4 | The Making of Sathima Bea Benjamin

Jazz . . . is what liberates you. It is the most liberating music on the planet.

—Sathima Bea Benjamin, interview, *Jazz Weekly*

In the era of decolonization, when much of the black world saw Africa as the beacon of hope for the future of humanity, honoring and embracing African cultures underscored the continent's arrival on the world stage. For African Americans, especially, identification with Africa and the Third World transformed a minority struggling for basic civil rights to a world majority demanding human rights for all formerly colonized and oppressed people. The journeys of Guy Warren, Randy Weston, and Ahmed Abdul-Malik reveal that the elements of indigenous culture they celebrated were not always ancient and traditional but new and modern—highlife being perhaps the best example.

But as most of the continent celebrated political independence, in South Africa the white minority–ruled racial state tightened its grip. In 1948, the predominantly Afrikaner National Party came to power and immediately implemented legislation intended to weaken multiracial struggles for social democracy, labor rights, and racial equality. The apartheid laws, as they came to be known, further codified racial segregation and severely limited rights of nonwhites in South Africa. The laws prohibited marriage and sexual relations across the color line; classified the entire population by four "racial" categories of Bantu (Native), Asian, Coloured, and White; divided residential rural and urban areas strictly by race; segregated public accommodations; barred black workers from striking; and essentially outlawed every liberal antiracist organization under the guise of anticommunism. The Bantu Education Act (1953), passed a year before the U.S. Supreme Court declared "separate but equal" education un-

constitutional, created a draconian, state-run education system based on the principle of separate and unequal. The apartheid state imposed a national curriculum for Africans allegedly suited to their status as a permanent cheap labor force. All these restrictions were enacted under the guise of preserving "traditional" cultures. Science and anything but the most remedial math were prohibited, and the social science curriculum promoted white supremacy and nonwhite inferiority. The act was just one example of the apartheid regime's twisted deployment of "traditional culture" as a weapon to subjugate Africans. There was no room for "Natives" in modern South Africa, except as maids, cooks, and laborers. In this severely segregated context, something modern and international, like jazz, was considered anathema by the apartheid state. To South Africa's black and "Coloured" population, however, modern jazz potentially embodied an inherent critique of apartheid's racial illogic. As mass opposition to the regime grew during the 1950s, jazz served as one of the prevailing soundtracks of struggle.

This social and political cauldron produced some of South Africa's greatest musical figures, notably Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Chris McGregor, Letta Mbulu, and Abdullah Ibrahim. And it was that same turmoil that caused them to flee their country. Whereas African American artists like Randy Weston sought freedom by traveling *to* Africa, generations of South African musicians sought freedom in escape, in exile. It often meant finding their distinctive voice in diaspora, one among the many dispersed communities of black folks whose very art (blues, jazz, calypso, and so on) had profoundly influenced the musical cultures of South Africa.

One of those exiles, singer and composer Sathima Bea Benjamin, is rarely mentioned in the pantheon of South African artists, despite a half-century in the music business and praise from none other than Duke Ellington. Nor has she earned full acceptance and recognition in the American jazz world. Some might glance at her career and chalk it up to bad luck. In 1959, Benjamin recorded what should have been the first LP in the history of South African jazz, but it was never

released. Four years later, Duke Ellington produced a historic recording session with her for Reprise Records, but the label decided she wasn't commercial enough and shelved the record. It was finally released in 1997 as *A Morning in Paris.* The few critics who have paid attention to Benjamin regard her as one of the great musical storytellers. She is known for delivering lyrics with the kind of patience and emotion that leaves audiences hanging onto every word. As Jon Pareles, a critic for the *New York Times,* wrote in 1983, "in song after song, Miss Benjamin could make a word cry out with just a flicker of vibrato."[1] And yet, from the time she left South Africa in 1962 until quite recently, Benjamin has always had to scuffle for work.

Much like Guy Warren, Benjamin was not "African" enough to be marketable, and too "African" or exotic to be taken seriously as a great jazz vocalist. Once she complained, "People write books and things about jazz singing and they don't include me. So what is the reason? Sometimes I think it's because I don't come from Georgia."[2] On the other hand, as a Coloured South African whose repertoire excludes township music or traditional Xhosa songs, Benjamin has been considered less authentic than, say, Miriam Makeba. Although late in her career she began to sing standards over Cape Town's unique shuffle rhythms, she fashioned herself as a jazz vocalist and has remained squarely in the idiom. And yet, Benjamin is as much a product of apartheid and the struggle to overthrow it as Makeba, and she, too, has composed liberation songs, paeans to her homeland, and worked tirelessly in support of the African National Congress (ANC). Benjamin and Makeba both became professional singers during apartheid's formative years, when jazz was hailed as a music of freedom. Jazz in South Africa was an expression of the nation's defiant present and liberatory future—thoroughly modern, urban, sophisticated, and nonracial. Jazz stood in stark contrast to the retrograde, segregationist ideology of the regime. But whereas many of Benjamin's contemporaries and compatriots, including Makeba, abandoned jazz for township music or indigenous folk songs, or attempted to fuse the genres in an effort to root their music in South

African soil, Benjamin never strayed from her devotion to modern jazz as "the most liberating music on the planet." Her singular commitment to jazz made her South Africa's leading jazz vocalist and one of the central figures linking U.S. and South African musical culture. Ironically, that same commitment ensured her marginalization, as beautiful romantic ballads and torch songs lost their relevance in a highly nationalistic era of urban militancy. And as a Coloured South African woman working in a genre too often construed as black-and-white, male, and essentially American, Sathima Bea Benjamin had to struggle just to be heard.

