

hannesburg only to watch the band from the wings. It must have been doubly painful to witness the Jazz Epistles back four different female vocalists: Thandie Khumalo (later Thandie Klaasen), Thoko Mgcina, "Mummy Girl" Nketle, and Abigail Kubeka. Each one sang standards such as "Stella by Starlight," "Easy Street," and classics by Gershwin, Johnny Mercer, and Harold Arlen—in other words, the kinds of tunes Benjamin performed.⁷⁷ As if to rub salt in her wounds, *Drum* magazine covered Ibrahim's close collaboration with Thoko Mgcina, whom he reportedly deemed "the best in the country."⁷⁸

Not long after the couple returned to Cape Town, Ibrahim invited Moeketsi, Masekela, and Gwangwa to join his trio at the Ambassadors. The three men jumped at the chance, in part because Johannesburg was becoming politically intolerable and economically unsustainable. "Work was drying up all over the country," Masekela remembered.⁷⁹ Neither the success of *King Kong* nor Mehegan's influence could generate work for musicians in Johannesburg. The political climate certainly contributed. In August 1959 the trials began of 156 South African activists who had been arrested and charged with treason soon after drafting the ANC's Freedom Charter. The Pan Africanist Congress had formed the previous year under the militant leadership of Robert Sobukwe, who escalated opposition to the pass laws. The situation was tense, as confrontations between the state and the movement escalated in frequency and ferocity.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, the Dollar Brand Trio was playing to a packed house every night.

With just enough money for train tickets to Cape Town, Moeketsi, Masekela, and Gwangwa spent the first few nights sleeping on the floor in the back of the club and spending most of their days rehearsing. They practiced from ten in the morning until seven at night, working through tunes by Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Fats Waller, and Duke Ellington. "We also composed our own modern tunes," Masekela recalled, "a cross between mbhaqanga and bebop."⁸¹ All the musicians and jazz lovers packed into the Ambassadors for a glimpse of what was being deemed the greatest jazz ensemble in South African history. Vincent Kolbe mused, "When

Abdullah played those Monk chords, it said a lot about the state of Africa at that time. When people went to concerts, it was like coming to a church service. And it wasn't to forget life and be happy-happy. The music of that time had got a lot of soul in it. The Jazz Epistles' music is beautifully soulful."⁸² Chris McGregor, a progressive white pianist who would go on to found another historic South African jazz ensemble, the Blue Notes, saw the arrival of Moeketsi, Masekela, and Gwangwa as a catalyst for new developments in Cape Town: "It was a period of jazz explosion."⁸³ The authorities also found the happenings at the Ambassadors explosive. As they began to crack down on racial mixing, even the presumably more liberal Cape started to become a difficult place for jazz musicians to work.

In January, the entire band returned to Johannesburg. Ibrahim convinced Benjamin to come along for an extended stay. She readily agreed, both to support Ibrahim and the band but also hoping to reignite her own career. "I just like totally changed," Benjamin remembered. "I didn't have any fears about anything and it was rough and it was very hard. Relying on the generosity and the love of friends who love the music, they put us up, we slept on the floor, and had no money. It was all for the music."⁸⁴ She continued to sing, but the oft-repeated claim that she was a member of the Jazz Epistles is an overstatement. As Benjamin later explained, "whenever they had work, I was with them," though not always on stage.⁸⁵ The fact is, a female vocalist was not part of the Jazz Epistles' core identity, especially as they began to compose their own music. Perhaps she could have formed her own group or worked with other artists during these formative years with Ibrahim, but she chose not to. Thus, at the very moment when Benjamin decided to turn professional, inspired in part by Ibrahim's musical vision and example, her own aspirations took a backseat.

As Benjamin's fledgling career stalled, the Jazz Epistles took Johannesburg by storm. Club dates suddenly opened up and the white-owned South African label, Gallo Records, offered them a rare opportunity to make an LP. Notorious for exploiting African musicians,

Gallo paid the band a measly seventy-six pounds and no royalties to do the date.⁸⁶ Despite the terms, on January 22, 1960, the sextet assembled at Gallo Studios and laid down eight dazzling tracks in just three hours—all original music.⁸⁷ They played no jazz standards or vocal numbers of any kind, effectively excluding Benjamin from contributing. Instead, the LP was an explosive, masculine display of virtuosity and mastery. The compositions were structurally complex and demanding, involving shifting time signatures and tempos, and dissonant harmonies. Ibrahim's pieces, "Uka-Jonga Phambili" (Xhosa for "look forward") and "Vary-oo-um," employ Monkish chord voicings and encourage soloists to break free of the chord changes. Moeketsi's "Blues for Hughie," which opens hauntingly with a unison bass and trumpet duo, is not a standard blues but a sixteen-bar AABB form in a minor key. Masekela's composition "Dollars Moods" is a twenty-eight-bar boppish romp that shifts from a ten-bar A section in $\frac{4}{4}$ time to a six-bar bridge in waltz time.

