

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

Nigel Williamson introduces South Africa's biggest musical export –

LADYSMITH BLACK MAMBAZO



Apart from Buena Vista Social Club and possibly the Gipsy Kings, South Africa's Ladysmith Black Mambazo must have sold more records than just about anyone in world music. That an *a cappella* group singing in Zulu should find success in the mainstream musical supermarket is remarkable enough. But the group, led by Joseph Shabalala for almost 40 years, has enjoyed not one but two substantial bites of the sweetly lucrative crossover cherry.

Their first international break came when Paul Simon used them to fine effect on his 1986 Grammy-winning album *Graceland* on the tracks 'Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes' and 'Homeless'. Then in 1997, the group's 'Inkanyezi Nezazi' (The Star and the Wiseman) was used by Heinz for a television advert. The exposure catapulted their rich harmonies into the top 20, producing perhaps the most unlikely hit single since

the shaven-headed devotees of the Radha Krishna Temple chanted their way into the charts almost 30 years ago.

Yet Ladysmith's origins precede their discovery at the hands of Simon by many years. When Shabalala was first assembling the group in the 60s, Simon was still musically married to Garfunkel, he had not written 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' and the world was a more innocent place. "The first time we went into a recording studio, we were very afraid about these machines stealing our voices," Shabalala recalls.

By the time Simon got to hear Ladysmith in the mid-80s, they had reconciled themselves with the suspicious recording machines and had become the most famous black choral group in southern Africa. A decent selection of their pre-*Graceland* material is available, scattered across a number of compilations and, if you can find it, there is an excellent 'two-on-one'

released on Gallo in South Africa, which teams the early albums *Thandani* and *Umthombo Wamanzi* on a single CD.

It now seems odd to recall that Simon's collaboration with Ladysmith resulted in his blacklisting by the United Nations for breaching the strict terms of the cultural embargo against recording in apartheid South Africa. Jerry Dammers of the Specials even helped to organise an Artists Against Apartheid picket line when Simon appeared with Ladysmith and other African musicians at London's Royal Albert Hall in 1987. In retrospect, the position was stupid and inflexible, for *Graceland* was clearly nothing but a force for good and did a huge amount to promote black South African culture.

It also served to land Ladysmith a deal with Simon's record label, Warner Brothers, for whom they recorded three strong albums in the late 80s. They mixed both Zulu and

English-language material and encapsulated the very soul of South African music – proud and joyous but at the same time imbued with a deep sadness and a profound resilience in the face of long years of adversity.

Into the 90s, Shabalala pursued a policy of working with just about any Western pop artist who was game – with mixed results. Phoebe Snow, Dolly Parton, Lou Rawls, Des'ree, the Lighthouse Family – the list of collaborators of varying suitability is seemingly endless. On many of the collaborative recordings, the group abandoned its a cappella style and added a soft-rock accompaniment.

Then there's the question of that Heinz advert. "Some people said it wasn't right to do commercials, that we would lose the dignity of our harmonies," admits Shabalala, who is a deeply religious man and an ordained lay preacher. Yet he insists that using Ladysmith's voices to sell baked beans or working with Western pop artists has not compromised his musical vision. "I am a representer of our tradition and it is my job to share it with people. Nothing we have done has altered the purity of our traditions. It is just like shaking hands. It hasn't changed us."

BEST ALBUMS

1 *Shaka Zulu* (Warners, 1987)

After their contribution to *Graceland*, Ladysmith landed a deal with Warners and Paul Simon reciprocated by producing *Shaka Zulu*, their first and biggest-selling album for the label. He brought a crystalline clarity to their vocals which helped them win a



WIN TICKETS

»»» We have five pairs of tickets to Ladysmith's gig at the Royal Festival Hall, London on June 2. To enter, just answer the following question:

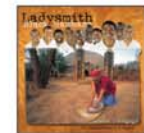
What is the name of Ladysmith's biggest-selling album?

Send your answer on a postcard, with your name, address and email to: Ladysmith Comp, Songlines, PO Box 2521, Windsor SL4 1YF.

Closing date April 4 2003. Winners will be chosen at random. Only one entry per household. Please note, we occasionally allow carefully selected companies to mail details of their products to our readers. If you would like your name to be excluded from this list, please state clearly on your entry.