Nations in Me

Benjamin's world had always been cosmopolitan. Her family's roots extend across three oceans. She was born Beatrice Bertha ("Beattie") Benjamin in Johannesburg on October 17, 1936, and her father, Edward Benjamin, descended from the island of Saint Helena off the coast of South West Africa. His mother, Eva Thwaites, immigrated to Cape Town as a young girl and married Alfred Chambers Benjamin, another Saint Helenian who made the trek to South Africa to seek his fortune. The tiny island had been a crossroads linking Europe, Africa, and the Americas ever since the Portuguese landed there in 1502, embodying the extremes of freedom and unfreedom that have defined the Atlantic World. Saint Helena was a depot for slaves, a possession of the East India Company, a British Crown colony, and a destination for "Liberated Africans" after the British abolished the slave trade and sent its fleet out to enforce its decree. Saint Helena became the home for Chinese "coolie" labor, Afrikaner prisoners of the Boer War, and Napoleon Bonaparte, who lived his final years there as a British prisoner.[3]

Benjamin's mother, Evelyn Henry, traced her roots to the island of Mauritius, situated off the east coast of Africa in the Indian Ocean. Like Saint Helena, Mauritius was a British possession occupied by a cross-section of the world. The people spoke Mauritian Creole,

French, English, Rodriguan Creole, Swahili, and some Arabic. An island of immigrants hailing from Africa, India, China, the South Pacific, and Europe, together they created a distinctive Mauritian identity and culture. Evelyn Henry's mother, a Filipina native named Francesca de la Cruz, was one of those immigrants.[4]

Benjamin's parents grew up in Cape Town, but after they married and Evelyn was expecting, Edward relocated to Johannesburg to find work. Evelyn followed, enduring the long train ride to Johannesburg alone and seven months pregnant with Beattie. About a year later, Evelyn bore another daughter, Joan, but her marriage had already begun to unravel. Evelyn and Edward soon divorced, and the two girls lived for a while with their father and his new wife. When family members learned that Edward's wife beat the children severely, they were promptly sent to Cape Town to live with their paternal grandmother, Eva "Ma" Benjamin. Beattie was about five at the time. A strict disciplinarian and devout Anglican, Ma Benjamin was devoted to her two grandchildren. She was also devoted to her native land. Remembered as "very British in her ways, although she was quite African-looking," her strong identification as a Saint Helenian and British subject left an indelible impression on young Beattie.[5]

For Beattie, apartheid did not signal a dramatic shift from past policies. Even in Cape Town, renowned for its long tradition of liberalism, race-mixing, and cosmopolitanism, segregation was a way of life. "The English had apartheid you know," she explained. "In my mind, they put it already into practice. There weren't any signs. They weren't seen, but you knew your place . . . I only went to colored schools, only had colored friends. Everything was just with your own ethnic group. You couldn't really go over to visit even the Africans in their township. You couldn't do that. And you never went to the white side."[6] The racial realities, relative poverty, and deep sense of familial displacement left Beattie feeling isolated and a bit melancholy. "I was a lonely child, and along with my daydreaming, which I indulged in constantly, music was my only solace." Benjamin grew up listening to her grandmother hum some of the old British popular

songs from operettas and early Tin Pan Alley musical theater. She told critic Francis Davis, "I was very attracted to the music of Victor Herbert, songs like 'Indian Summer' and 'Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life,' which I still perform. Musicians ask me, 'How do you know those songs? You weren't around in the 1920s.' And I tell them, 'No, but my grandmother was.'"[7]

Through her grandmother's old radio-phonograph she discovered Nat King Cole, Doris Day, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, and other American jazz and pop singers who influenced her early singing style.[8] Their impact proved decisive. Cole taught her the importance of diction and enunciation, Doris Day provided some of her early repertoire, and all of them introduced her to the endless possibilities of jazz phrasing—especially Vaughan and Sinatra. She also loved the immensely popular Joni James, particularly her rendition of "The Nearness of You." The Chicago-born daughter of Italian immigrants, James topped the pop charts at the age of twenty-two. Her voice was young, vulnerable, slightly melancholy, and like Benjamin, she was partial to slow ballads. They also shared a similar look—dark hair, dark eyes, and a pretty face exuding more virginal innocence than coquettish sexuality.[9]

Benjamin could not afford records, songbooks, or sheet music, so she kept a pencil and note pad hidden inside the phonograph in order to jot down lyrics. It wasn't easy since she was under constant surveillance. "My grandmother would say, 'What are you doing there? You have to get on with the ironing' or whatever. So it was all done in secret. And even I was singing in secret . . . I had no ambitions to be a great singer. I didn't think about it. But I found out that when I sang I forgot whatever pain, whatever traumas, I was dealing with. I went into another world."[10] The cinema was another source of escape, as well as a rich musical resource. On Saturdays, Ma Benjamin gave the girls a little money and dispatched them to one of the local "bioscopes" so that she could indulge in her only vice—playing the horses. Young moviegoers were treated to cartoons, an episode of Dick Tracy, and a double feature of American westerns and musicals.