The best-known and perhaps most successful tune of the date was Kippie Moeketsi's "Scullery Department." A brilliant example of what musicologists call an asymmetric time-line pattern, the piece opens with Ibrahim and Ntshoko playing in $\frac{6}{4}$ rhythm, but the horns entering with a melody line in $\frac{4}{4}$ time, thus displacing the down beat, or the "one." Their performance swings despite sudden shifts in dynamics and rhythm. Freedom is the operative word here; their improvisational flights are equal to anything Ornette Coleman or Charles Mingus was doing at the time. The story behind the song's title, "Scullery Department," also speaks to the group's politics of masculinity. Its music and aggressive performance style were assertions of dignity and manhood in a racist world that thought of them as boys and servants. One night, while playing at an exclusively white Johannesburg nightclub, the management insisted that they take their break in the kitchen. This wasn't the first time. They had worked in other venues where they had to take their breaks on fire escapes or in alleys. But on this occasion, Moeketsi complained to Ibrahim, "By right, you know Dollar, this is all nonsense—this idea of us being

taken into the kitchen when there's a break . . . 'Are we kitchen "boys." Aren't we here to entertain the people?'" In a mocking reply, Ibrahim described them as the scullery department. The two men then approached the owner's son and demanded that they take their meal in the club with the customers. After some argument, the management relented and that was the last time they were in the kitchen.⁸⁸

A couple of weeks later, Ibrahim was back at Gallo Studios to record a trio LP. The session consisted of an eclectic mix of standards, music by Thelonious Monk, South African composers Todd Matshikiza and Mackay Davashe, and three of Ibrahim's original compositions. Once again, he did not invite Benjamin to participate in the session, though he did include an original Monkish blues he had written for her titled "Blues for B."⁸⁹

When *Jazz Epistle—Verse I*, the first all-black jazz LP in South African history, was released in the early summer of 1960, Gallo pressed a mere five hundred copies and did nothing to promote the record.⁹⁰ It sold out in no time, quickly becoming something of a collector's item. Gallo held on to Ibrahim's trio recording for over two years. It was finally released as *Dollar Brand Plays Sphere Jazz* in 1962, well after Ibrahim and Benjamin had fled the country.⁹¹ Gallo's reluctance to promote such revolutionary music may have been a consequence of the political climate. By the time *Jazz Epistle—Verse I* was ready for release, the world had changed. On March 21, 1960, the Pan Africanist Congress organized peaceful protests against the pass laws in the township of Sharpeville, in the Transvaal, and in Langa, a township in the Cape and Makaya Ntshoko's hometown. Some protesters burned their pass books, others simply showed up without passes and offered themselves up for arrest. In Sharpeville, the police opened fire on the demonstrators, killing at least sixty-nine people including eight women and ten children, though the unofficial count was much higher. The massacre sparked more protests, strikes, and violent uprisings all across the country. Nine days later the ruling Nationalist Party declared a state of emergency and detained over 18,000 people. The United Nations responded immediately, con-

demning the violence and the South African government. Whatever vestiges of democracy existed in South Africa were swiftly crushed after Sharpeville. The state passed laws banning all African organizations and permitting ninety-day detentions without legal process. Torture and outright murder for those confined became commonplace. Between 1963 and 1965 alone, at least 190 Africans were hanged. In response, both the ANC and PAC decided that peaceful means were no longer possible; they formed underground guerrilla wings and launched an armed struggle.⁹²

The Sharpeville Massacre effectively killed the Jazz Epistles and dealt a devastating blow to jazz in general. A nationwide tour of the Epistles scheduled for April was canceled, and Masekela and Gwangwa turned their attention to finding safe passage out of the country. The state of emergency and the apartheid regime's enforcement of the Separate Amenities Act effectively barred African and Coloured musicians from playing in white venues.⁹³ A growing number of South African artists considered the prospect of exile, including Benjamin. "After Sharpeville," she explained, "that's when we had to leave . . . Jazz was actually considered by that government subversive music, because it brought the races together and we would be mixed on the stage because we had African musicians and white musicians."⁹⁴

