



"Ladies and gentlemen, Pace presents Sakhile". At the back (from left): Siphon Gumede, Percy Kunene and Jabu Nkosi. In front: Khaya Mahlangu and Mabe Thobejane.

TOP OF THE POPS BUT NOT IN THE SHOPS!

The smart, erudite and culturally aware bunch with political savvy, who patronise trendy, cultural emporiums like The Market Theatre, will readily agree that Bayete and Sakhile are the foremost progressive bands in South Africa.

In spite of unbridled commercialisation bedeviling the music industry worldwide, Bayete and Sakhile have their own agenda which is not heavily influenced by monetary considerations.

These are guys who are not in the game because it conjures up visions of pots of gold. They're imbued with a sense of social responsibility. Their *raison d'être*, it would seem, is to haul our music out of the pits of mediocrity for the sake of tomorrow's kids and posterity.

They're into such mundane things as workshops, as opposed to being egocentric, money-grabbing demigods of the music world whose only desire is to retire stinking rich, bequeathing no musical heritage to future generations.

But, despite their credentials and social commitment, Sakhile and Bayete have not really taken off to stir up any national fervour.

Stimela, who were conceived when Sakhile had disbanded (they were on a sabbatical — they've since regrouped), have fitted snugly into the slot created by the demise of Sakhile.

With their charismatic leader, Ray Chikapa Phiri, Stimela whipped up such passion and frenzy among the masses that they're now revered as "the peoples' band".

In terms of their appeal, respectability and popularity among the progressive and enlightened people, Sakhile and Bayete should be cherished as national shrines by the nation. As befits their musical stature, one would think no festival line-up would be complete without them.

But, alas, that is not so. Their names lie buried in the subconscious minds of musical promoters, and surface as an afterthought when festivals are planned. They seem to be regarded as strangers in their own country.

Some people claim Sakhile and Bayete are distancing themselves from grassroots people by playing venues like The Market Theatre, Baxter Theatre and Jameson's. Some have tagged them liberals in black skins. Why, then, have brand new bands like Marcalex, who are unashamedly into Western rock music, shot up to the top at

blinding speed? Even Mango Groove, who blend Western music with Marabi and Kwele, are creating a splash.

"The aim is to create a kind of New York set-up in South Africa by suppressing indigenous music," says Jabu Khanyile, Bayete's lead singer. "Bands like Marcalex have zoomed meteorically to the top because they sing the 'right' kind of music. But our music, which salutes — Bayete (meaning 'we salute you') — and celebrates the now mangled, crumpled and tossed-into-the-trashcan customs of Africa, is the 'wrong' kind of music that the powers-that-be would rather see wiped from memory," says Jabu.

"As the SABC is the lifeblood of the music industry, the record companies tend to pussyfoot around the issue," says Jabu.

"There's a deliberate effort to suppress progressive music in favour of music that projects a false image of our level of thinking. It's an insult to our intelligence and integrity in terms of our musical development," says Siphon Mabuse, who is prepared



Heard of a bunch of down-to-earth musos called Bayete? Well, here they are.

We're not influenced by monetary considerations, say top progressive groups Bayete and Sakhile. We want to take our music out of mediocrity and pass on the heritage to our future generations

BY JOE KHUMALO PHOTOGRAPHS BY TLADI KHUELE

to move heaven and earth for the survival of progressive music.

"The whole industry is to blame for keeping progressive musicians out of the mainstream. How often do you see progressive musicians on TV, or hear them on radio?" Siphso asks.

"Even the promoters are in it for the money; development is not their concern. We need to develop progressive music. There are people out there who want to hear and support progressive music as well," adds a concerned Hotstix.

"It's not that we don't have the right kind of management; CCP is the biggest record company next to Gallo in South Africa. But the lyrics of our songs, which are not overtly political, but pro-African and anti-apartheid, border on the risqué, as SABC standards go," claims Jabu.

