these days you're more likely to see me on saxophone or flute. I first learnt classical flute and then one day decided I wanted to learn the saxophone — so I did, by trial and error. But I still love the flute. There's a serenity about it that makes me feel calm. If I'm angry, then I guess you'll hear the drums.

**There's an academic inside me waiting to get out.** Growing up I always thought I'd be a doctor or lawyer. We had a family doctor who would visit us, Dr G. He'd come in his white coat with his stethoscope around his neck and I really liked that look. From then on, my family called me "doctor", but sadly, with an unsettled childhood, I didn't manage to achieve that — but I'm sure I would have made a good doctor. I would have a good bedside manner!

**Adoring fans were a powerful pull.** We started The Beaters when I was just 16 and it took over my life. It wasn't that we didn't like school — we actually looked forward to going to school. But the growing popularity of the band, the money and the girls — that was a heady mix. Another thing we had going for us was that we were English-speaking, which made us elite. As we were seen as a high school band, we found ourselves being invited to play at lots of matric dances — more girls ...

**Travel opened our eyes.** Before long, we were travelling all over South Africa and it was while playing in Botswana that I saw a real revelation: black and white people dancing and socialising together in one hall. As South Africans who only knew apartheid, this was amazing. I thought, if only South Africa could be like this — it looked so normal.

**The Beatles, Rolling Stones and Steve Biko moulded me.** By the time The Beaters had become Harari, the Beatles and the Stones' music was a big influence on me and, together with my growing political consciousness at the time, transformed us from a pop band to a traditional African rock band. We used music to get our message across.

**Big decisions are never easy.** Deciding to leave Harari and go solo was the biggest decision of my life. People couldn't believe it, as we were doing so well, having returned from the US, where we had an incredible reception. We came back to support Percy Sledge, Brook Benton and Wilson Pickett on their South African tours. In 1979 we became the first black pop group to appear on SABC and at The Colosseum in Johannesburg. We were at the top, but there were things that weighed heavily on me. I was overambitious and driven. I expected the other guys to live by my rules. Looking back I handled it badly, but it was meant to be.

**Success is sometimes puzzling.** I've

always said that *Burn Out*, which I recorded in 1984 and which went to number one on every radio station in South Africa, was something I didn't expect. I'm still sure this was a case of ancestral intervention.

**South Africa is the best country to perform in.** There's nowhere else like it. But travelling is always eye-opening, especially Russia. I never knew it could be as cold anywhere and I remember saying to some of the guys when we started playing for our first Russian audience, no wonder they just sit there showing no emotion — they're cold! But when we finished our performance the response was overwhelming. What was really crazy was all the Russians who came up asking us about ANC guys they'd worked with in Moscow — this fascinated me.

**Music brings all people together.**

Kippies — my dream, which we opened in Newtown in 1987, was where you came to hear the best in music, from South Africa and beyond our borders. Destroying Kippies killed the spirit of jazz in this country. It was a great loss. But watch this space: Hugh Masekela and I have something up our sleeves.

**You're never too old to learn something new.**

My colleagues and friends thought I was crazy going back to do my matric in my sixties. They said, why didn't I just get an exemption? But now, after finishing all but two of my subjects, which I'm doing this year, they say: "Wow, we take our hats off to you." Even my youngest son, Biko, who's eight, thinks it's cool that I went back to school.

**Some things change but respect never should.**

The other day one of the students stood up in the middle of a lesson to answer his cellphone. This made me angry. I said: "You don't do that in my presence." I told the teacher, who's much younger than me, that he had to set parameters. "I come to school because I want to learn." I told the other guys in the class, "you can call me old fashioned and I'll take that, but I want us all to pass. So we must treat the teacher with respect." They came to me after class and said it wouldn't happen again.

**Watching sport is as good as playing.** I've always been a sports fan and for me, watching that magician Lionel Messi of FC Barcelona scoring goal after goal — that totally gets my heart racing! — *Marian Scher*



IN THE MOOD: Sipho Hotstix Mabuse: the flute is calm, but if he's angry, you'll hear the drums

what i've learnt