Even if they had wanted to leave, Benjamin and Ibrahim did not have the money. The couple decided to go back to Cape Town, where Ibrahim and his trio briefly enjoyed a hero's welcome. They had conquered Johannesburg, put out a record of staggering imagination, and returned at a moment when it seemed as if the Cape Town jazz scene was on an upswing. The welcome was short-lived, however. The Ambassadors and similar venues were now under constant surveillance, and Ibrahim's reputation for being difficult and temperamental certainly did not help him. Critic Frank Barton described Ibrahim's trio as "the lone wolves of the Cape." "They play it their way," he wrote in a *Drum* magazine article celebrating Cape Town's jazz renaissance, "and if the customers don't like it then that's tough

on the customers. But don't ask The Dollar to play something different, or he may slam the piano lid and go home."⁹⁵

He eventually stopped playing the Ambassadors because, in his words, "they gone all square"—though the frequent raids and police surveillance probably influenced his decision. He continued to play where he could and worked with Benjamin more often now that they were back in familiar territory. To try to make ends meet, the couple launched the Dollar Brand School of Music. The venture proved disastrous. Despite Benjamin's knowledge and talents, she was little more than a glorified secretary, while Ibrahim, the master teacher, played the role of the aloof artist. He attracted few if any students, and he did not see the need to actively recruit any. "The money don't count," he told one writer. "It's the art."⁹⁶

Their main priority, however, was leaving South Africa. Once again, Paul Meyer—perhaps out of guilt, genuine friendship, or both—offered valuable assistance. He had recently returned home to Switzerland and offered to help them relocate to Zurich. On January 21, 1962, Cape Town's jazz community held a huge farewell benefit concert at the Ambassadors to raise the money for two one-way tickets.⁹⁷ A couple of weeks later, Ibrahim and Benjamin packed a few precious belongings and the warmest clothes they could find and left the sun-splashed beaches of Cape Town for the snow-covered streets of Zurich.

Sometimes I Sing

Meyer helped them secure housing at the International Student House and used his contacts to find gigs. Without his trio, Ibrahim had to work solo or join various pick-up bands to make money. Although club dates were hard to come by at first, Benjamin ended up working more than she had in South Africa—both as a soloist and in a duo with Ibrahim. They played in Berne, Geneva, Lausanne, and various small towns around Switzerland, Germany, and Scandinavia—namely Oslo, Stockholm, and Helsinki—and Ibrahim toured

briefly with Swiss tenor saxophonist Chester Gill. The couple made it to Copenhagen a few times at the Montmartre jazz club, where they met a number of notable African American musicians, including Don Byas, Dexter Gordon, Kenny Drew, Ben Webster, Bud Powell, and Kenny Dorham. They even had a stint with a Swiss-based calypso group.⁹⁸ As exciting as these times were, Benjamin found it hard to adapt to Zurich. "I can remember how very cold it was, the wonder of seeing snow for the first time, the culture shock I experienced, the longing for the sun and the tenderness and warmth of my people affected me a great deal and after a few days 'I longed for home.' But there was no turning back."⁹⁹

Fortunately, Ibrahim's playing so impressed the owner of Zurich's Club Africana that he offered him a regular engagement and contributed a bit to help defray travel costs for Makaya Ntshoko and Johnny Gertze.¹⁰⁰ By late fall of 1962, Ibrahim happily reunited with his trio and moved both men into International Student House. They spent most of their days rehearsing at the Club Africana in preparation for the nightly gigs. Benjamin continued to enjoy guest appearances with the band, though by now she had invested more energy in promoting Ibrahim's career than her own. When she learned that the Duke Ellington Orchestra would be appearing at Kongresshaus in Zurich on February 19, 1963, she made sure to secure a ticket, hoping to meet her idol and convince him to catch the Dollar Brand Trio's last set before heading off to the next city.¹⁰¹

Benjamin made her way backstage during intermission and practically begged Duke to swing by the Club Africana after the concert. Intrigued as much by her looks and charm as by her commitment to her husband's music, he listened to her case but made no promises. What convinced Ellington to accept her invitation was the news that Ibrahim had no recording contract. As an A&R man for Reprise Records, a fledgling three-year-old label founded by Frank Sinatra, Duke was always on the prowl for new talent.¹⁰²