Sponsors frequently held talent contests at intermission during the Saturday matinees. One afternoon, encouraged by her sister, eleven-year-old Beattie took the stage and sang "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now?" It was an interesting choice. An old pop song originally written for a 1909 musical, *The Prince of Tonight*, it had taken on a new life in 1947—the year Beattie turned eleven—when Twentieth Century Fox released the movie, *I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now?* Perry Como's recording of the tune reached #16 on Billboard's pop charts.[11] The spectacle of a skinny eleven-year-old girl singing

> I Wonder who's looking in to her eyes?
> Breathing sighs! Telling lies!
> I wonder who's buying the wine?
> For lips that I used to call mine

caught the audience's attention. She walked away with the grand prize: eight movie tickets.[12]

Benjamin entered many more talent contests, unbeknownst to her grandmother, took some voice lessons in opera, and joined the school choir. Although she displayed impressive vocal skills, the choir director never assigned her a solo. "I asked him why," she later recounted, "and he said, 'Because you sweep. You slide up and down the note, instead of staying directly on it.' That meant nothing to me at the time, but, in retrospect, it shows that I was unconsciously trying to imitate the black American singers I heard on the radio."[13]

Yes, Brother, Anything American

Benjamin was not alone in her efforts to imitate black American singers. For over half a century, African American music has been perhaps the greatest single influence on popular culture outside of South Africa itself. Cape Town, the gateway to the Atlantic and Indian oceans, and a major port for U.S. and European imports, had long been an entrepôt for American culture. African American and

Afro–West Indian seamen passed through regularly, and some ultimately chose to make Cape Town their home.[14] The popularity of American minstrelsy inspired the Cape's own Coloured minstrel tradition, the Coon Carnival. New Orleans–style jazz and other forms of American popular music came by way of gramophone records and became popular in the Cape during the early 1920s. Queenstown in the Eastern Cape earned the nickname "Little Jazz Town" due to the proliferation of New Orleans–style bands active there. During the 1930s, with the onset of swing music, jazz-based dance ensembles became the rage. Most of these bands fashioned themselves in the image of the African American bands they heard on the radio, saw in "soundies" at the bioscopes, or read about in magazines. Challenged by these upstart swing bands, established Cape Coloured orchestras began incorporating jazz alongside traditional folk forms (*vastrap* and *ghoema*) and standard ballroom fare of foxtrots, waltzes, and square dances. By the 1950s, many of the Coloured bands moved closer to modern jazz, exchanging guitars, violins, and banjos for saxophones and brass.[15]

For much of this period, however, jazz's center of gravity was in Sophiatown, an African suburb of Johannesburg. Nicknamed "Little Harlem" and South Africa's Chicago by its patrons, Sophiatown was overrun with popular bands such as the Harlem Swingsters, the Jazz Maniacs, the Merry Blackbirds, the Rhythm Clouds, the Pitch Black Follies, and the African Hellenics. They performed at nightclubs and dance halls, fronted female vocalists like Dolly Rathebe, Dorothy Masuku, Thandi Klaasen, Miriam Makeba and the Skylarks—all of whom became huge stars in South Africa. The bands' musical and sartorial style mirrored African Americans portrayed in films such as *Stormy Weather* and *Cabin in the Sky*.[16] Sophiatown boasted a vibrant black intelligentsia, but it was primarily a working-class community whose social and economic conditions deteriorated under apartheid, especially as pass laws limited mobility and the municipality increased transportation fares—all on the eve of the state's planned destruction of the township under the Western Areas Resettlement

Act of 1953. The Resettlement Act required that all residents relocate to the newly created Southwest Townships (Soweto), and there they were to be divided by language group.[17] Sophiatown's destruction, in addition to new regulations forbidding Africans from playing or patronizing venues where liquor was served, killed the big bands. Even established small bands had a hard time finding adequate rehearsal space and played very few gigs. (Some of the musicians complained of having to rehearse in local classrooms, tram sheds, dilapidated abandoned buildings, and bathroom stalls!)[18]

The fantastical world of popular culture and the political realities projected two very different images of South Africa. On the one hand, the dance halls, nightclubs, and traveling variety shows displayed the glamour and brilliance of a thriving music scene.[19] On the other hand, the country was in a state of war—a war that preceded the National Party's rule in 1948. Indeed, apartheid should be understood as a response to heightened opposition, especially during the mid-1940s, when the ANC Youth League pushed its parent organization to support mass uprisings against consumer and transportation racism. In the face of greater repression and deteriorating economic conditions under the National Party, the ANC launched the Defiance Campaign in 1952—a nationwide series of strikes, "stay-at-homes," pass burnings, and mass demonstrations. Though unable to roll back apartheid laws, the ANC's membership grew from 7,000 to 100,000 in 1952.

