



CLARICE SMITH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER
PRESENTS

Vusi Mahlasela

This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great nation deserves great art.

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Photo by Aaron Farrington

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2009. 6PM
INA & JACK KAY THEATRE

19

PROGRAM

Vusi Mahlasela, vocals and guitar
Bakithi Kumalo, bass
Mongezi Ntaka, guitar
Ian Herman, drums

Program selections will be taken from Vusi's latest release on ATO Records, Guiding Star.

Jabula
Heaven in My Heart
Moleko
Chamber of Justice
Tibidi Waka
Everytime
Sower of Words
Ntombi Mbali
River Jordan
Song for Thandi
Mighty River
Thula Mama
Our Sand
Tonti
Susana
Pata Pata

Tonight's program will be approximately 90 minutes with no intermission.

Please join us in the pavilion post-performance to meet the artists and your fellow community members.



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ABOUT THE ARTISTS



Vusi has a sort of profound beauty about him. He has a light on...And that's something he would share with Bob Marley, Neil Young, Marvin Gaye or Miles Davis.

— Dave Matthews

One of the hardest things to learn as a musician is when to not only recognize inspiration, but when to trust and follow it. Over a musically and socially consequential career, South African singer-songwriter and poet-activist **Vusi Mahlasela** has successfully followed his muse. That trust in his gift is at the root of his latest album, *Guiding Star*.

Mahlasela wrote and recorded this album as he toured the globe. Its soul-stirring title is very much a product of the new friends he has met and experiences he has had touring. Bearing the influences of various music and voices from throughout the world, *Guiding Star* features guest appearances from friend (and partial ATO Records label head) Dave Matthews ("Sower of Words"), band leader and Allman Brothers guitarist Derek Trucks ("Tibidi Waka"), Australian didgeridoo star Xavier Rudd ("Chamber of Justice"), singer-songwriter Jem ("Everytime") and longtime friends and touring mates Ladysmith Black Mambazo ("Heaven in My Heart"). Mahlasela also drew on the talents of numerous South African guests, including the legendary "Black Moses" Ngwenya of the Soul Brothers, the children's choir from the Agnes Chidi School in his home township, Mamelodi, and the KCC Gospel, among many others.

Mahlasela, an accomplished guitarist, percussionist, composer, arranger, bandleader and performer, has bridged generations at home and abroad. His sound is a hybrid of folk, world, blues and soul, one that connects South Africa's Apartheid-scarred past with its promise for a better future. Over the past three years of heavy, worldwide touring and spreading his message, Mahlasela has remained true to his roots.

The bulk of *Guiding Star* was recorded on a farm in rural South Africa. Like any Vusi Mahlasela album, there are songs that connect him and the people of South Africa both with their past, present and hopes for a better future: "Song for Thandi" tells the story of detained freedom fighter, Thandi Modise, while the affecting "Sower of Words" — featuring Dave Matthews — is a lament for the late Black Consciousness poet and writer Ingoapele Madingoane, who wrote the influential poem "Africa My Beginning, Africa My Ending."

"There's a part on it where I needed a very strong voice to drive the message across, and Dave was the perfect voice," Mahlasela says of the latter. "Dave adds passionate, rich vocals to this song, taking it to a new level."



VUSI MAHLASELA

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Born Vusi Sidney Mahlasela Ka Zwane in 1965 in Lady Selborne, South Africa, Mahlasela became enchanted by music at an early age, building his first guitar out of tin and fishing line. Reared in Mamelodi Township, a vibrant artist community where he still resides, he gravitated toward poetry and songwriting as a teen, eventually joining youth organizations protesting South Africa's separatist, white government.

Reading poems at night vigils, funerals and anti-Apartheid marches triggered a long streak of police harassment. Local police soon began requiring that he keep them abreast of his whereabouts at all times, and his poems and songs were routinely confiscated — forcing him to memorize his work. It was a time when people like him would “just disappear indefinitely,” he recalls, or, in Mahlasela's case, be held for periods of time. “Somehow you get some sort of courage. You look at what's happening to your comrades, and you see that their struggle has to be testified — and you don't have to be afraid.”