They arrived just as the owner was about to lock up, allowing the

Dollar Brand Trio to treat Ellington to a private impromptu concert. Clearly impressed, Duke then turned to Benjamin and asked if she managed the group or was married to one of the band members. No, she replied, but quickly added, "But I sing sometimes." Ellington smiled and insisted, "Then you must sing." Duke's warmth and encouragement wiped away her fears and calmed her nerves, enabling her to deliver a tender rendition of "I'm Glad There Was You." He loved it. Before he headed back to his hotel in those early morning hours, he invited the trio *and* Benjamin to record LPs for Reprise and arranged for a recording session at Barclay Studios in Paris on February 24. He provided train tickets and made sure they arrived on the 23rd in time for the Ellington Orchestra's concert at the Olympia Theater.¹⁰³ This left them only four days to prepare, but the sheer weight of meeting the man whom they both idolized, the artist whose music had brought them together in the first place, made them feel invincible.

The session reinvigorated Benjamin's dedication to her own music and supplied a much-needed boost to her confidence. Ellington treated her and Ibrahim as equals, and he even asked her to record first. The great Billy Strayhorn showed up for the date and accompanied her on "Your Love Has Faded" and "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square." And Duke himself commandeered the piano when she sang his tunes, "I Got It Bad" and "Solitude." Ibrahim's trio backed her on the remaining eight titles—all standards. Pizzicato violinist Svend Asmussen, having just recorded with Ellington two days earlier, also dropped by the studio that morning and accompanied Benjamin on every track.

The results are remarkable. Singing with a slight vibrato and a crystalline tone, Benjamin displays astounding maturity and control for a twenty-six-year-old singer who worked infrequently. Her choice of very slow tempos required enormous patience and imaginative phrasing, but it also allowed her to create a field of emotion—to give the impression that she had lived every lyric. She shined on "Darn

that Dream" and "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square," revealing slight traces of Billie Holiday, and mastered "Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year," whose wide intervals seemed to suit her voice perfectly. Her collaborations with Ellington and Strayhorn were gorgeous, particularly on "Solitude," which may be the session's high point. Although she limited her repertoire to slow ballads, about two-thirds of the way into "I Could Write a Book," "Man I Love," and "Soon," the band doubles the tempo, demonstrating her ability to "swing" and breaking up what had become a uniform cadence.

Ellington adored Benjamin's voice and thought the session went well. So did Benjamin, who would mark February 24, 1963, as one of the most important days of her life. Unfortunately, Frank Sinatra and the men running Reprise disagreed. Months later, Ellington delicately informed Benjamin that the bosses elected to shelve the recording because they did not think it was "commercial enough for a vocal album." Benjamin was devastated. Another unreleased LP, another chance at visibility lost. Duke cushioned the news with encouraging remarks. "When they tell you it's not commercial enough," he advised, "you must have something going on there. You keep doing what you're doing—you're my singer from Africa."¹⁰⁴ She had never had the opportunity to hear the recording, and when she asked about the tapes many years later, she was told they had been destroyed. Fortunately, the recording engineer, Gerhard Lehner, secretly made a duplicate of the session.¹⁰⁵ David Hadju, Strayhorn's biographer, discovered the tape, which set in motion the release of the session in 1997 on CD with the title *A Morning in Paris*. The CD drew a flurry of attention and critical praise, though thirty-four years overdue.¹⁰⁶

Ibrahim did not suffer the same problem. On the contrary, his three-hour session with just his band was released amid great fanfare as *Duke Ellington Presents the Dollar Brand Trio*. And although the band plays brilliantly, one is hard-pressed to call this LP "commercial." Ibrahim had composed all but one song on the album, and that song was Thelonious Monk's famously difficult "Brilliant Corners."

And even his original pieces possessed strong Monk and Ellington influences. “The Stride” is chock-full of Monkish chord voicings, off-beat phrasing, distinctive bass countermelodies, and rapid shifts in time signature. “Ubu Suku” (the Evening) knits together phrases from two favorite Monk standards: the first bar of “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You” and the second bar of “You Are Too Beautiful.” Duke’s influence looms just as large. “Jumping Rope” and “Dollar’s Dance” are clear nods to Ellington’s playful sense of swing as well as the most avant-garde elements of his piano style, while “Kippi,” a lovely ballad in tribute to his friend and former bandmate, opens with a quote from Ellington’s “Rockin’ in Rhythm.”¹⁰⁷

