The Self-Invention of Hugh Masekela

Sam Raditlhalo

Summary

This article examines the self-invention of Hugh Masekela as a troubadour of music and the frames through which the construction of the memory process is allowed to unfold. It argues that unlike straightforward resistance autobiography, Masekela's *Still Grazing* (2004) is an odd mixture of resistance autobiography, minstrel self-invention, *skollie* impishness and the internationalisation of his self. This odd mixture hides as much as it reveals about the subject intent on an ongoing process of self-invention. The text abounds with the celebration of Eros, debauchery and discursive manoeuvres of the exilic condition. In the process, the idea of national identity and crises is subsumed by the *skollie* metaphor to distance hideous episodes, which it craftily records and rationalises. In the true fashion of the *skollie* framing, the autobiography ends on a note of reform, borne by a serious confessional mode for past indiscretions and yet another reinvention frame as survivor of the ravages of time.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is 'n ondersoek na Hugh Masekela se vind van sy self as 'n musiek-troebadoer, en die raamwerke waardeur die konstruksie van die herinneringsproses toegelaat word om te ontvou. Daar word aangevoer dat, in teenstelling met outo-biografieë wat onbetwisbaar weerstandsliteratuur is, Masekela se *Still Grazing* (2004) 'n ongewone mengsel van weerstandsliteratuur, sy vind van homself as troebadoer, van skollie-agtige ondeundheid, en die internasionalisering van sy self is. Hierdie sonderlinge mengsel verhul net soveel as wat dit openbaar oor Masekela en sy verbintenis tot 'n voortgaande proses van selfvinding. Die teks wemel van Eros-vieringe, brassery en beredeneerde maneuvers van die uitgewekene. In dié proses word die idee van nasionale identiteit en krisisse ingetrek by die skollie-metafoor met die doel om afskuwelike episodes te distansieer. Laasgenoemde word op vernuftige wyse weergegee en gerasionaliseer. In die ware gees van die skollie-raamwerk eindig die outobiografie in 'n toon van hervorming, gedra deur 'n ernstige belydende trant met betrekking tot die onbesonnenhede van die verlede, terwyl nog 'n verdere raamwerk vir vind van die self na vore kom: dié van die man wat ontkom het aan die tand van die tyd.

The world hailed the end of official apartheid in the year 1994. As South Africans experienced an outpouring of euphoria for the liberation of the

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country from oppression, this catharsis revealed the immense possibilities of reinvention of the society based on principles of equality, egalitarianism undergirded by a fraternal spirit for "settlers" and "natives" alike, that is, those who were made Africans by history and ethnic Africans. In the brief period before the inaugural hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – set up by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of Parliament 34 of 1995 – during the days 15-18 April 1996 in the Eastern Cape Province, the infectious mood was demonstrated in musical festivals and political rallies all underscoring enthusiasm for the incumbent Government of National Unity led by Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. The subject of this article, Hugh Masekela, was profoundly involved in mediating the transition to the future and was a much sought-after entertainer at festivals, gala occasions and in institutions tasked with designing the role of arts and culture in the new dispensation. It was a heady time for all concerned. To read *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (2004) after the momentous occasion of the first democratic elections is to partly reflect on these times but also to raise questions of how the subject came to be where he is. The autobiography recounts "the musical journey" within the framework of resistance autobiographies, and it is in this manner that the self-invention of the subject becomes apparent.

South African autobiographical writing stretches as far back as the Dutch colonial intrusion with diaries, travelogues and anthropological/ethnographic observations being key descriptive aspects of this process. Writing, however, should not pursue the view that Black South Africans did not have an idea of an "autobiographical self". If such a theoretical stance were adopted, it would run foul of the African conception of self and community, and thus the self-conceptualisation of Africans as demonstrated by their names in particular. Such names were closely tied to an ability to compose praise poems of the self as autobiographical sites. Daniel Kunene's pioneering study of this phenomenon is worth mentioning. One of Kunene's important contributions to identification (a process of articulation, a suturing, an overdetermination as Stuart Hall would have it) is through his demonstration of the function of orality in preliterate societies such as the Sotho. Using heroic poetry as a point of departure, he reconstructs how early Basotho communities conceptualised their being-in-the-world. The poetic rendering of warriors' and kings' heroic deeds in precolonial societies, emphasising the virtues of manly prowess, resembled precisely the oral traditions of the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings. Thus Kunene (1971) begins with the "manhood of man" by showing how the name of a great king, Moshoeshoe, came into being. After a successful cattle raid, Leqopo of the Basotho began to sing his own praises thus:

> Ke nna Moshweshwe moshwashwaila wa ha Kadi
> Lebeola le beotseng Ramonaheng ditedu.