Both images of South Africa came together in the pages of a new magazine called *Drum,* launched in 1951. A white-owned monthly pitched to African and Coloured readers, *Drum*'s largely black editorial staff turned a pictorial styled after *National Geographic* into a powerful voice of South African modernity. They understood their audience. As one prospective reader demanded: "Give us jazz and film stars, man! We want Duke, Satchmo and hot dames. Yes, brother, anything American."[20] And they delivered, celebrating urban style, American cinema, and jazz. *Drum*'s main music writer, pianist and composer Todd Matshikiza, fashioned a jazz-inflected writing style

so distinctive it came to be known as "Matshikese."[21] His regular column, "Music for Moderns," acknowledged American influences but encouraged South African musicians to pay attention to their own indigenous urban music. He argued relentlessly that the fusion of jazz and township music was the path to creating "the African form of expression. The African idiom."[22] Just as highlife captured the imagination of urban West Africans, township music—namely kwela (or pennywhistle jive) and mbhaqanga—competed with jazz in the realm of popular music. Both forms derived from marabi, an urban dance music that originated in the 1920s. Like jazz, it was played in the shebeens—local drinking holes where home-brewed beer was served.[23] Mbhaqanga combined marabi chord progressions, indigenous melodies, and jazz improvisation. The word itself is Zulu for a kind of steamed bread made from maize. Musicians referred to it as both a source of "daily bread" and something homemade. Ironically, because the South African Broadcasting Corporation—state-run radio—promoted mbhaqanga heavily in the 1950s through a regular feature called "This Is Bantu Jazz," political activists and even some musicians dismissed it as *msakazo,* or "broadcast," and associated it with state repression and the policy of "develop along your own lines."[24]

Given the intense debates raging over jazz, township music, and the pros and cons of American cultural influence, it is telling that Benjamin never credits South African singers with having influenced her. After all, African vocalists were in great demand in the early 1950s. This was the golden age, when the Skylarks, the Manhattan Brothers, and the African Mills Brothers reigned supreme, when former nightclub singers such as Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, and Dorothy Masuka not only transformed township ditties into popular protest songs but symbolized a new, urban, female sexuality. Glamorous photos and profiles of these women dominated the pages of *Drum,* propelling them to national stardom. But Benjamin had no desire to play sex kitten, and township music was not her cup of tea. So she shunned cheesecake photos and stayed committed to jazz,

singing standards and old American and English ballads, often at slow tempos—creative choices that contributed to her marginalization.

In 1952, Benjamin enrolled in a two-year program at the Cape Town Teachers' Training College. Her desire to sing still burned within her, but she chose the practical path of becoming a schoolteacher. But during her two-year enrollment, she continued to sing in talent shows and, most important, fell in love with a fellow student named Sam Isaacs. He was a bona-fide jazz musician, a drummer about eight years older who was pursuing a graduate degree in music. "That was my first love," she reminisced. "And then he found out that I could sing." He had a regular trio gig at a whites-only skating rink on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and Benjamin used to prop herself up on a box and listen to them through a window. "Their sound was George Shearing, the George Shearing sound; so I think that was where I started to get leanings."[25] Isaacs introduced her to more recording artists and a wider range of jazz styles, but their relationship ended by the time she graduated.

Benjamin began teaching right away, but she and her sister, Joan, also made the fateful decision to leave their grandmother and move in with their mother, Eva. After years of searching, she had found her mother living in Cape Town, remarried, and raising several younger children. The move proved traumatic at first. "It was so hard to leave my grandmother. And she couldn't understand why, after all she did for us. But you know what, your mother is your mother. And I wanted to know her." It turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Unlike her grandmother, Eva encouraged her daughter's musical ambitions. She had an upright piano in her house and, to Benjamin's surprise, she played a little ragtime—mostly old American songs like "Chicago" and "Up the Lazy River," and only in the key of C or F. "I was just amazed. Then I realized, okay it was the diamond rush and the Americans went there and wherever they go they take their culture. And she, as a young girl, was a domestic and she worked in their houses and she heard and she played by ear. A lot of wrong notes but

she played by ear."[26] Evelyn earned most of her income as a dressmaker and occasionally took domestic work, but every so often she was "asked to play in the local hotels and rent parties."[27]

From about 1955 to 1957, Beattie Benjamin lived something of a double life. She spent her weekdays teaching elementary students in Athlone, Cape Town, where she was the consummate educator—organized, informed, diligent, and readily accessible. But come Friday night, she and Joan hit the nightclubs—the Naaz, Mermaid, Zambezi, the Catacombs, or on occasion Weizmann Hall in Sea Point.[28] Coloured musicians performing at the smaller venues would invite her to sing. Since she couldn't read music, they helped her determine key, taught her the importance of tempo, expanded her repertoire, and offered general advice about ways to improve her performance. The "lessons" often lasted into the wee hours of the morning. "I call it my night school," she mused, "because I learned all the standards . . . Sometimes they'd give me records. After singing with them we did not know how to get home to our area because we had no transport so we'd have to hang with these guys until one of them who had a car would say we're ready to take you home. Then we'd go to one of their houses in the early hours of the morning and they would play Charlie Parker, Stan Getz, Ellington . . . and you know, they'd play jazz. And I got to hear these things."[29]

Her music education took a formal turn when guitarist Kenny Jephtah introduced her to pianist Henry February. Ten years her senior, February was a native of Cape Town and one of the most respected jazz musicians in the city. His father, a prominent church organist, encouraged his son to take up piano, but Henry remained a reluctant student until high school—about the time he discovered Teddy Wilson and Nat King Cole. While admiring Benjamin's talents, he recognized she had work to do and was a strict and demanding taskmaster. Every week she left with a stack of new music to learn, new artists to check out, and a swirl of ideas about melody, rhythm, accent, and sound.[30] She was good enough to join Kenny Jephtah's band, a drumless trio modeled after Nat King Cole's group, with

Jephtah on guitar, February on piano, and Johnny du Toit on bass. February's idea was to write arrangements akin to Cole's but with a female vocalist.[31] They performed fairly regularly on Saturday afternoons at the Holy Cross Hall in District Six, often accompanied by saxophonist Jimmy Adams.[32]

