

Blues for a Hip-King: A Timeless Obituary on Dumisani Dlamini 1973-2004
Jazz Riffs about the late Dumi: Film Producer:

"MDumara, da Hustler "

It's death or post death's sacrosanct rule no # 1: after one man has said his thing, after the burial of, say a friend or dearly beloved - like the great conversationalist and coffee shop Mr Cool, Eric Myeni did on Dumisani Dlamini - you don't want to spoil the gig.

You don't want to come later, breathing deep, sweat and tears battling for a space on your pitch black beautiful face, only to repeat the whole post-death gumbo: the crying, uncontrollable grave side weeping, uncontrollable choreographed news paper obituary weeping, the works...the blues, the funk, the cursing of Satan "that bastard."

Cause if you do it, all your tears will be merely "funk-tional" and really not something that can take the much-intended mourning to another level.

You see, mourning, as bra Zakes Mda's characters will tell you, is an art best left to its masters and mistresses, mostly our big round aunties back in the villages and townships we all come from.

But this is Dumi's death. No, 'twas his. No longer, now. It's ours. Ours to talk and shine about. Ours to regret. Ours to nail our choreographed emotions to. Ours . . . his friends and close family.

And yours of course, for the most eloquent voices in the pre- and post- burial gatherings would not be so good in their "Dumi was my best buddy" performance were they aware there wouldn't be no audience - you!

In the thick of all the performed and honest outpour of grief, mine was one of those muted voices. Muted like Miles Davis's horn when he brewed the bitch, like Trane's improvisational madness, the silent "scream" through which he composed and performed "Naima", like Thelonious Monk when he barricaded himself in his room to pour tears over his instrument. Muted but very much alive. Muted but oh so loud.

Muted because, I can't help it, I take death personally. Very personally. And in my life, I dunno how many people I have buried, personally or as part of the crowd. I have lived with death and refused to share my blankets with him.

Oh yeah, it's a "him"! One day it is Gitto Baloyi, then Brenda "Fast" (my nickname, for her), then Dumisani.

Look, let's not get worked up here, rather let's get the work "upped" if we are to make sense of this. Fact is - and that's between me and you, the art lover - millions of our people - from kwa Qumakala to Gaza strip, from the Namibian desert to the Tuareq's' land, from Khartoum to Harare, from Yeoville to Melville - thousands, rather, millions of black, poor, talented, debauched, enriched, enriching people die minute by minute, second by second, hour by hour and we say nuffing.

That's what I mean: death is personal. We don't say much about those cause they have never really lived inside us, and us in them.

Dumi has lived inside me, I know what I'm talking about. We had a strange relationship. Professional, personal and creative. Whenever we met, he'll say "au Ta Bongs, you've really moved, neh?"

And he would make a joke about people who complain about blacks who are said to have "soul'd" out and to quote him "complaining without really understanding how tough and painful it is to be in those boardrooms, trying to out-negotiate corporate sharks."

I never understood why he always told me that story, for I was and still am a journalist, working for a Sunday rag, like I've been working for Sunday rags all my life.

Here's the strange thing, and two of my lady friends (in the last 10 yrs) would complain about it: Dumi would call me around 5: 30am to talk black consciousness, discuss news stories, talk film and "race matters."

In a strange way, we would end up the talking ritual with a shot prayer and I would hang the phone to go to sleep, which made me late at work.

The other day he called me from New York, simply to tell me that a woman whose film I had loved so much and helped bring to my "moan" and "mourn", my beloved country, South Africa, a woman I had communicated with passionately, online, about politics and culture, was not actually black but white - as in Caucasian. And not Coke-Asian, if you know what I mean.

To top it off, she was his friend and he was calling me from her office in Manhattan. For the record, Stephanie Black is the film director and activist who - other than being famous for being the first to attack the great whiteblack-loving recording Emperor and Bob Marley's beneficiary, Chris Blackwell, calling him a blood sucking "Chris Whitewell" - is known on the Black Atlantic activist circles as the woman who did that film on why and how Jamaica's Agri-economy was brought down by the World Bank/ IMF. Gawd, forgot the title!

I have never seen anything like that and anything like that since on the so-called underground filmmaking scene. Pure, ballsy!

So, I started an email communication with her that went for almost six months, while all along thinking she was black, and of course she didn't correct my perception - not that being black was or is an issue (or isn't it? True it's an issue, but is it a trophy to win? Anyway . . .)

Dumi, smart boy he was, could read my mind and so he called, specifically to say, "you know Ta Bongs, you can in fact be black without being an African, y'know..." and tell you what, Stephanie is the blackest thing since your granny's DrieFoot pot! Ha ha ha!" he laughed, at my silliness.