> I am the sharp shearer, the shaver, descendant of Kadi,
> The [barber's] blade that shaved off Ramonaheng's beard.
>
> (Kunene 1971: 1)

Leqopo coined the name "Moshweshwe" on an occasion suitable to himself, thus signalling how he was to be described in future. Prior to this raid, Lepoqo (c1786-1870) was an ordinary mortal, but through such a deed of daring, of testing himself against adversity, he could choose a new name and become someone else, for his action had demonstrated depth in personality and courage. This point is reiterated by M. Damane and P.B Sanders in the introductory chapter to their text, *Lithoko: Sotho Praise Poems* (1974: 13), where they write: "After initiation ... young warriors were expected to prove their manhood, and they generally did this by cattle-raiding". C.M. Bowra (1952: 4-5) explains that cattle-raiding was necessitated neither by starvation nor war. It was mainly to test and acquire one's place-in-the-world, comparable to the traditional Masai lion-killing rite of passage. Heroic poetry works precisely because it shows that obstacles in the path of the protagonist have been overcome: "It works in conditions determined by special conceptions of manhood and honour. It cannot exist unless men believe that human beings are in themselves sufficient objects of interest and that their chief claim is the pursuit of honour through risk" (Kunene 1971: 8). Thus, through an accepted cultural praxis of raiding one another, a man comes into "being". Valour was an indispensable aspect of these communities, and conditions under which it was tested included frequent wars, battles, and skirmishes, encounters with wild beasts, hunting expeditions, cattle raids and, generally, the presence of any source of danger to life and property.

Praise poetry, as praxis, also had to do with initiation and the conceptualisation of individuation. Alverson remarks that, among the Tswana, this was seen as a way in which a name (*leina*) came to acquire deeper meaning for each initiate:

> The word "name" (leina) in ordinary usage refers not to a proper designation of a person but to a genre of oral poetry which every Tswana (traditionally, at least) was expected to master – as a composer – in the process of growing up. In former times young adolescents were sent to "initiation schools" where they underwent a complex and lengthy rite-of-passage into adulthood. This rite was an extended period of instruction in the knowledge and skills associated with leading an adult life as a responsible member of Tswana society. As part of this schooling youngsters were taught how to compose poetic formulations which would capture the essential meaning of the various deeds the child would accomplish in the school and later on in adult life. Each child was taught literally how to compose poetic praises of self. Public, poetic self-praising was explicitly taught as a prerequisite to

> acquiring a proper adult social personality. These praise poems composed to oneself and for everyone are called leina or (literally) "praise names".
> (Alverson 1978: 194)

While the above may be a mystery to many people who may not have seen praise poems as auto/biographical sites, it remains a truism that Black South Africans generally see life as a continuum between the living and the dead, and hence the concept of having a praise poem to oneself is an important part of "suturing" oneself into the lineage from which one descends.

The earliest intimations of South African women's life-writing are traced back to 1895 (Coullie 2004) so that it is a well-traversed genre reflecting the decades in which the autobiographical subjects lived their lives. It is a genre in which many social and official histories are fiercely contested, and Hugh Masekela's autobiography shows strong affinities with this tradition, even though it comes after the significant dates of 27 April 1994 (the date of the initial democratic elections) and 8 May 1996 (the adoption of the Constitution of South Africa Act 108 of 1996 by Parliament). These dates are historical touchstones because during these two days South Africans initiated an important aspect of their society: learning to live with the past through an all-embracing constitutional state arrived at by representatives of the political organisations themselves without any outside mediation. It is at these seminal moments that South Africans became co-authors of their destinies.

In a seminal contribution to the study of autobiographies and biographies in South Africa, Judith Lütge Coullie, Stephan Meyer, Thengani H. Ngwenya and Thomas Olver (2006) state that post-apartheid auto/biographies fall into three broad categories:

- The first group comprises *personal memoirs* which include texts by famous figures – sports personalities; media personalities; performers; writers as well as individuals whose lives have changed dramatically.
- The second group comprises *auto/biographical accounts which recover portions of history or experience suppressed by the apartheid regime.*
- The third group comprises *auto/biographical subjects' attempts to adjust to the new political dispensation.*

(Coulie et al. 2006: 31-35)

Masekela's text straddles the first two points above in that while it is not exactly a memoir (concerned with one particular event, such as imprisonment), yet it consistently treats one key subject – music; it falls into the second category rather neatly because it seeks to recover the subject's relation to the repressive state and brings to light the difficult years of exile. The trend followed in this text is to lash out at the past while simultaneously justifying choices made, exposing personal faults and accounting for the triumphs of his life. This is because historical particularities peculiar to

regions hardly conform to the neat categorisation of "universality" of the human experience; such narratives as those emanating from South Africa make nonsense of the poststructuralist theory of decentring as an analytical tool. And in this instance, this autobiography proves the aptness of Jane Watts's observation regarding the importance of the genre to South Africans. She notes that

> [i]n this situation the writers' need to find their own individuality becomes a prerequisite to literary creation. And indeed autobiography is the South African writers' answer to this interference with their consciousness – they use it to try and reverse the conditioning process in order to free themselves, through reassessment of their entire growth and development, of their mental subjugation, to make their consciousness.
>
> (Watts 1989: 115)

