



# On the road again

Three of our best musical exports have been racking up the air miles for years, frequent fliers touring across the globe every year. Why do they keep doing it?

YVONNE CHAKA CHAKA  
"I'm never away for more than 10 days at a time."

HUGH MASEKELA  
"As long as I'm fit, I'm going to work it!"

PHOTOGRAPHS GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

BY JASON CURTIS



Touring is a job requirement of every musician or band and SA's finest talent spend weeks, if not months, beyond our borders. International travel is appealing, of course, but packing your bags regularly and heading off to become the next Bruce Springsteen or U2 is quite another thing.

'You must be open to learning about new customs and ways, and trying new things. That's when travel can be really good fun,' says Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse, who has been touring since the late 70s. 'You also need a good manager, who deals with the media and can explain who you are. I learnt early on that surrounding yourself with the right people makes all the difference – especially when you're far from home.'

Being away from the familiar, from family and friends, can be difficult, but 'they understand that this is my job', Sipho says. 'As with any breadwinner, what I do puts food on the table. Sometimes my family gets to come to shows as well, which helps make being away from home easier.'

Sipho sees the frequent interludes as more of a privilege than a weight on his shoulders. 'It's my career,' he says. 'If you're passionate about it, you will make a success of it. My wife and family [he has seven children] always knew what I was doing, that I needed to work hard at it. Even now, I still rehearse every day, sometimes just for an hour with the sax in order to keep me in tune.'

In the late 80s, being in a band fortunate enough to be invited overseas meant that regardless of your skin colour, sexual orientation or religious beliefs, most of Europe embraced you. 'I remember touring Germany in 1989, during the height of apartheid,' Sipho says. 'Some members of the band got homesick after day two, but once I explained how we were all equal overseas, and who we would be meeting at the shows, the whole mood changed. We had an amazing month on tour, doing more than 25 shows in 30 days, all over Germany. We even saw the Berlin Wall before it came down later that same year.'

Sipho recalls another great show beyond SA's borders. 'I performed at the official celebrations in South West Africa [Namibia], at the time when that country became independent from South Africa. It was an amazing experience. This brings me to the point of what we consider "international" – we tend to think of Europe or the US. If you need a valid passport, in my eyes, that is overseas. Namibia, Malawi, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Kenya – I have had amazing shows in all of these countries.'

Many South African artists head to foreign shores for the recognition and the cash, but Sipho's quick to point out that the grass is actually quite green on this side. 'We do make good money playing live in South Africa. If you have the songs and a great stage show, you will get work. I have never been busier. In December last year I led a band at the Miss SA beauty pageant at Sun City, then there were shows at the Vaal and in Vereeniging, with Keith Sweat, followed by more gigs in Malawi and Lesotho.'

He acknowledges that the international tours are great, 'but you need to build a great fan base and show what you're made of in your own country first. The reason I am invited to play overseas today is because of the investment I made, decades ago, in my own audience, before I tried to win over the world.'

• Sipho will be launching the Acoustic Tales on the Lawn series at Emperors Palace on 15 July. To book, call Aurelia's Restaurant on 011 928 1908.

MAKING IT WORK

The 'Princess of Africa', Yvonne Chaka Chaka, who has been at the forefront of South African popular music for close on 30 years now, is no stranger to a long-haul lifestyle. 'I started singing in 1985, and was married in 1989,' she recalls. 'My husband never expected me to change who or what I was.' For someone who spends 200 days out of every year travelling abroad, this mother of four's ability to balance work and family life is quite extraordinary. She does shows, not extended tours.

'Throughout my career I have made sure that I was never away from home for more than 10 days at a time. It was a choice I made early on. I wanted to see and be around my kids while they were growing up. Fortunately for me, I have been able to pull it off. It's tough being away from home, but over the years my family has supported and respected my choices. That way, when I am home, I'm entirely focused on being a wife to my husband and a mom to my kids.'

Yvonne's music, like that of so many of her local peers, has over the past three decades made its way into homes and concert halls across the world. 'I've been lucky,' she admits. 'By 1987 I was travelling into Africa – to Nigeria, Kenya and many other countries on the continent. My music has always been seen as more multicultural, and thanks to that I've been invited to play in many African countries, as well as in the US and Europe many, many times.'

INTERNATIONAL PROFILE

Early in his career, Hugh Masekela went into exile, which had the positive effect of boosting his international profile. At one stage, it could be argued he was more famous in America than here at home. He returned to live in South Africa in the 1990s, but has not stayed put. At the age of 73, Bra Hugh still spends a lot of time en route to engagements in the UK and US.

'I'm only getting started,' he joked in a recent Cape Times interview. 'I'm not a conformist – I never have been. As long as I'm fit, I'm going to work it! Why would I ever want to stop doing something that fulfils me like music does? There are few things in this world that can command the hearts and minds of millions of very diverse people – all from different walks of life. All are able to share in a common love of music. Musicians respond to applause, no matter where that may come from.'

Besides the lure of fame and earning foreign currency, another important factor sending our home-grown talent overseas is an established touring circuit that supports great music. 'South Africa does not have the numbers to support touring in the same way as Europe and America can,' Yvonne says. 'Since the economic downturn of 2007/8, people's priorities have changed too, so we often need to look outside to be able to keep doing what we do.'

When you consider diminishing CD sales in general, due to downloads from the internet, and the impending expiry of many major record labels, the only sustainable route for local artists is to go where the call and commitment to pay comes from. 'I accept the need to travel,' Yvonne says. 'After all, music is universal. It educates, entertains and knows no boundaries, and that's always been good news for musicians and fans hungry to hear and see great live performances.'

*'Namibia, Malawi, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Kenya - I have had amazing shows in all of these countries.'*

SIPHO 'HOTSTIX' MABUSE



HHP  
Happening  
in the rest  
of Africa.



KYLE SHEPHERD  
His jazz is in  
demand in Europe.



PRIME CIRCLE  
Rocking around  
the world.



DIE ANTWOORD  
Taking 'I Fink  
U Freeky' global.

More  
departure-  
lounges  
regulars

Die Antwoord

The 'zef' duo of Ninja and Yo-landi Vi\$\$er are currently enjoying crowds, equally appalled and delighted at what they see (and hopefully don't quite understand), in Australia and the US. Next stop: the European summer tour circuit.

Prime Circle

The Joburg rockers continue to get love beyond their multi-platinum success at home. The band has played in India, the United Arab Emirates and Europe, and enjoy callbacks for more.

Kyle Shepherd

This 20-something jazz piano prodigy is no stranger to heading north and sharing his talent with audiences across Europe.

HHP

A regular flight attendants' favourite, he's equally loved on the rest of the African continent as he is right here at home.

PHOTOGRAPHS GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; DIE ANTWOORD PUBLICITY