Like so many South African schoolteachers of her generation, Benjamin was a young intellectual living through a period of intense political turmoil. She spent her free evenings in the local public library, where the talented pianist and drummer Vincent Kolbe was head librarian. She immersed herself in African American history and literature, devouring works by noted authors such as Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Langston Hughes, not to mention Billie Holiday's memoir, *Lady Sings the Blues,* just before the government banned it. "There wasn't such a strong ban on U.S. literature then," she remembered, "so I was able to read a good deal about black Americans, and I felt a bond with them, with their longing to be free."[33] She also participated in the library's "bohemian" culture, which included membership in the Jazz Appreciation Club, a small listening and discussion group organized by Kolbe.[34] Many of these young educators were active in the Teachers' League of South Africa (TLSA), a Cape-based organization dedicated to the overthrow of apartheid. Founded in 1913 initially to protect Coloured interests, the TLSA had been radicalized by wartime militancy, the Defiance Campaign, and the regime's racist assault on education.[35] Although Benjamin was not an active member, as both a high school student and as a teacher she admired their work. And like most of her colleagues, she understood all too well that the Bantu Education Act (1953) was just the first salvo in the regime's racial overhaul of the school system. A few years later, the legislature passed the Coloured Persons Education Act, further separating white and Coloured education and forcing Coloured schools to register with the government.

Her burgeoning political consciousness sprang not just from books and conversations, but out of her daily battles with discrimi-

nation and oppression. "I sang in the nightclubs in the white areas, where black and so-called 'colored' entertainers were allowed to perform but were not allowed to mix with the customers. We had to sit in the kitchen during intermissions, just as black musicians were having to do in the American South." Consequently, she began to question the utility of a "Coloured" identity, noting how it obscured the brutal realities of white supremacy by creating a mythic racial hierarchy among nonwhites. Benjamin recognized how the classification divided "Coloureds" from "blacks," though neither group could escape the indignities of apartheid. "Black is not a color, it's an experience. And in South Africa, there are only two possible experiences. I was never privileged to know what the white one was. That makes me black."[36]

In 1957, just when she felt she needed to get away from Cape Town and take a break from teaching, Arthur Klugman hired her to join his new traveling show, Colored Jazz and Variety. Saxophonist Jimmy Adams was also part of the entourage. A Coloured follow-up to the African Jazz and Variety show, the troupe of dancers, musicians, acrobats, and comedians traveled all over southern Africa, performing before half-sold auditoriums filled with indifferent and even hostile audiences. Benjamin usually held the room with popular tunes like "Over the Rainbow" and "Mr. Wonderful," but she had never encountered such tough crowds or such terrible working conditions. "That was my first on-the-road for the music. I can't begin to explain; that was horrendous. We drank sugar water and ate dry bread to survive most of the time."[37] Although Benjamin gained valuable experience, the entire production was a commercial failure. Klugman abandoned the show in Rhodesia, leaving the entire band stranded—no money, no transportation, no work. The immigration authorities put them on a train and dropped the group just across the South African border. In order to raise the fare needed to get to Johannesburg, Jimmy Adams organized a dance. "There was no electricity," he remembered. "It was just me, my bassist, and we had a banjo."[38]

Safely in Johannesburg, Benjamin and Adams were befriended by the alto saxophonist Kippie Moeketsi and a baby-faced trumpeter named Hugh Masekela—two key figures who, along with Benjamin's future husband, were on the verge of revolutionizing modern jazz in South Africa. "Kippie," born Jeremiah Moeketsi, was only nine years older than Benjamin but was already considered a living legend. A formidable voice on clarinet and saxophone, he performed with several leading Sophiatown bands, including Todd Matshikiza's celebrated Harlem Swingsters. After the Swingsters broke up, Moeketsi joined the Shantytown Sextet, a band led by tenor saxophonist Mackay Davashe that backed the popular vocal group the Manhattan Brothers and the young singer Miriam Makeba.[39] Moeketsi was still working with the Shantytown Sextet when Benjamin and Adams arrived in Johannesburg, and Masekela was the newest (and youngest) addition to the band. Masekela had already achieved some fame as a member of the Huddleston Jazz Band, an ensemble named for Father Trevor Huddleston, a former headmaster of St. Peter's Secondary School (which Hugh attended). Father Huddleston was an outspoken critic of apartheid who refused to cooperate with the Bantu Education Act. He was also responsible for providing Masekela with his first trumpet and encouraging his music career. Masekela became a remarkable soloist partial to fat tones and singing melodic lines, his influences ranging from African American trumpeter Clifford Brown to South Africa's own Elijah Nkwanyana.[40]

Kippie's generosity toward Benjamin and Adams belied his reputation for being notoriously difficult and moody. But his favors weren't always doled out evenly. Kippie gave each of them a pound every day so they could eat, but he invited only Adams to rehearse with his big band. Impressed with his playing, Kippie offered to take Adams to Lourenço Marques (Maputo), Mozambique, to play a Christmas engagement. At first, Kippie wasn't interested in bringing Benjamin. Adams stepped up and lobbied on her behalf. "What about Beattie? She is a vocalist, I can't leave her here!" The band's pianist had limited skills, so Adams sat at the piano and accompanied her

for an impromptu audition. Kippie hired her immediately. Before they could leave, however, they had to solve one problem. "Beattie had a dress on that she made herself. And I borrowed my clothes from somebody. We didn't have clothes, we didn't have money. And I said to Kippie, please lend us some money so we can buy clothes and I will pay you back after the shows." With the money Kippie advanced, they were both able to buy decent outfits, and the gig generated enough income for Adams to pay back the advance and purchase train tickets to Cape Town.[41]

I Got It Bad

Benjamin returned home in 1958 weary, a little wiser, and more committed than ever to modern jazz. She had seen the dark side of highly commercialized entertainment and realized how easy it was to lose the essential artistry of music in the hustle to make a profit. She settled back into her old life of teaching during the week and singing on the weekends, but this time she achieved a little recognition. Write-ups about her began to appear in the local papers. More and more bands and local variety shows wanted to hire her. The attention became too much for the headmaster of her school, who demanded that she choose between her singing career and her teaching job. She chose to sing.