Masekela spent his formative years in a house of business and hilarity in Witbank's Kwa-Guqa township. His grandmother, Johanna Mthise Wa-Mandebele a Kwa Nnzuznza Mabena Bowers, ran a thriving shebeen serving the demands of Kwa-Guqa Township's drinkers and migrant workers (Masekela 2004: 5).[1] His maternal grandfather was a mining engineer from Scotland. While Johanna refused to have music in her house, Masekela's Uncle Putu and Aunt Tinnie played from the gramophone to 78-rpm records. The influence of African American entertainers such as Billy Holiday, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughn, Ella Fitzgerald and so on, together with groups such as the Mills Brothers and Ink Spots were making inroads into South African urban musical styles and hip lifestyles. The miners, when not underground, left an impression on young Masekela with carnivals of ethnic dances. Kwa-Guqa, in this sense, was a melting pot of cultural interaction and translation since it hosted Zulu, Swazi, Venda, Chopi, Baca, Hlubi, Tsonga, Tswana, Sotho, Ndebele, Pedi, Lobedu, and Karanga warrior ensembles. The sad songs of the drunken miners are also a feature in his life at this time which he later records as "stimela/The Coal Train" to institutionalise the bitter memories of migrant labour and loss of home (p. 12).

Masekela left his grandmother's house in 1945 to join his parents in Payneville Township near Springs. He was six. In 1947 the family relocated to Alexandra Township. The move from present-day Mpumalanga to Johannesburg was an auspicious one as it came near the localised cultural renascence centres around Sophiatown but also apparent in Cape Town's District Six and Langa Township. The musical scene in that part of the country was already flourishing with the Manhattan Brothers, singers such as Dolly Rathebe, a young Miriam Makeba, Thandie Klaasen and Dorothy

1. All subsequent references to *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (Masekela 2004) are indicated by page number(s) only.

Masuka as notable entertainers. When he joined St Peter's in 1952, aged 13, little did he suspect that the initial step towards his self-invention had begun.

In September 1953, he and a friend named Stompie from Sophiatown went to the Harlem Cinema and sat through *Young Man with a Horn* with Kirk Douglas as Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke. With Stompie he embarked on shoplifting and they were generally an unruly alliance that saw Masekela forced to repeat his second-year class. This *skollie*-like behaviour which was motivated in part by thinking of themselves as being street-smart; the "clever", trendy boys of St Peter's were important because, while Masekela left unruliness and theft behind, he never quite outgrew the *skollie* mental framework. And this framework accounted for much of the misery in his later life. According to the *Blackwell Companion to Criminology* (Markham 2004: 168) *skollie* is an Afrikaans term meaning a scoundrel, rascal, or rogue, with undertones of gangster. Throughout his life at home and in exile Masekela managed to straddle these definitions with ease and nonchalance.

The cinema episode proved to be life-altering, for he opined: "My resolve there and then was to become a trumpet player … I wanted this with all my heart and being – nothing else would do" (pp. 59, 60). This is the first act of self-invention, the tenacious will to *become*, a process of identification and identity construction. It answers that perennial but utterly bewildering question: "What do you want to *be* (my italics) when you grow up?" Even an individual such as Es'kia Mphahlele, at the same stage in his life, did not know what he wanted, as opposed to what he was forced to *become* (*Down Second Avenue* (Mphahlele [1959]2006: 126). Indeed, the one overwhelming motif in young Mphahlele's life in Maupaneng and Marabastad is bewilderment ([1959]2006: 1, 8, 40, 115).

This was a crucial stage in the life of young Masekela. Daniel J. Levinson and others' study, *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (1978: 19), points to important ways by which a person's life can be dissected. For this writer, what emerges as a key component of growth is what the team terms transitions from one era to the next. These transitions allow for a person to make crucial and life-sustaining decisions as they grapple with life. In the study, Levinson looks at life's eras as roughly divided into:

> Childhood and adolescence: age 0-22
> Early adulthood: age 17-45
> Middle adulthood: age 40-65
> Late adulthood: age 60-?
>
> (Levinson 1978: 28)

Thus when Masekela made the decision regarding his career, it is clear that he was still an adolescent and about to join the adult world. It is the contention of this writer that in this autobiography Masekela hardly experienced these transitions or paid particular attention to them. He was

trapped in the adolescent mode until late in life. While an argument may be advanced that the narrator is geared to an authentic narrative, an equally compelling argument may be made that he was ultimately a *skollie* for whom these transitions make little sense. And indeed, given that the text was written in collaboration with D. Michael Cheers (PhD) of the University of Mississippi, this lack of nuance is inexplicable precisely because biographical interviewing involves more than a cosy relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Levinson attests to this fact when he notes that "[w]hat is involved is not simply an interviewing technique or procedure, but a relationship of some intimacy, intensity and duration. Significant work is involved in forming, maintaining and terminating the relationship" (1978: 15). That both Masekela and Cheers, in their relationship, did not see the necessity of unpacking the displayed self as they reconstructed his life is puzzling, at the very least.