"First and foremost, it takes guts to go into a recording studio with groups like Bayete," says Peter Mbolekwa, CCP's PRO. "We've tried every angle of promotion — TV, radio and the print media — to create an awareness. Though the public is buzzing and the reaction at concerts is fantastic, Bayete appeals to those people who don't feel it's worth buying records, for reasons best

known to them.

"They appeal to the A-B income group, who are very selective," continues Peter. "These are people who go to Kippie's in droves to watch them live, but would rather have them on tape than buy their records. They are the sort who ask for comps before dipping into their pockets for the price of a show. But the low-income group are very honest. If they like something, they buy it," says Peter.

Credence was lent to Peter's theory by Victoria Singo, Gallo's PRO. "When lovers of 'bubblegum' music hear a record they like at one of their buddies' stokkies, they don't borrow or tape it; they go out to a record bar and buy it," says Victoria.

"Just ask the middle class when they last bought their local idol's records. Do they ponder and ask themselves what their favourite artists eat? Look what happened to the A-Train. The jet-set, who love showing off on gala nights, were invited to the opening night. The select crowd, dressed to the nines, were the creme-de-la-creme of the celebrity class. But after the dazzling opening, what happened? It went down the tubes."

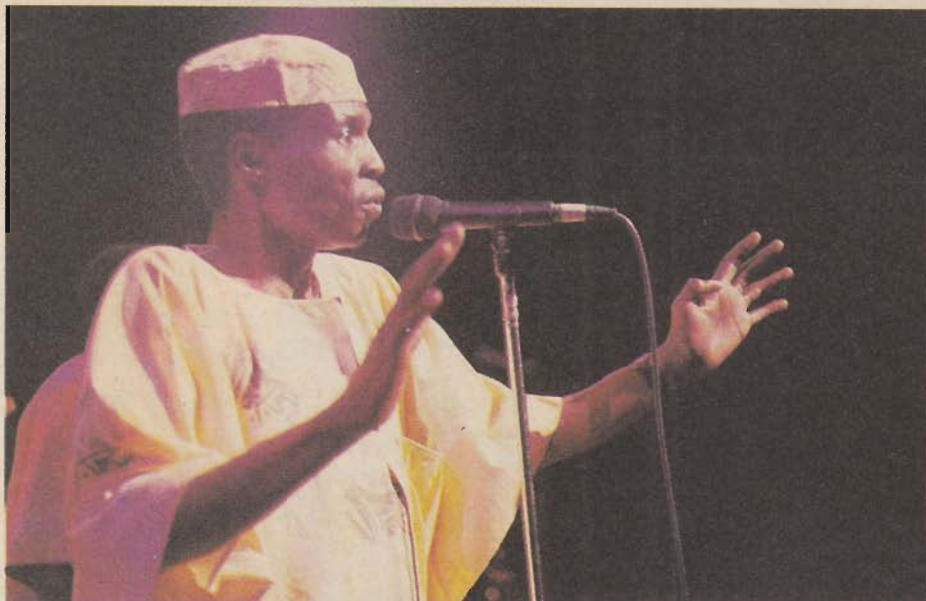
"The South African market is a crazy one: popularity does not match sales. Look

at Bakithi Khumalo: a lot of overseas artists would give their right arms to work with him. But back home sales of his record, 'Step On The Bass Line', are not coming through," reckons Peter. "We released an album, 'Faka Bom Bom', by Thiza, who was an unknown artist, and it sold more than 50 000 units without any airplay, press publicity or videos. How do you account for that? We need another Paul Simon or Quincy Jones to open up the Bayete/Sakhile kind of market," opines Peter.

Sakhile and Bayete's music might strike a common chord among the generally clueless, but Bayete, whose music is liberally laced with social commentary, are more into the earthier stuff, mbaqanga, which is akin to American blues. The slick and sophisticated but kinda laidback, highly instrumental Sakhile music appeals more to the jazz-orientated fans.

Bayete's intensely vocal and visually appealing act is characterised by stage theatrics, while Sakhile, who are not given to stage histrionics, attach more emphasis on musical perfection in the true jazz tradition.