Dumi shared so many stories with me, especially work. Strangely, for a party man like he was, he found time to read newspapers and, like Andile Magengz and Arabi Mucheke (people who do not quickly jump into to your senses when you think of so-called thinkers), Dumi was an animated speaker who seriously meditated and excelled in a wide variety of issues and always, un-intentionally exposed me as somebody who ought to dig deeper than I was actually doing, research-wise, etc.

We would discuss his favourite topic, Sophiatown, then move to Cuba, hip-hop, townships, women, always women and race matters without skipping a beat.

We also fought. Quite a lot. Fought and made up all the time.

For example he took issue with the fact I always referred to him in my articles as "a hustler", "a smooth-tongued producer".

I fought him in return, for what was Dumi other than a beautiful speaker? And wasn't it a talent on its own? Dumi was the only person who could talk at length without you feeling the urge to say, "do you really believe what you are sayin?"

True Yeovillites will remember that, long before Dumi, there was a man called Bennito. No, not Del Toro, the Hollywood hunk. Bennito, once one of the fashion and style emperors of Johannesburg's streets - circa 1990s.

At his best Bennito was a peerless raconteur and fabulist with a tongue of gold and a mind of a snake, priest and an activist all rolled in one.

At his best he was so good people started saying he would sell rain drops back to the icy clouds from which rain materialised. That he would sell mothers their own children but at double the cost - whoever set initial cost, nobody knows.

But not even Bennito could beat Dumi's short burst vignettes, stories with no beginning nor endings, anecdotes and the ability to disagree with you, tell you how inconsequential your thoughts were while all the time laughing with you.

But also, Dumi had one thing most of us, "maguduga" - immigrants - in Jo'burg have long lost: simple, basic respect.

This far, I choose to remember him professionally and this far, he had given me inside stories (what used to be known as scoops) in three of his films, or films he produced: "Waiting for Valdez", which I think was a 101 guide as to how big and talented black egos (especially black male egos) can work together to produce wonder without throwing tantrums or reducing the assignment to a peeing contest. You know, boys' stuff: let's see who can pee the furthest in our sunday morning earth watering contest.

Together with Teddy Mattera, and Dumisani Phakathi, Dumi Dlamini created a story that moves, touches, and demands an applause, tears and - as Miles used to say - "mad love" from a viewer.

I remember working on a review of the film, the same night I saw it, possessed and inspired, laughing and crying . . .for the Sunday World - a tabloid that paid my bills - and I am not ashamed to say Dumi's story was one of the five that helped me win the current (2003-4) "Arts and Culture Journalism of The Year" award.

Early this year or late last year Dumi made me feel as if he came to fetch me at the airport while in fact he came to fetch some white chap from Sithengi Film Festival, who spoke non-stop, to my disgust.

I think the chap was David Max Brown, though I am not certain about it. Anyway, white boy was gaaning on and on about this and that, and I looked at him, thinking, spoilt brat, what's eating you up?

Dumi told him point-blank that he must shut up before I ram a fist up his rib cage. Now those who know will tell you I can't even kill a fly, but white boy was seriously frightened.

We had a good laugh after that.

We fought again when he called me to come fetch "exclusive" pics of a Hollywood feature film they (with his partner in Dollar Bill and Black Roots Films, Zola Maseko) had just completed, "Mr.Drum", for my essay piece on the film.

When I arrived at the office, Dumi did not have the pics and if he did, he did not have the permission to gimme the pics. Whaaaaat? I blew my top. Notorious top. Stormed and stomped a tornado frenzy. Its part of my job - as a journalist - to behave like I'm the only man to burst up angrily - in the world, you see. Sure you've heard of our reputations, havencha? Do believe the hype!

It helped. Two days later I got all 100 pics - courtesy, Dumi - and an exclusive story on "the making of Mr. Drum", the South African story going the "Hollywood-weird" route.

Again we laughed about it.

One day, he called me to "come hang with me and Taye." Who's Taye? I asked, and he replied, "au Ta Bongs, awusa fustani amaJit e'kasie?"

So I walked up to where he and the so-named Taye were in Rosebank, and typical of Dumi he was with this pitch black, chiskop boy (more handsome than pitchblack Afro), called Taye.

Did I know when he asked me if had forgotten "amajit' ekasie" (boys in the hood, or, as hip hop parlance has it, "homies") he was talking about Taye Diggs, one of Hollywood's fastest rising stars?

That's Dumi, he would make something big quite light and position it within the township. His own township. For him the townships were not dwellings but a state of mind.

I never knew somebody who loved the townships and lived "township jive" in his life without really physically living there like Dumi.

So we hanged with Taye until the so-called "umjita wa-se kasie" started blowing his cover, showing how he doesn't come from the 'hoods, and not that there's anything special about the hoods.