In an erudite reading of poetry from Africa, Mphahlele offers a succinct observation of what has happened to Masekela. Analysing the Gambian poet Lenrie Peters's poem, "Parachute Men", Mphahlele (2002) observes that this is the dialogue of the local self with the migratory self. The poem reads, in part:

> Parachute men say
> The first jump
> Takes the breath away
> Feet in the air disturbs
> Till you get used to it.
> Solid ground
> Is not where you left it
> As you plunge down
> Perhaps head first
> As you listen to
> Your arteries talking
> You learn to sustain hope
>
> …..
> *Jumping across worlds*
> *In condensed time*
> *After the awkward fall*
> *We are always at the starting point*.
>
> ("Parachute Men" in Mphahlele 2002: 270-271; my italics)

Masekela was thus on a journey which would involve swirling currents, downdraughts and the occasional illusion of timelessness as he invented and reinvented himself at key moments of his life, "the starting point" Peters alludes to, which Levinson terms The Novice Phase (1978: 90). Given his life, the mentors he associated with and the friendships he made – particularly with Stewart Levine – Masekela remained, for much of his life,

a novice of life. Equally crucial is the theme of homecoming that is evident in the poem and which serves to delineate later why Masekela would come back to Africa for newer musical impulses.

In an attempt to answer why autobiography is so interesting, Jill Conway observes that

> [w]hat makes the reading of autobiography so appealing is the chance it offers to see how this man or that woman whose public self interests us has negotiated the problem of self-awareness and has broken the internalized code of a culture which supplies notions about how a life should be experienced. Most of us, unless faced with emotional illness, don't give our inner life scripts a fraction of the attention we give to the plots of movies or TV specials about some person of prominence. Yet the need to examine our inherited scripts is just beneath the surface of consciousness, so that while we think we are reading a gripping story, what really grips us is the inner reflection on our own lives the autobiographer sets in motion.
>
> (Conway 1998: 17)

This observation is crucial since it crystallises Masekela's tenacious will of becoming a musician against the opposition of his parents. While recovering from a bout of flu in 1954, and with his precocious audacity, he requested a trumpet from Father Huddleston, setting in motion a lifelong engagement with his dream. Huddleston obliged with this request and supplied him and Knox Kaloate with the instruments and arranged for their first structured music lessons from Old Man Uncle Sauda of the Johannesburg Municipal Native Brass Band. Huddleston later put the passionate young men to work by organising their leisure time:

> Huddleston enjoyed our enthusiasm. He became fascinated with the band as more boys came to him begging for instruments. My cousin Jonas Gwangwa got a trombone; another cousin of mine, Chips Molopyane, and Prince Moloi got alto saxophones, and "Moon" Masemola got a tenor saxophone … St. Peter's was coming alive with the sounds of the Huddleston Jazz Band. The only thing we had on our minds was rehearsing.
>
> (p. 64)

When the apartheid state tightened its grip on all sectors of the society, the Community of the Resurrection decided to close St Peter's at the end of 1956 rather than inaugurate Bantu Education, setting in place the Era of Dislocation and the end of "black spots". Huddleston himself was recalled by the Community to its headquarters in Mirfield, England. And yet the seminal influence of Huddleston on Hugh Masekela and other (then) young men such as Jonas Gwangwa cannot be underestimated. Not only did he set them on lifelong career paths but he also responded to their insistent exhortations to help them leave South Africa by arranging means and ways for them to study abroad (pp. 81, 86, 91, 93, 104). Prior to this, Huddleston

had met Louis Armstrong who sent his used trumpet to the Huddleston Jazz Band, which duly arrived on 11 April 1956, to further reinforce Masekele's ambitions. Astonishing for someone his age, he had begun to devour the world of jazz in a spectacular, almost obsessive manner. I quote him at length:

> By March 1956, I had bought everything I could find and afford by Clifford Brown and Miles Davis. I was also getting into so-called West Coast jazz as a result of my cousin Chips, whose brother Kappie was working at the Coliseum of Chips's brother-in-law, Gwigwi Mrwebi, was also the saxophone player with the Harlem Swingsters and an avid collector of West Coast jazz. When I would visit Sophiatown, Gwigwi would bombard us with recordings by Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond, Shorty Rogers, Bob Cooper, Bud Shank, and others. I loved all jazz, but remained loyal to Clifford, Max, Miles, Dizzy, Sonny Rollins, and other African-American jazz giants. The West Coast jazz had a much softer style both instrumentally and vocally. Its foremost players, Gerry Mulligan, Chet Baker, Shorty Rogers, Dave Brubeck, Paul Desmond, Bob Cooper and Zoot Sims, and singers, June Christy, Anita O'Day, and Chris Connor, all had extremely gentle approaches to their arrangements, dynamics, and phrases. The music hardly ever had any loud passages.
>
> (p. 80)

While it could be argued retrospectively that the distinctions between East and West Coast jazz styles are arrived at as the historical self discusses the displayed self, what cannot be questioned is the enthusiasm of this self for the music itself. This listing of the musicians serves a purpose: it bludgeons the reader with these luminaries, some of whose artistic friendship and collaboration he would assiduously cultivate. Indeed, the book teems with names and names and names as an aspect of authentication and rememorialisation. Significant, too, is the local variety of this art form and his immersion in it, leading up to him being inducted into a life of debauchery and alcohol: during his school holidays he jammed with the Merry Makers from Springs and later ran away from home, aged seventeen, to join Zakes Nkosi's Sextet orchestra. Later, having dropped out of school, he joined Alfred Herbert's African Jazz and Variety which embarked on an extended tour with attendant self-destructive tendencies. At one point, Masekela confessed, after a tongue lashing from a doctor, that "[i]t didn't matter: my addictions to alcohol and sex were well underway" (p. 92). This *skollie* mentality was further reinforced by the dazzle of the lights and the merry-making needs of the communities which they toured. His transition from adolescence to early adulthood was so abrupt that little internal growth was allowed to flourish, thus enmeshing him in a frozen mental state that stayed with him for significant periods of his life.

