

Dorothy Masuka, South African Singer and Activist, Dies at 83

Dorothy Masuka in 2017 at Town Hall in New York, where she shared a bill with the pianist Abdullah Ibrahim. She rose to fame in the mid-1950s and continued performing into her 80s. Caitlin Ochs for The New York Times

By Giovanni Russonello

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Dorothy Masuka, a vocalist and songwriter who blazed a trail for female pop stars in South Africa and became a dogged advocate of the struggle against apartheid, died on Saturday at her home in Johannesburg. She was 83.

The South African jazz journalist Gwen Ansell, who knew Ms. Masuka, said the cause was complications of a stroke that Ms. Masuka suffered last year while touring Europe.

Ms. Masuka rose to fame in the mid-1950s, becoming one of the first black female recording artists to achieve stardom across southern and eastern Africa. She performed in a jazz-inflected pop style, singing in native African languages, often about politics.

Ms. Masuka wrote prolifically, and many of her songs were covered by other South African stars. Miriam Makeba adapted Ms. Masuka's "[Pata Pata](#)" (originally titled "Ei-Yow"), turning it into her signature song. Tunes like "[Kulala](#)" and "[Hamba Nontsokolo](#)" were covered by Hugh Masekela, Thandiswa Mazwai and others.

"A lot of my songs, they talk," [she told The Mail & Guardian](#), a South African newspaper, in 2014. "The way of my singing is message. You send a message: It's love, it's sadness, it's everything."

Ms. Masuka's career took off right as a newly cosmopolitan culture was flourishing among young black South Africans. At the same time, the country's apartheid regime was tightening its repressive policies.

From early in her career, she wrote and recorded songs that squarely addressed the racist policies of the South African government and others across the continent. She sang in support of the nonviolent [Defiance Campaign](#), and she denounced the pro-apartheid politician D. F. Malan in "Dr. Malan." In 1961 she recorded "Lumumba," addressing the assassination of the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba. The South African authorities tried to seize all copies of the record, and Ms. Masuka went into exile for more than 30 years.

Throughout the 1960s she worked with pro-independence groups across southern and eastern Africa, including the African National Congress, which at the time was a revolutionary party seeking to overthrow the apartheid regime in Pretoria.

For a few years she traveled widely, performing on behalf of independence movements in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. She lived briefly in New York and London, supported by A.N.C. sympathizers, before settling down in Zambia with her children.

Ms. Masuka was a flight attendant for 15 years while keeping up her musical career, returning to live in Zimbabwe after it gained independence in 1980. She moved back to Johannesburg in 1992, when apartheid was crumbling.

From left, the South African singers Tandie Klaasen, Abigail Khubeka and Ms. Masuka with Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa, at a celebration of his 90th birthday in 2008. Ms. Masuka is considered a national hero in both South Africa and Zimbabwe. *Juda Ngwenya-Nelson Mandela Foundation, via Reuters*

Information on her survivors was not immediately available.

Dorothy Masuku was born on Sept. 3, 1935, in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). Her name was misspelled “Masuka” on some early records, and the mistake stuck.

Her father was a chef who worked for rail companies and hotels, and her mother ran a restaurant. Dorothy got her first taste of performing at her mother’s shop, where she sang songs for pennies in the [tsaba-tsaba](#) style, a rhythmic dance music popular in the 1940s. She attended Roman Catholic mission schools, first in her hometown and then, after moving at 12, in Johannesburg.

In 1952 she played hooky to go on tour with the African Inkspots, a renowned male vocal ensemble based in Johannesburg. The next year she again ditched school to appear in the Rhodes Centenary Exhibition in Bulawayo, where she won first place in the Miss Bulawayo beauty contest. The win helped persuade her family to support her ambitions as a performer.

Her mother signed a contract with Troubadour Records on behalf of Dorothy, who was still a minor. She immediately recorded a handful of songs, including her first hit single, “[Hamba Nontsokolo](#).” An upbeat piece guided by a swinging guitar rhythm, it featured her chirruping voice over a bed of vocal harmonies, reflecting the popular sound of South African vocal groups at the time.

The song became Ms. Masuka’s calling card, and Nontsokolo became her nickname. In later years, South Africans tended to refer to her affectionately as “Mam Dorothy.”

In the late 1950s she performed often in both South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, becoming a top act in both countries. She was a regular on Johannesburg’s thriving club circuit, and toured with the [African Jazz and Variety](#) revue, a pioneering traveling show that featured some of South Africa’s finest black musicians and performing artists. Ms. Masuka’s recording of “Into Yam” — the revue’s closing number, and its only song to come from the black townships — became a dance-hall hit.

Ms. Masuka did not make a full-length album until 1987, when she recorded

[“Ingalo”](#) for the Zimbabwean Starplate label. She followed it with “Pata Pata,” in 1990, for the British label Mango, which reinvigorated her career. She followed that with a few more albums in the 1990s and 2000s, including “Mzilikazi” and “Lendaba,” both for South Africa’s Gallo label.

Ms. Masuka was inducted into the Afropop Hall of Fame in New York in 2002, and four years later President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa awarded her the Order of Ikhamanga in Silver, a high national honor bestowed upon artists, writers and other cultural figures.

Ms. Masuka continued to perform well into her 80s. In 2017 she [shared a bill with the pianist Abdullah Ibrahim](#) at Town Hall in New York, and last year she released her final album, [“Nginje.”](#)

Today she is considered a national hero in both South Africa and Zimbabwe, though she resisted aligning herself with any single country.

“I’m a child of every part of this continent,” she said in a [2015 interview](#) at the Zanzibar International Film Festival, when asked about her history of activism. “I’ve been fighting not for a particular area — I’ve been fighting for South Africa, I’ve been fighting for Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania, Congo and all these places. So I feel I don’t belong to one place.”



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