Given a chance, they would certainly make South Africa walk tall at the prestigious Montreal Jazz Festival. ▶



"The aim is to create a kind of New York set-up in South Africa by suppressing indigenous music," opines Jabu Khanyile.

It was 1981 when six of the finest musicians in the land came together and formed Sakhile. With Siphon Gumedede on bass, Khaya Mahlangu on sax, Gabriel Mabi Thobejane on percussions, Menyatso Mathole on guitar, Madoda Mathunjwa on drums and Themba Mkhize on keyboards, this was a sextet made for one another.

The two pillars of this super band, Siphon Gumedede and Khaya Mahlangu, were salvaged from the once-brilliant Spirits Rejoice, which had gone to pieces.

Menyatso Mathole played for the erstwhile great Drive, while Gabriel Mabi Thobejane thumped and caressed percussions in the company of that guitar wizard, Phillip Tabane, for Malombo. Madoda Mathunjwa did a Max Roach on drums for the Afro Peppers, while Themba Mkhize flexed his nimble fingers on the ivories in Durban's music halls.

The fusion of this talent culminated in the release of an exhilarating debut album, "Sakhile", which set the country on fire in 1982. While the nation was still savouring the exquisite Sakhile music the plug was suddenly pulled and the group was no more. It was a tragic and sudden end as the six musos disbanded and parted ways, much to the grief of their fans.

As the fans mourned, the musicians explored different musical horizons. After three years in the wilderness, gnawing consciences and the sheer weight of pleas from concerned fans, Sakhile realised they were too good a band to be thrown in the garbage can.

In 1987, Sakhile was relaunched in an electrifying concert which bubbled over with excited, ululating fans at the Eyethu Cinema, Soweto.

In spite of Sakhile's aura of intellectualism, they have been nudged by rampant commercialisation to perform on the fringe. Contributions of respected musicians, such as Khaya Mahlangu, who studied music at

the University of Zululand, and Siphon Gumedede, who played with the likes of Harry Belafonte and Caiphus Semenya and who would enrich our music, are sorely missed. But for the temporary lapse, Sakhile would have been streets ahead of Stimela and Sankomota.

"They started off in grand fashion and they had the capacity to sustain the momentum. However, they split up and that wonderful winning team was short-circuited," says Moses Dlamini of Priority Records. "That really set them back and by the time they regrouped in 1987, it was too late."

"Unfortunately, Sakhile's music appeals to the class of people who budget for whatever they buy. Things like bonds and school fees are priority number one and, as most of them are jazz-lovers, they prefer overseas jazz to the local genre. They are trapped in the syndrome of looking down on their own," explains Moses.

"While Sakhile's music may be too polished for the ordinary man in the street, their first album sold fairly well," reveals Dlamini.

But Sakhile were not at all pleased with the promotional drive mounted by the record company, hence they put subsequent recordings on hold. They looked around for a better deal and may have clinched one before Pace went to press, as they were busy recording in the studio before leaving for Europe.

"Artists will obviously blame record companies; that's a natural reaction. I too would pass the buck," says Moses.

"Jazz is not marketed and promoters are out to make money. They pack every festival bill with the same pop bands," says Khaya Mahlangu. "A lot can be done to accelerate the acceptance by the people. Local radio stations should play more South African music. And not only pop, but all kinds of music should be marketed. Although jazz musicians don't make that much money, they live fairly well overseas, as all types of



One thing at a time? "Hogwash!" growls Jabu Nkosi as he croons and tinkles the ivories.



Some wild African bashing the skins in the jungle, perhaps? Not on your nelly! That's Sakhile's Mabe Thobejane, South Africa's most colourful percussionist.

music have a following there," adds Khaya. "It's about time we started thinking in the long-term; not only of making a new record every six months.

"Things are coming up, but they're moving too slowly for me. There must be more bands like Sakhile, Bayete and Peto. I do believe the standard of jazz in this country is improving as more young players are coming up," claims Khaya.