What apartheid had not foreseen was that, as bad as things were for Africans, it could never take away their music, an observation Masekela

attributes to Dolly Rathebe (p. 85). Such an observation resonates with James Baldwin's statement that "[i]t is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because of a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story" (Baldwin [1949]1964: 18).

It seems almost a truism that the great talent of musicians, composers, actors and singers are the protégés of *King Kong* the musical; a truism because we cannot reflect on this show without looking at the "galacticos" (to use a more recent football terminology) that made it possible. The musical score was written by Todd Matshikiza, with Spike Glasser the chief orchestrator. Having resigned as a clerk, an interpreter to the local enforcer of the Government's Urban Areas Act and Influx Control Legislation for the Natalspruit Municipal Council, Masekela was roped in together with Jonas Gwangwa to copy the orchestral part from the sketches – a massive task, one accompanied by the now usual and defining characteristic of his work: "Even if we got home at four in the morning, by eight o' clock we would always be waiting for Spike outside Dorkay House, hung over but ready for work" (p. 97). The success of *King Kong* allowed a number of cast members to start new lives abroad when it closed its overseas run. All this was made even more possible by the worsening political situation under the anvil of the Treason Trial. Rather than see him as a harmless yet useful instrument, the state framed Masekela as a subversive, which alienated him still further: "My continued association with the deported priest and his political allies caused the Special branch to keep me under surveillance" (p. 87). This had the intended effect of destabilising him, and he put more pressure on Huddleston to get him out by any and all means! The departure of Miriam Makeba for the Venice Film Festival in November 1959 and from there to New York was a further spur. What cannot be denied at this point was that music was his chosen profession, and his work with the renamed Jazz Epistles (previously known as Jazz Dazzlers) in Cape Town reinforced the popularity of this art form in South Africa then: Abdullah Ibrahim, Makhaya Ntshoko, Johnny Gertze, Jonas Gwangwa, Kippie Moeketsi and Masekela – by his own account – mesmerised Cape Town at the Ambassadors nightclub with their modern, complex arrangements and tunes. They also played their versions of bebop tunes by Monk, Gillespie, Miles, Parker, Ellington Waller and others (p. 102). For a young man not quite in his twenties, and for someone who had escaped the humiliations of having to seek a trade and thus gain employment, for someone who had escaped becoming an unskilled labourer, it must have been affirmation of his talent. His self-identification with the musicians in the United States reminds me of the same manner of identification that Peter Abrahams had with the African American writers whose works he had devoured. Abrahams, having grown up at the fringes of Johannesburg in the 1920s, realised his situation as he opened Du Bois's *The Souls of the Black Folk* ([1903]1969) in the library of

the then Bantu Men's Social Centre in Eloff Street. The following sentence that pulled at his heartstrings is important: "For this much men know, despite compromise, war, struggle, the Negro is not free" (1954: 192). Kgomotso Masemola observes that, for Abrahams, "[t]his becomes a powerful refrain, a powerful figure of memory in which a collective experience crystallizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia" (p. 50). In an instant, a moment of identification is forged "across millennia", which allows for that moment in which migration becomes the only way which guarantees the completion of the identification process. Hence Masekela's constant plea to Huddleston for a scholarship which materialised after four years. In applying for a passport, he faced a farcical process:

> In order to be issued one, an African had to supply a letter of reference from his local police station, the Special Branch Police, his parish priest, his last school principal, a letter of his overseas sponsor, a letter of acceptance from the school to be attended, four hundred pounds in cash in case the applicant was stranded abroad, proof of available funds for a round-trip ticket, sufficient expense for six months, and a health certificate.
>
> (p. 105)

When he eventually got a passport and boarded his plane bound for London, it is with the characteristic urchin-like observation that he ordered his first drink in May 1960: "I realized for the first time that I had never ordered a lawful drink in my life" (p. 110)! At this point, the first frame as a citizen of the world was complete. Coming to New York via London after attempts to attend the Royal Academy of Music, he enrolled at the Manhattan School of Music with the help of Harry Belafonte and Dizzy Gillespie. Barely twenty-one, it is with a sense of wonder that he remarked: "In only four months since leaving South Africa, I had met Sammy Davis Jr., Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and Max Roach. I'd seen John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Charles Mingus perform. I had to work hard to get to the level of these great talents I had just been with, but I was determined to get there" (p. 126).