Her decision was hardly a fait accompli. On the contrary, she came very close to leaving music, and for reasons having to do with gender. Being a woman in the masculine realm of jazz and popular music meant navigating a stifling, condescending, sexually dangerous, exploitative world dominated by men. On the road with Klugman, she was vulnerable and often had to depend on men (such as Adams) to protect her or even vouch for her musicianship. And unlike her male counterparts, she was expected to exude sex appeal on stage. Although she earned fellow musicians' respect the legitimate way—through her voice, imagination, and hard work—the late-night listening sessions left her vulnerable to sexual advances, especially

since she had to rely on others for transportation. Her growing reputation as an outstanding singer was no deterrent to the propositions, which seemed to increase over time. At one point she temporarily quit music. "I got disgusted and I said I'm not doing this because all the guys just want to sleep with me in the end. I don't want to sleep with anyone. So I gave up . . . And I would get blue and recover and then get blue again. All of it just made me want to say goodbye to this."[42]

She was just about to call it quits when she met a Swiss expatriate named Paul Meyer. In 1958, Meyer had launched "Just Jazz," a concert series at the Cape Town City Hall to benefit mentally ill people living in backyards, or what was known derisively as the "snake pits."[43] A graphic artist by trade, Meyer loved jazz and was reputed to have one of the largest record collections in South Africa, though he limited his acquisitions to black artists only. The same could be said about the women he dated. A diminutive man with blond hair, blue eyes, and "a film star's looks," his proclivity for black women was second only to his love of jazz. According to one of his acquaintances, he fled Johannesburg for Cape Town "when his romantic relationships across racial lines attracted unwelcome police attention."[44]

Meyer approached Benjamin and told her he loved her voice because she sang like Billie Holiday. This intrigued her, as she had not yet read *Lady Sings the Blues* and only possessed a passing knowledge of Holiday's recordings. Meyer, in turn, invited her to his place to listen to some of Holiday's music. "He had a red sport car and he came into this colored area with his sport car and he would come and pick me up and take me into the white area. And me in all my innocence, thinking this is just a nice guy; besides I want to hear these records." He would bring her to his house in the coastal suburb of Camps Bay and play records by Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and a host of black female vocalists she had not heard. "I went there once or twice and everything was cool. I had never drank alcohol, I had never smoked cigarettes. I was just so puritan it was unbelievable. So

everything was fine; he was so nice and he played me these things and it was mind-boggling to hear all of this."[45]

Meyer also wanted to introduce Benjamin to a friend of his, a pianist by the name of Dollar Brand—later known as Abdullah Ibrahim.[46] The prospect of meeting Ibrahim didn't impress her, however. "I heard that he was a rebel and that nobody liked him and his music was different and all that sort of thing."[47] Then one night, during one of her visits to Meyer's place, he started making sexual advances toward her. When she politely demurred, he became more aggressive. "I kept saying, 'You just have to take me home. I don't want to come here any more.' And I'm realizing, who am I going to complain to? I'm in the wrong area. I can't call cops—not that I would have had to, but he was being very aggressive. He was just a little guy, but he was saying, 'Come on, come on, I slept with Miriam Makeba!'"[48]

Just as she was preparing to fight her way out of it, there was a knock on the front door and in walked a very tall, lanky, serious-looking, brown-skinned man in miners' boots. It was Ibrahim. There was no time for introductions. "I just said, please would you help me? Would you get in the car with me and have this guy take me back?"[49] Meyer took her home, and she did not think she would see Meyer or Ibrahim again. But a few weeks later, Meyer begged her to sing in his next concert, "Just Jazz Meets Ballet," to be held in January 1959. She would be a featured artist, and he had already arranged for a pianist to accompany her. "I said, 'listen here, I'm not singing anymore,'" but she eventually relented. When she arrived for rehearsal, she saw the man who saved her from Meyer's clutches sitting at the piano. She introduced herself, again, and he asked,

"So, now, what are you doing?"

"I'm a singer and I'm working with Ellington's music," she replied.

"You are?" He was shocked. He loved Duke and few, if any, vocalists with whom he had worked knew his music.

"What song?" he asked.

"I'm working on 'I Got It Bad.'"

"What key?"