Sakhile, who regrouped in 1987, minus two original members, Themba Mkhize and Madoda Mathunjwa, have since had the slots filled by Jabu Nkosi, the late Zakes Nkosi's son, and Percy Kunene on drums. They had their best year, in terms of music,



"Sakhile's music is too sophisticated for the ordinary man-in-the-street," says Moses Dlamini, Priority Records executive.



The trombonist-cum-bandleader, Mfaniseni Thusi, in whose speakeasy Bayete was born.



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in 1988 when they were invited to perform in cultural festivals in Switzerland and Italy. When this issue hits the streets, they'll be flitting from one European capital to another.

The year is 1983 and a clutch of young musicians, inspired by their mutual love of indigenous African sounds, decides, "to hell with wishy-washy pseudo-American music".

Authentic African rhythms coursed their rich, African blood as they banded about ideas as to how best to recapture South Africa's downtrodden musical pride. They

christened themselves Bayete.

Bayete! What a great name! It revives memories of Africa's regal glory. It is a name usually reserved for royalty, meaning "we salute you".

Bayete started out at the same time as Brenda Fassie, but while she's wallowing in opulence, they have been nudging poverty for their entire, albeit short, history. Scrapping the barrel has been their main preoccupation, despite their excellent musicianship.

The Bayete concept was hatched in a watering hole, between copious draughts of beer, interspersed with grouses and grumbles, by a bunch of musicians who had had it with the ersatz South African musical fare.

The groghouse where the jaded group of musicians chewed the musical fat had a proprietor who dispensed booze on tick. And these musos, forever strapped for cash, would, from time to time, wheedle the poisonous stuff on tick from the ever-obliging shebeen king who obviously wasn't cut out for the cut-throat capitalistic enterprise.

Needless to say, the hooch business went under. A fool and his money are soon parted!

Mfaniseni Thusi, Bayete's trombonist and leader's subscription to the dictum of "booze now, pay later" might have cost him his business, but in turn he gained a band — Bayete.

Mfaniseni and Arthur Shabalala, the keyboard ace, were let loose when the band Jaws crumbled. As the two pondered their next move, they came across a group of disgruntled musicians who had had stints with several bands in the country and were bored stiff with what was flourishing as popular music. They had turned Mfaniseni's speakeasy into their favourite hangout for obvious reasons — booze on tick. Mfaniseni, Arthur and the disillusioned artists gabbed and slurred over bottles and from the hooch-tainted talks, the brilliant concept of Bayete was born.

In the face of music with a heavy commer-

cial slant, Bayete elected to go back to their roots, Mbaqanga.

"We could have gone commercial from the very outset and played pop music. After all, we were into this copyright disco music with our previous bands. But copyright music won't take you anywhere, as it doesn't bear your name," says Mfaniseni, the band's mouthpiece.

"Original music is accepted anywhere in the world, but you cannot, for instance, take disco music to America or rock to Europe; that's their thing, Brother . . . they know it better," adds Mfaniseni. Though Bayete never sacrificed their roots for a few bob, life in the materialistic world has been tough for the past six years.

Some of the original band members threw in the towel because there wasn't enough cash to keep the wolf from the door.

"We love music as much as we love to live reasonably, but we cannot betray our heritage just to make a quick buck," says Mfaniseni.

Though Bayete have finally come out of the woods, time was when they used to eke out a living from the few crumbs they could salvage from the bigger acts. Wallowing in despair, they rubbed their hands in hope while jobs were as scarce as water in a desert. They survived by backing big-name artists.

Bayete may be on the brink of an exciting future in a post-apartheid South Africa, but things have been soured by the unsavoury departure of the band's spokesman and trombonist, Mfaniseni Thusi. I was saddened to learn that his colleagues unanimously resolved to have him scuttling out of the band together with their manager, Lorraine McCarter.

Sipho and company might put the boot in the music industry, but some people view the matter differently. They feel progressive bands must make themselves available to the masses, not just play venues patronised by yuppies who buy 30 percent local music and 70 percent foreign.