And yet the strange matter of self-invention and its myriad stages is simply that it cannot be accomplished through the shedding of an identity. For his initial success Masekela packaged himself as a derivative American. His remarks about his ambitions to be an all-American musician resulted in the failure of his first album, *Trumpet Africaine*, and made him work hard at losing his stupid fascination with all things American and developing a style that better fitted his skills and disposition, realistically assessing that the music with which he had been raised could be the launching pad of his cultural impact on America (p. 157). He observed that he

> had come to New York as a bebop musician, hoping to one day become a member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers or Horace Silver's Quintet, or play in Les McAnn's group, but when I broached the subject with any of them, the answer was always "Hughie, why don't you form your own group?" This frustration was lightened by Belafonte, who said to me: "Why don't you play music from home? Look at what it's done for Miriam" …. [This] encouragement was a turning point for me.
>
> (p. 165)

Worse too, is that, despite his club-hopping, pot-smoking, cognac-guzzling and dalliances with countless women, he ached for home: "I was aching for the township life …" (p. 162), and the masking of the pain through reckless behaviour was not at all successful. The s*kollie* behaviour could not mask the tyranny of the place. This would account for the equally reckless decision to return to South Africa, a foolhardy decision given that he had slipped even with the supposed surveillance of the Special Branch (p. 163). Yet he began to play at the jazz nightclubs in New York with pianist Larry Willis, bassist Hal Dobson and drummer Henry Jenkins. It is interesting to note that the infusion of all forms of musical styles into their repertoire is indefinable, yet makes a huge impact on the listeners and jazz affiliates. Crucially, Masekela recognised its importance in his career:

> All our songs were a hybrid of traditional and ethnic chants, township dance, and Caribbean, calypso-like grooves mixed with jazz and Brazilian sambas. It was a potpourri of the music of the African diaspora. All kinds of jazz critics and music experts have tried to categorize it, but have been unable to pin it down. I haven't either. One thing for sure, it has gotten me where I am today.
>
> (p. 164)

If the *skollie* metaphor carries undertones of rogue, this became a defining measure of Masekela's ability to appropriate and mix musical styles and grooves and recast them in newer, and thus startling forms. The same kind of strain in him would see him return to Africa for more musical impulses.

After moderate success of his albums such as *The Americanization of Ooga Booga*, *Emancipation of Hugh Masekela*, *Hugh Masekela's Next Album*, *Promise of a Future*, he formed a group with Gwangwa and Semenya which had Wayne Henderson of the Crusaders on trombone, Wilton Felder on saxophone, pianist Joe Sample and guitarist Arthur Adams, and recorded the *Union of South Africa* debut album which became a smash hit. It included the unforgettable Jonas Gwangwa's mbhaqanga composition, "Shebeen", the highlight of the album (p. 233).

As the summer of 1968 came to pass, the hit song "Grazing in the Grass" catapulted him to international fame even as his obsessions multiplied (p. 224). His marriage to Makeba having fallen apart with remarkable ease, he married and after three months quickly divorced Chris Calloway, the

daughter of Cab Calloway, and just as quickly married Jessie La Pierre, the mother of Selema Masekela (now a major sports presenter on the East Coast).[2] With Stewart Levine he turned into a veritable psychopath, and only a chance encounter with Quincy Jones awakened in him the desire to return to Africa at the invitation of Fela Kuti. With Makeba in Guinea as the guest of Sekou Ahmed Toure, it became relatively easy for him to travel on a Guinean passport. It was here that Masekela, from 1971, reinvented himself as African, an identity he had been trying to shed without success. As Stuart Hall observes, the little that we know about identity is that it provides psychological grounding:

> [I]identities are about using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we came from", so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside of representation. They relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as "the changing same" (Gilroy 1994) not the so-called return to roots but a coming to terms with our "routes". They arise from the narrativization of the self, but the necessarily fictional nature of this process in no way undermines its discursive, material or political effectivity, even if the belongingness, the "suturing into the story" through which identities arise is, partly, in the imaginary (as well as symbolic) and therefore, always, partly constructed in fantasy, or at least within the fantasmatic field.
>
> (Hall 1996: 4)

In search, therefore, of a fresh and distinctly *African* musical impulse, it was to Africa that Masekela returned early in 1972 via Conakry, Guinea. And this in itself is not unusual. It is an enactment that other exiled artists, such as Gerard Sekoto, were to undertake in reawakening the muse of their talents. In April 1966 Sekoto undertook a journey to Senegal and lived for some time in Casamanca among the Diola. As Chabani Manganyi notes in his biography, *A Black Man Called Sekoto* (1996: 113), he seemed to work harder there than in Paris: "day and night, capturing the everyday life of the

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2. Masekela claims to have been scrupulously faithful to Makeba during their marriage (pp. 174-175). The main contention between Masekela and Makeba is mutual accusations of adulterous affairs during their marriage. This writer has no desire to take the two autobiographies – Makeba's is titled, *Makeba: My Story* (1988) – and attempt to discern who of the two is slightly "truthful". I believe this would be equal to attempting to unravel the Liz Taylor-Richard Burton conundrum. While Makeba was deeply hurt by Masekela's revelations, it is important to note that she hardly dignified these with a publicity stunt. For this writer, this matter should simply be allowed to be their private battle and grief.

ordinary folk, for it seemed to him that their facial expressions, their beautiful features and their graceful movements brought into focus the truth and essence of that which is peculiarly African".