Grammy award of their own. The ten songs include 'Hello My Baby,' 'How Long?' and 'Rain, Rain, Beautiful Rain,' which remain staples of their live show to this day.

2 *Lihl' Ixhiba Likagogo (My Grandmother's Kitchen)* (Gallo, 2000)



You might have to search for this, as it has not so far been released in the UK. But the hunt is worth it, for after the crossover pop albums *Heavenly* and *In Harmony*, Ladysmith returned gloriously to their roots with this traditional-based CD, to date released only in South Africa. Not a pop collaboration or a soft-rock backing in sight – just glorious a cappella voices and ten new compositions, the essence of which is summed up in 'Dlondlobala Njalo' and the title-track, both heartfelt pleas to preserve South Africa's indigenous culture.

BEST COMPILATIONS

1 *The Ultimate Collection* (Wrasse, 2001)



A double album with a populist slant, but the 34 tracks (including the famous Heinz tune) intelligently mix the group's celebrity collaborations with the best of their traditional Zulu material. You won't necessarily approve of all of their crossover excursions and the Lighthouse Family and Lou Rawls are hard to take. But Simon and Parton still sound great and, ultimately or not, this is easily the most diverse and best balanced collection on the market.

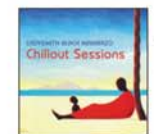
2 *The Warner Brothers Collection* (Warners/Rhino, 2000)



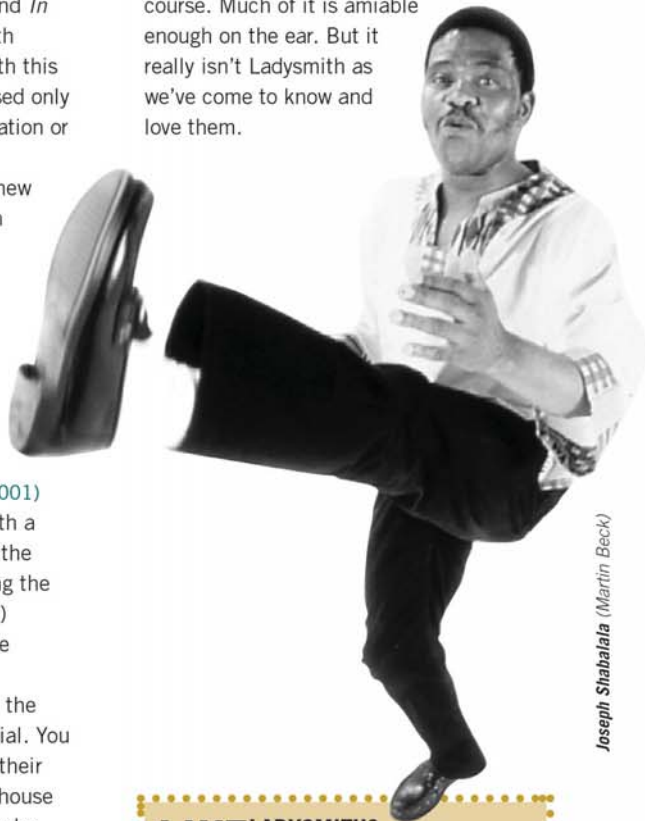
An unimaginative title for a fine 17-track compilation that draws on the trio of albums they recorded for Warners in the late 80s after *Graceland* had made them international stars. Simon appears on 'Homeless' and 'Amazing Grace,' but otherwise it's refreshingly free of superstar guests and represents Ladysmith at their high-spirited best as they enjoy the first flush of international success.

BEST AVOIDED.

The Chillout Sessions (Wrasse, 2002)



You thought Ladysmith were an a cappella group? Think again. Ten of their vocal tracks are remixed with beats 'to enhance and embellish' while 'retaining the essence of the group'. Or at least, so it says on the sleeve notes. It does no such thing, of course. Much of it is amiable enough on the ear. But it really isn't Ladysmith as we've come to know and love them.



Joseph Shabalala (Martin Beck)

LIKE LADYSMITH? THEN TRY...

◆ *Women Of Mambazo Mamizolo* (Gallo, 2002)

The debut album recorded by Nellie Shabalala and the group she formed from the congregation of the church where she ministered. Tragically, she was murdered in May 2002 and the excellent record she had almost completed with husband and Ladysmith leader Joseph Shabalala in the producer's chair, is now released posthumously. *Mamizolo* is reviewed in the Africa section.