"The key of D." He paused for a moment, and then told her, "That will take some work. I mean, I just can't go into that song. I'm also working with Ellington but that's a very difficult key."[50] Not to be discouraged, Benjamin invited him over to her mother's house to work on the song since she had a decent piano. After a couple of rehearsals, they got it together in the key of D, and "I Got It Bad" was a smashing success. The *Golden City Post* waxed enthusiastic over her appearance, declaring Benjamin "Most promising singer for 1959."[51] Ibrahim, for his part, was selected "South Africa's best pianist" as a result of their performance.[52] Benjamin left "Just Jazz Meets Ballet" with more than a good review. "I was totally in love. I never met anyone like that. He just took over my life. Very strong, very different. I had leanings toward [his music] because I was sick of everything else. And I threw caution to the wind. Gave up my teaching job. Just went on the road with him."[53]

Different, indeed. Some musicians revered Ibrahim like a god, others avoided him like the plague. The critic Mike Phahlane, who described him as "the unpredictable mystery man of modern jazz," remembered the early days when club owners fired him regularly for playing music the patrons did not understand.[54] He rarely left home without his signature miners' boots, a satchel of sheet music, and a dog-eared copy of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, from which he quoted passages at every opportunity. Gigs were few and far between, so he applied for a position as a clerk at the post office. Even though he had studied two years at Cape Town University, they hired him to sweep the floor. One writer described him as "the most persecuted man in Cape Town."[55]

Ibrahim was no stranger to poverty. Just two years older than Benjamin, Adolf Johannes Brand was raised in Kensington, a West Side slum in Cape Town, by his Basotho father and Khoisan (so-called Bushman) mother. His parents scraped by, setting aside enough money to pay for piano lessons. Besides the standard classical repertoire, he learned hymns and old "Negro" spirituals from his

grandmother, an organist and founding member of the local African Methodist Episcopal Church. Like any kid running around the working-class neighborhoods of District Six, he absorbed local dance music. By some accounts, he discovered jazz by way of a 78 disc of Duke Ellington's recording of Billy Strayhorn's "Take the A Train." Duke became his obsession: he played "A Train" constantly on his grandmother's upright piano, and when "other kids were playing football or something, he would be listening to Duke Ellington records at the nearest record dealer's shop."[56] According to other accounts, he attributed his love of jazz to an ice cream truck that used to pass through the neighborhood blasting saxophonist Louis Jordan, the Honeydrippers, and Tiny Bradshaw through its loudspeakers. He began playing with a vocal group called the Streamline Brothers and even performed with local pennywhistle bands. But what sealed his fate as a musician was hearing Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie on the radio. He earned the nickname "Dollar" because whatever little money he had was spent at a local music shop on American jazz records and stock arrangements by the likes of Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, and, especially, Duke Ellington.[57]

Still, Ibrahim was not one of those musicians obsessed with the United States. "The American jazz I heard on the radio and on records," he explained, "was only an extension of the music I was already playing." It was never "simply American music—it was Ellington!" He considered Ellington more "the wise old man of the village" than the *American* jazz artist.[58] In other words, jazz was at its heart African music, and the story of South African jazz was not a matter of American influence but one of "parallel developments. There is a hardcore, basic musical literature that is common to both countries. Africa is the fountainhead."[59]

Ibrahim was only seventeen when he went on the road with the Streamline Brothers. After two years in Johannesburg, in 1953 he moved back to Cape Town, where he played with a few different groups and took small pick-up gigs, including one with Kippie Moeketsi.[60] Moeketsi was so impressed with the young pianist that

when Todd Matshikiza left the Shantytown Sextet in the summer of 1958 to compose the music for the African jazz opera *King Kong*, he—along with saxophonist Christopher "Columbus" Ngcukane—insisted that Ibrahim take over piano duties.[61] On the road with the sextet, Moeketsi and Ibrahim were inseparable. Ibrahim shared Moeketsi's fascination with Charlie Parker and bebop, and his dream to "modernise African music."[62] "It was just [him] and a couple of other guys," recalled Ibrahim, "who were really interested in the modern sound. As it was, it was tragically hard to get work playing jazz. We'd play crazy things that would chase the other musicians away."[63] One of those "other guys" that stuck around was Hugh Masekela. The young trumpeter practically sat at Moeketsi's and Ibrahim's feet, absorbing all he could about modern jazz: "They would teach me the complicated chord structures for the latest Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker compositions and songs from the limitless book of Duke Ellington, Abdullah's favorite . . . If I didn't make any money, at least I received a musical education I could never have afforded from these two musical geniuses during our fateful summer tour."[64] The three men vowed to form a group of their own at some point in the near future.

Masekela wasn't the only "student" on the tour. Ibrahim credits Moeketsi with introducing him to the music of Thelonious Monk. The effect was life-changing. "Kippie would talk to me about Monk before I'd heard of any of his records. I was saying: 'Monk? What's this Monk thing?' And then, man I heard the music and I said 'aaaaaah! I can dig this . . . so this is Monk!' Kippie would be screaming about how Monk was playing the same type of sound you could hear in so-called tribal music up in the Northern Transvaal."[65] Ibrahim returned from the tour playing as if he had been possessed by Monk's sound and spirit. Even Cape Town's young modernists had trouble hearing what he was trying to do. Bassist Sammy Maritz remembers that the effect of Monk's music on Ibrahim was decisive: "So much so, that when he played, nobody understood it."[66]