For Masekela, as it was for Sekoto, the tyranny of place was also the source of inspiration. It is on one of the "routes", Hall articulates, that he found a facet of himself in Nigeria. And such narrativisation, as Hall points out, does not make for a weaker text so much as it grounds it into a more nuanced discursive field. So, after countless jam sessions with Fela, Masekela connected with a Ghanaian group, Hedzoleh Soundz, singing in Twi, Fanti, Ewe, Ga and Hausa, the five languages they used (p. 268). The result was an album titled *Hugh Masekela Introducing Hedzoleh Soundz* through Blue Thumb Records. From the initial success, he became involved in the musical festival that was arranged for the Muhammad Ali-George Foreman world heavyweight title fight in the then Zaire in 1974. The nightmare of the arrangements armed Masekela and Stewart for undertaking big projects, and the remarkable success of the documentary, *When We Were Kings* by Leon Gast, demonstrated that the pair of *skollies* had talent when not engaged in endless recreation drugs. Indeed, at some point it was Stewart who tried to reform his life and Masekela candidly observed that his friend had had it and was trying hard to remain sober (p. 296). It is notable that Masekela would also travel the same path later and only at the instigation of his sister Barbara checked himself in at Clouds House in England. Over the years and with Stewart's active participation, he had easily squandered at least $50 million on drugs, parties, tax penalties, lawsuits, legal fees, divorces, women, cancelled engagements, royalty losses, terminated recording contracts, luxury airplane junkets, hotel and telephone charges, expensive cars and abandoned houses (p. 368).

The success of the collaboration between himself and the Ghanaian musicians ultimately served as a *second turning point.* Later he formed a group called OJAH – OJAH is Nigerian slang for "very close friend" – made up of the remnants of Soundz and Nigerians, and released two inspired albums, *I Am Not Afraid* and *The Boy's Doin' It*. Group members included the Crusaders' Joe Sample on piano and Stix Hooper on drums, Adelaja Gboyega on keyboard, saxophonist/composer Julius Ekemode, Stanley Todd on guitar and Yaw Opoku on bass. In between numerous work sessions he also recorded two albums with Herb Alpert before the fateful 1980 Christmas Day Music Festival in Maseru, Lesotho. Organised by Blowie Moloi, it was headlined by Miriam Makeba and Masekela together with Lesotho's vibrant Afro-Jazz group Uhuru featuring the then young(ish) Frank Leepo and Tshepo Tshola and other acts (p. 319).

Accoding to this writer, it is because of this festival, much like Mphahlele's tentative July 3, 1976 visit to South Africa at the invitation of the Black Studies Institute in Johannesburg (1984: 171), that forced Masekela to consider a return to southern Africa. Moreover, the adulation,

the closeness to home and family members such as his by then ninety-year-old grandmother, the ravages of life to siblings Sybil and Elaine, are factors that account for his later resettlement in Botswana. And it was this move, in part motivated by desperate poverty and a desire to refine the musical muse that allowed him to turn into an activist. Hitherto, claims to being an activist nothwith-standing,[3] Masekela was simply coasting on an activist tag with very little content. I would argue that Makeba was the more active of the two musicians, going so far as to address the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid on 16 July 1963 – an act that prompted the South African government to ban all her records (p. 159). But for Masekela, the closeness to the exiled community in Botswana and the witness to its circumstances, the nearness of "home", the pain of having been barred from the funeral of his beloved mother Polina and the fact that Barbara was then part of the African National Congress's office staff for Oliver Reginald Tambo overwhelmed his bohemian nonchalance. The presence too of Jonas Gwangwa and Wally Mongane Serote with the MEDU Cultural Trust and the planned Cultural Resistance Festival of 1982 forced his hand to settle in Gabarone with his third wife Jabu (née Mbatha). This reinvention as activist is not necessarily opportunistic but a consolidation of the turning point occasioned by the Lesotho festival of 1980, the fact that his star was definitely on the wane in the United States and circumstances in his life which had forced him to confront the daily reality of the oppressive state and what he could contribute to its demise. His involvement therefore with the group Mother (renamed Kalahari Band) offered him the opportunity not only to have consistent work but to channel his bitterness into a useful direction. His sojourn coincided with the beginnings of the Release Mandela Campaign and he was invited to perform at the first Mandela birthday concert in London's Alexandra Palace in May 1983 (p. 330). His efforts resulted in the launch of the Botswana International School of Music. His "anointment" as activist was when he received a smuggled birthday card from Nelson Mandela from Pollsmoor Prison, an act of generosity which he reciprocated by writing the song "Bring Him Back Home" (p. 338). The campaign against the exile community, culminating in the raid of 14 June

3. After being involved in a street accident on 4 April 1968, he disingenuously made the claim that he did not wish the police to be called because: "I had been drinking and snorting cocaine all day. I had two grams in my pocket, had been smoking a joint in the car, and was carrying a pocket full of rolled joints. This had become my lifestyle. I wasn't alone in this; all over the world, not every participant in the liberation struggle was sober" (p. 195). At this point of the narrative, beyond wild parties with students and the setting up by Miriam Makeba of the South African Student Association (SASA) Masekela was *not* an activist of any kind. It is instructive that such commentary is replicated in Dan Roodt's annual bile-fest regarding the incumbent Government of South Africa!

1985 by South African paramilitary forces, drove him into a second exile. During this period, he worked with Mbongeni Ngema on *Sarafina* and Paul Simon on a marathon *Graceland* nine-month tour of Europe and the States, two events that restored his depleted coffers (pp. 344-345).