Black boy started calling me 'Sir'. Sir this and Sir that. I said to Dumi, "autshaele le bari yakho kuti I am not Sir, hini ungathi hi bourgeoisie le mvemvane?"

To which Dumi laughed and said you are also "I-mental bourgeoisie, Madondo, ungazenzi nqono nge mpinji yeGazi" (his all favourite phrase). Now I hate translating my Zulu slang for your benefit, but at this Dumi came to Taye Diggs' defense after I called the famous Hollywood hunk to order for addressing me as "Sir". Fucking Sidney Poitier's "Too Sir, with Love".

I am not a British sucker. This fool should never ever call me "Sah" or "Massah" - n which he didn't - ever again, otherwise . . . I cursed and muttered under my

breath, but loud enough for Dumi to hear and call my bluff for what it was: "Hey", don't act for my pal, Taye, you are also an intellectual bourgeoisie, holly damnnit! Don't try to shine on my friend's shien, here."

I cooled off and pitch black boy stopped Sirring me again. So we balling again, thanks to Dumi.

Dumi would insist on eating in some corner cafe selling "pap and steak" rather than Ninos or Mimos whenever we lunched together in Rosebank.

Being close to him I realised what an open and loving spirit he was and how beautiful women loved him in return.

I always threatened him to grow my beard to Castro's and Hizbolla Sheick's size, then we'll see who the sisters will flock to - and that was five years ago.

One thing we don't talk about when people we love have moved on, is the side we think was "bad" about 'em.

I dunno much about what our mutual friend Gail Smith once hinted to me, in between her sobs, as his "dark side". I never knew it, but I knew one thing: Dumi loved women and women loved Dumi, period, now that's hardly dark, or is it?

He lived his life like there are no stress, no sweat, in this world and spending time with him and his soccer lovin', machine gun tongued friend, mad man, fellow funkeiro, Sanza was chaotic. I mean even his - Sanza's studio name says it all: which sane parent would call their son, "Sanza da Fanatic?" But that's another story . . . I loved these brothers, especially when they operated as if they were on cue, some black nihilistic-boho-new Africans ruling the world cue. Their strut. The talk. You will need a dictionary to make sense of their ever evolving language.

I have met them twice to talk business and every time the meeting will crumble to a discussion about Madala Kunene's music, and gals: one gal we all loved with all our collective souls, the erratic gal with a wild spirit was... well forget it, I have no cents to fight off law suits here. This is about Dumi, and not about scandalising impintshi ye'Gazi as he would refer to it.

But also, as I said early this year in the *Sunday Times* Lifestyle feature on "Mr.Drum", Dumi was going to be something I really despised and secretly envied.

The first black, no, the first South African producer in Hollywood and dare I say, together with hip-hop mogul Master P, Spike Lee and Jeff Flanagan -

one of the fewest, a handful of black creatives in Hollywood (notoriously colour-obsessed town, the colour of its choice being green) after Drum hits the screen, later this year.

I take this opportunity to challenge the film industry to create the "Dumisani Dlamini Young Film Producer Award" (iMpintshi ye Gazi Fund for motion Picture stories) as a tribute to Dumi's role.

Lastly, Dumi told me a secret that many of you already know and I would like to quote him verbatim, and at length, for this is where South African film debate will be at once "Mr. Drum" is released and the local film industry and the media works themselves to a stupid "whose story is this" non-debate after that.

"With Mr. Drum," Dumi told me several times, especially when we were alone "we were fucked, Ta Bongs. They – Hollywood's big studios – wanted us to feature P.Diddy and we refused, they wanted to take the whole thing and turn it into Hollywood drivel but we stood our ground. At the end of the day, something had to give, and the ground we were standing on started shifting, bro.

"It was sand, Ta Bongs! Hollywood would not shift for two black boys. So we bent over and got a bit screwed (metaphorically) by the big guys. The story is still ours, but again, the story is not ours.

"A film belongs to two sets of people, Ta Bongs: funders and audiences. Not us producers, you pompous writers or the triple pompous lot directors. Sometimes you allowed yourself to get screwed so that you can go ahead and create something totally and truly yours in the future. That's what I had learned while dealing with Hollywood."

I think I have said it all.

To Dumi, I would like you to remember these words: a man we both loved (Can Themba) once wrote these words, words me and you and your producer Peter, the German chap living in London, recited back and forth: "son-of-a-gun had no business dying on us like that".

'Pon, reflection though, I think you had business dying like that, you had, so that we can wake up to this crime in Jo'burg and become vigilant about it. Knowing us, we are going to go back to Spiro's, reminisce and drink ourselves spoilt, go back to our different homes, crash on trees, street poles or get shot as we enter our lounge rooms late at voodoo hours.

And then obituaries and brand new suits will be tailored out so that we the professional mourners can make an appearance at each other's funerals.

How sad... Fuck this!

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