In 1988, he joined the Congress of South African Writers, developing a new level of confidence as a poet and a writer. He struck up a creative friendship with South African poet Lesego Rampolokeng (who joins Mahlasela and Dave Matthews on “Sower of Words”), while falling under the spell of artists like Miriam Makeba and Phillip Tabane and the work of Victor Jara — all central influences on Mahlasela's music and lyrics.

Mahlasela never knew his father, finally locating him in 2000, sadly, six months after his death. When he was in his early 20s, his mother collapsed in church, dying the same day, just a year after she'd proudly held his first recording in her hands and wept. He wrote the new song “River Jordan” for her, and it was with her inspiration and the motivation of leaders like Nelson Mandela that Mahlasela crafted his official debut, 1991's *When You Come Back*, produced by Lloyd Ross, who returns to the controls for *Guiding Star*.

After the end of Apartheid, Vusi performed at Mandela's inauguration in 1994, and is now an ambassador to Mandela's 46664 Foundation, a campaign to help raise global awareness of AIDS/HIV. Mahlasela proudly promotes Mandela's message at all of his performances. Having released a string of albums in South Africa, it wasn't until the debut in 2003 of the documentary film *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, a film that charts South Africans' longtime struggle for racial equality, that Americans first glimpsed and heard Mahlasela. In a rave *Los Angeles Times* review, noted critic Robert Hilburn wrote: “Vusi Mahlasela's voice is so pure and commanding; you wonder whether you should have gotten an entire album by him.”

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Later that year, Americans did, with *The Voice*, a collection of the best songs from his catalog, all released for the first time in the United States via the ATO Records label (co-owned by longtime fan and fellow South African Dave Matthews, who calls Mahlasela “one of the most important influences of my life.”) It was an album so chock full of beauty, soul and struggle that it had a profound effect on American listeners in the wake of 9/11 — even though much of the album wasn't sung in English.

And that's a power that Mahlasela doesn't take lightly. A single listen to *Guiding Star* is all one needs to be assured that Mahlasela is a gifted performer. And with that gift comes responsibility, says Vusi: “I know that I have something that is like a borrowed fire from God. And I have to use it in a very positive way.”

Bakithi Kumalo, a native of Soweto Township outside Johannesburg, South Africa, has had a musical career characterized by a series of serendipitous events ranging from his debut gig as a precocious seven-year-old filling in for the bassist in his uncle's band to his enlistment into Paul Simon's group during the recording sessions of the pop star's landmark *Graceland* album in 1985. Kumalo creates a singular electric fretless bass sound that teems with double stops that sound like human voices and the African grooves of his homeland and has garnered him a stellar reputation as a sideman. In addition to touring with Simon on his current European tour, he's also recorded and/or toured with the likes of Gloria Estefan, Chaka Khan, Eileen Ivers, Randy Brecker, Hugh Masekela, Harry Belafonte, Gerald Albright, Miriam Makeba, Josh Groban, Chris Botti and Vusi Mahlasela.

Kumalo has also been active as a solo artist, with two fine albums to his credit (1998's *San' Bonan'* and 2000's *In Front of My Eyes*) as well as three award-winning children's albums recorded with his dynamic wife, vocalist Robbi K. He breaks fertile new ground with his CD, *Transmigration*. The album displays Kumalo's multifaceted talent in a variety of jazz-infused, deep-grooved musical settings including those steeped in contemporary/lyrical jazz, R&B funk and straight-ahead acoustic jazz (with Kumalo setting aside his electric bass for an upright acoustic) as well as an African rhythm jam.