The foregoing thus merges well with what the Levinson study characterises as the destruction/creation polarity. Without Masekela realising it, his sojourn in Botswana was a midlife transition: the *skollie* character of the narrator was being slowly suppressed to allow the adult to come through. Mandela's "anointment" of Masekela was important: it forced the creative impulse in him to suppress the *skollie* part of his life and insist on the exilic self coming to a point of convergence with his suppressed, activist self. As Levinson and others attest, this transition is a kind of makeover where the individual starts to realise he is indeed mortal and wishes to focus on his legacy:

> In the Mid-life Transition, as a man reviews his and considers how to give it greater meaning, he must come to terms in a new way with destruction and creation as fundamental aspects of life. His growing recognition of his own mortality makes him aware of destruction as a universal process. Knowing his own death is not far off, he is eager to affirm life for himself and for the generations to come. He wants to be more creative. The creative impulse is not merely to "make" something. It is to bring something into being, to give birth, to generate life. A song, a painting, even a spoon or toy, if made in the spirit of creation, takes on an independent existence. In the mind of its creator, it has a being of its own and will enrich the lives of those who are engaged with it.
>
> (Levinson 1978: 222)

Masekela was ultimately able to legally enter South Africa in September 1990, having become estranged from his wife Jabu. He kicked off his South African career with Sekunjalo in February 1991. The tour included Sankomota and Bayete. At the end of the tour, he decamped for the United States none the wiser that he was really urgently in need of help. It is observations such as the following that lift the autobiography from the mundane. His insistence on truthfulness, the confessional thread that comes through at key nodes of the narrative, is important since he comes across as vulnerable, irresponsible, at times irredeemable and a thoroughly unpleasant subject. At one point he writes of the opprobrium of family members when he relates how his sister, Sybil, actually died of AIDS-related illnesses, a confession that made headlines in the *City Press* (pp. 372-373). This then introduced the *last turning point* in his reinvention; the *redemptive suffering* element that was an active agent in addressing similar demons that trouble affluent artists in general. Consider for instance the reasoning behind an observation such as this one:

> Instead of embracing the turn my life had taken – the success of *Sarafina* and the *Graceland* tour, the moments of happiness I had eked out with Jabu and Deliwe in Botswana, and, most of all, the progress toward liberation in South Africa – I sank deeper into my addiction. And rather than stay and sort out the mess I'd made with my finances and marriage, I returned to South Africa.
> (p. 355)

In South Africa, for the first time, he began to miss gigs, appointments, and had to resort to lame excuses (p. 364) despite at this stage having secured a good Government post as Deputy Director of the Performing Arts Council under Minister Ben Ngubane (p. 360). During the long period of rehabilitation, not only did the *skollie* mentality begin to rankle with him but revealed a serious character defect for someone his age with "forty years of sex, drugs, and alcohol addiction" (p. 368). Together with Peter Vundla he redeemed himself by setting up the Musicians and Artists Assistance Program of South Africa (MAAPSA) and thus completed a remarkable journey of self-invention and discovery. As he walked his daughter Motlalepula down the aisle on her wedding day, he reflected: "As I walked Pula down the aisle, I thought how lucky I was to be alive after such a crazy life" (p. 375).

One of the lasting impressions of this autobiography is Masekala's lust for life, for an existence that does not hinge on the intricacies of enforced separation of "races" and the ability of talent to will out of such a society. In this sense it is metaphoric of other autobiographies of talented South Africans who made it in other societies against great odds, and who proved the lie that "native" South Africans were not in any way to be allowed to live freely, and to have muted expectations that ground them as hewers of wood and drawers of water. It is deconstructive, in this sense, of all of apartheid's cherished shibboleths. It actually addresses, at a subconscious level, the basis on which a "rainbow nation" striving for non-racialism can emerge when talent is harnessed on the basis of its exception. The irony is that Masekela, like Makeba, Abrahams and Mphahlele, become significant others only when they are outside South Africa. Thus the "rainbow nation" that came into being in 1994 was actually existent in the turbulent periods of the 1950s and beyond, and even in the horrors of Robben Island, patiently waiting to outgrow its confinement. As Indres Naidoo attests in his own autobiography, being on the Island was part and parcel of nation-building even in the bitter decade of the 1960s:

> It was a bitter time for us, a time of hardship and suffering, yet we were all sustained by the feeling that something special was happening; that through our comradeship and our day-to-day struggles in support of each other, something very fine was growing – we could feel the new South African nation in birth, right there in the depths of prison, and this gave us strength to fight on, and great hope for the future.
> (Naidoo 1982: 57)

Therefore such autobiographical writings as Masekela's add an important facet to the spectrum of lives that ultimately becomes the tapestry of contemporary South Africa.

The program of the musical Truth in Translation 2007 (of which Masekela was the musical director and composer) directed by Mr Michael Lessac, founder and artistic director of the acclaimed Colonnades Theatre Lab in New York, lists Masekela as "arguably South Africa's most distinguished musician". Without proper contextualisation, it is easy to take such a statement at face value. The value of the autobiography allows the reader to engage with the process through which, from his initial self-invention, Masekela can lay claim to such greatness.

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