Benjamin understood it. She gravitated immediately to Ibra-

him's modern sound, his chord voicings, and his phrasing—elements they both heard in Ellington's piano playing. A few weeks after their debut performance, with the encouragement of Paul Meyer, she decided to make a record. She asked Ibrahim to accompany her, put together a trio, and produce the date. She wasn't interested in recording a couple of sides for a 78; she had enough material for an LP, and she thought she could benefit from the momentum generated by her "Just Jazz Meets Ballet" performance. Ibrahim readily agreed, secured a studio in Cape Town, and hired bassist Joe Colussi and Donald Stegmann on drums. On August 11, 1959, the group laid down eight complete tracks, all standards ("Bewitched," "Fine and Dandy," "But Not for Me," "I'll Take Romance," "Almost Like Being in Love," "It Could Happen to You," "My Funny Valentine" [two takes]) except for a redux of Ellington's "I Got It Bad." The LP was to be titled *My Songs for You,* and had it been released, it would have been the first jazz LP in South African history. Paul Meyer had even employed his graphic design skills to mock up the jacket, but it was not to be. Besides the predictable problem of finding a distributor amid rising racial tensions and state repression, the session just wasn't up to par. "I thought, this is so awful," Benjamin concluded. "The bass player is playing wrong notes!"[67]

If Benjamin had had a stronger rhythm section and *My Songs for You* had been released, her life might have been very different. She may have gotten some radio play, opportunities to tour South Africa, a substantial write-up in *Drum* or *Zonk!* or some of the other popular arts and culture magazines, and offers to make more recordings. She may have even fronted her own band with Ibrahim backing her—though Abdullah had his own plans, and they did not include backing up a vocalist, even one he loved madly. Instead, Benjamin slid back into obscurity and slipped into a powerful musical partnership in which her partner was the dominant figure. Together they organized a Sunday night jazz series at the Ambassadors School of Dancing in the Cape Town suburb of Woodstock. The owner, Dave Saunders, gave Benjamin and Ibrahim the run of the place, and they

opened it up to jazz musicians of all persuasions and people of all races. They served no food or drink, and, ironically, no one danced, yet the people came in droves—Africans, Coloureds, Indians, and whites. "Nobody made any money," Benjamin recalled, "but it was a center of expression, and it was beautiful."[68] The state did not think it was so beautiful. Although the Sunday night jazz programs continued for many months, they were ultimately banned for violating apartheid laws.

Many different musicians played at the Ambassadors, but the main attraction was the Dollar Brand Trio. No one had heard a band like this in Cape Town. They played exceedingly difficult pieces by Ellington, Monk, and Bird, as well as Ibrahim's original compositions, and as a rhythm section their synchronicity bordered on telepathic. On bass, Ibrahim hired the extraordinary Johnny Gertze, a multi-instrumentalist equally proficient on guitar, clarinet, trumpet, drums, and piano.[69] Ibrahim's drummer was Makaya Ntshoko, a professional boxer turned musician who had learned his instrument under the tutelage of the legendary Phaks Joya.[70] Benjamin occasionally sang with the band, but her appearances were infrequent. Although audiences appreciated her slow, languid ballads, most of the young jazz aficionados piled into the Ambassadors to hear the Dollar Brand Trio and those sitting in, the horn players who took off on uptempo bebop numbers.

As Ibrahim's reputation grew, he was summoned to Johannesburg in October to play a concert with Moeketsi, Masekela, and Masekela's cousin—a phenomenal trombone player named Jonas Gwangwa who had been part of the original Huddleston Band. Their reputation was also rising. The trio of horn players had recently returned from an eight-month tour of the country providing music for the critically acclaimed *King Kong*.[71] After the tour ended, Moeketsi, Masekela, and Gwangwa made history by cutting two LPs with white American pianist John Mehegan, marking the debut of South African jazz on a long-playing disc. A Julliard professor and respected musician who had recorded with Charles Mingus and Lionel Hamp-

ton, Mehegan had traveled to South Africa to lecture, promote his new book, *Jazz Improvisation*, and help nurture the jazz scene there.[72] For many African musicians, Mehegan's visit provided an occasion to shine an international spotlight on South Africa's burgeoning jazz scene, as well as expose the blatant violation of human rights under apartheid. Mehegan did both: he gathered the best talent and insisted on recording them, and he openly criticized the racial barriers that arrested the music's development. He praised Masekela, Gwangwa, and Moeketsi, whom he described as "three magnificent African jazzmen in Johannesburg," singling out Moeketsi as "one of the greatest jazz musicians in the world today."[73] Still, his plaudits were tempered by a slight tone of condescension, particularly when he declared that he could not find a decent black drummer in all of South Africa. For the record date, he hired a white drummer named Gene Latimore, whose heavy-handed, monotonous swing patterns weighed down the boppish flights of the three horn players. Nevertheless, the group produced some fine recordings of jazz standards, a blues in all twelve keys, and a marabi-inspired original written by Mackay Davashe.[74]

The concert, held at Selbourne Hall on October 13, 1959, was a smashing success. Since Ibrahim's regular rhythm section could not make the trip, they hired Mongezi Samson Velelo and Early Mabuza on drums. For Ibrahim and Moeketsi, who had been talking about forming a band since their days with the Shantytown Sextet, this was a dream come true. Ibrahim had even named the group: the Jazz Epistles. As he told one journalist, he chose the name because "he is a teacher and like the early Christian teachers, he believes that he is writing his Epistles."[75] Hubris, for sure, but the band lived up to its name. They regaled the crowd with near-flawless renditions of "Cherokee" and "Delilah," as well as tunes by Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Clifford Brown, and Duke Ellington—delivered in rapid-fire succession.[76]

No one left Selbourne Hall disappointed, except perhaps Benjamin. She had accompanied her boyfriend on the long journey to Jo-