While Kumalo became a professional at an early age in his uncle's band, life in Apartheid South Africa posed many challenges; so many, in fact, that Kumalo began to look for work outside the music field. However, a producer friend introduced him to Simon, with whose music was largely unfamiliar to Kumalo. Despite his nervousness in meeting the American pop star in a studio setting, Kumalo says Simon immediately gravitated to his bass style. Kumalo's work on *Graceland* opened the doors for him to pursue other avenues, including, recently, recordings with Herbie Hancock, Paul Winters, Gloria Estefan, Josh Groban, Randy Brecker and Cyndi Lauper.



Mongezi Chris Ntaka, the former lead guitarist with Lucky Dube and the Slaves (Africa's top selling artist) is a big fan of the 1950s' Kwela and Marabi music. Ntaka spent his childhood in the Johannesburg area and is self-educated. A self-taught musician, he made his own first guitar and it was that same guitar that got him interested in the 1950s' Kwela music. Strong rhythm guitar playing and warm guitar tone has always been his strong passion. Ntaka's break came in 1985 when he became part of Lucky Dube and the Slaves. His association with Dube produced albums like *Slave*, *Together as One*, *Prisoner*, *Captured Live* and *House of Exile*. He went on numerous world tours. "The custodian of African culture," as he likes to call himself, also recorded and toured with other South African artists including William Mthethwa, Splash, Sister Phumi, Oyaba, Spokes H. and Jambo. Now as a producer, Ntaka decided to expand the Kwela sound by forming his own band, MAHALA.

Ian Herman was the house-drummer at the legendary Shifty Records in Johannesburg during the Anti-Apartheid uprising of the 1980s and early 1990s. Shifty Records recorded mostly anti-establishment and politically active artists who the mainstream media wanted silenced, like Mzwake Mbuli, Lesego Rampolokeng with the Kalahari Surfers, The Genuines and Vusi Mahlasela. In 1994, Ian left South Africa for New York City. At that time he was working with Ray Phiri, a South African producer who co-wrote and produced some of Paul Simon's *Graceland* album. Ray connected him with Simon and he spent the next three years living in New York. In 1997, he and his family relocated once again, this time to San Francisco where, among many other gigs, he began working with Junk and Shabaz Ali Khan. Ian has been touring internationally with the WOMAD festival playing with Tananas, a band from South Africa and Mozambique. He is also currently the drummer for Hamsa Lila, Rainmaker and Hugh Masekela. Some of the other artists Ian has worked with are Abdullah Ibrahim, Miriam Makeba, Duran Duran, Sting, Manfred Mann, Vusi Mahlasela, Habib Koite and Sebongile Khumalo.

VUSI MAHLASELA: IN THE UM LIBRARIES

The following items, which include material about Vusi Mahlasela and his musical influences, are available from the Michelle Smith Performing Arts Library, McKeldin Library, UM library's ResearchPort databases and on the web. To access material in the Paged Collections Room, please ask the staff at the circulation desk.

Films

Hirsh, Lee, director. *Amandla!: a revolution in four part harmony*. Santa Monica, CA: Artisan Home Entertainment, 2003. 1 videodisc (103 min).
Location: Hornbake Non-Print Media Services
Call Number: ML3917.S68 A43 2003

Recordings

Dave Matthews Band. *Busted stuff*. New York: RCA/BMG Distribution, 2002. CD.
Location: Performing Arts Library Paged Collections Room
Call Number: MCD 7231

Dave Matthews Band. *Everyday*. New York: RCA, 2001. CD.
Location: UMCP Performing Arts Library Paged Collections Room
Call Number: MCD 6320

VUSI MAHLASELA: ON THE WEB

YouTube Videos

Visit: <http://www.youtube.com/vusimahlasela>

Recordings

Recordings are available via ATO Records' website, www.amazon.com and iTunes, among others.

Mahlasela, Vusi. *Guiding Star*. ATO Records. #B000MMLPA0, 2007.

Mahlasela, Vusi. *The Voice*. ATO Records. #B00009YXH1, 2003.

Mahlasela, Vusi. *Tsotsi*. Milan Records. #B000CRR3AQ, 2006.