What made Ibrahim’s LP commercially viable and Benjamin’s not? For one thing, the Dollar Brand Trio performed mostly original compositions, giving listeners something fresh and unfamiliar. Second, while they never strayed from the modern jazz idiom, their African roots made them slightly more exotic—made evident by the subtle references to Africa in a couple of the song titles. Third, the Dollar Brand Trio created a sound that stood at the crux of hard bop and the jazz avant-garde. The era of the “New Thing” had achieved some recognition when Reprise released *Duke Ellington Presents the Dollar Brand Trio*, the same year trumpeter Bill Dixon organized the infamous “October Revolution,” a series of avant-garde concerts at the Cellar Cafe in New York’s Upper West Side. And more often than not, the “New Thing” was considered a man’s thing, as musicians and critics at the time interpreted dissonant harmonies and startling rhythmic displacements as distinctively “masculine.”¹⁰⁸

Benjamin, on the other hand, sang familiar love songs, songs that had been covered many times over by singers she herself adored—including Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday. Unlike Ibrahim, or for that matter Miriam Makeba—now a huge star in the United States and Europe—Benjamin was too light-skinned and too committed to the jazz idiom to come across as African (read: exotic), despite her pronounced Cape Town accent.¹⁰⁹

There were aspects of the recording that limited its commercial value as well. She might have benefited from a few medium- and up-tempo pieces, as well as from jazz interpretations of South African music. This alone would have distinguished her from all other torch singers. And the addition of Sven Asmussen's violin, while musically interesting, at times threatened to overwhelm the subtleties of Benjamin's voice. On "Lover Man" and "I'm Glad There Is You," for example, his heavy-handed improvisations are more of a distraction than a complement.

In other words, Benjamin's creative choices and her illegibility in the worlds of jazz and popular music may have contributed to Reprise executives' short-sighted decision to shelve her LP. Ellington was right: she was not a commercial singer and had no intention of becoming one. She had already chosen a different path back in 1958, if not earlier, that entailed putting her own uniquely modern spin on early to mid-twentieth-century popular songs. Everything she sang would be a reflection of her roots—in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Saint Helena, Mauritius, the Philippines—but only insofar as these places continued to live through her. At this point in her career few listeners could discern these elements in her music, partly because she had no recordings in circulation, and partly because she had not yet begun to compose her own music.

Ellington was one who had discerned what she was doing, what made her stand apart from the rest, what made her "my singer from Africa." His support never wavered. He secured invitations for the couple to appear at the prestigious Antibes–Juan-les-Pins Jazz Festival in 1963, the Molde Jazz Festival (Norway), and the Ascona festival (Switzerland) the following year, and he personally invited Benjamin to sing with the Ellington Orchestra on several occasions between 1965 and 1972—most famously at the 1965 Newport Jazz Festival where she performed "Solitude" and "In a Mellow Tone" as an encore.¹¹⁰ Ibrahim also acknowledged Sathima's unique sound—a decidedly South African sound grounded in the modern, urban landscape of Cape Town and Johannesburg, in the nightclubs and the

bohemian jam sessions, in the bioscopes and church halls. But Ibrahim had his own music to make, and he pursued his creative path with a singularity of purpose. Benjamin would later reflect, "You have to remember when you live with someone like Abdullah, it's very hard to pull yourself out from under and say, 'You know what? I want to do this.' And I think for a long time I was very intimidated. Once I started to break out, it became easier as the years went on."¹¹¹

Breaking out took some time. They left Zurich and moved to England briefly, where they finally married in February 1965. Then Ellington's invitation to Newport turned into a three-year stay in New York City, resulting in the demise of the Dollar Brand Trio.¹¹² Between 1968 and 1971, they moved between Europe, South Africa, and Swaziland, during which time Ibrahim made several recordings, converted to Islam, and with Benjamin's assistance opened the Marimba Music School in Mbabane, Swaziland.¹¹³ Benjamin, by contrast, made no recordings (except for a single track on one of Ibrahim's unreleased transcription records), and made even fewer appearances with her husband as his music moved in a freer, more experimental direction.¹¹⁴ In 1971, she did give birth to her son, Tsakwe. Over time, she felt abandoned, especially during their European sojourns. "I don't like Europe very much," she confessed. "I felt very alienated there, but I used my time wisely. I would go to libraries. I would read. I investigated all the religions of the world. I used my time wisely, maybe because I was so alone. That's just something we have to do to survive. And that's where the work was."¹¹⁵

The combination of solitary study, reflection, motherhood, and travel back and forth to southern Africa inspired her to write poetry and compose her own music. In 1974 she composed "Music" as a tribute to her husband. The entire lyric consisted of a short poem repeated:

Music
is the spirit
within you

deep within you
 Find your sound
 Then let it flow
 Free
 and Easy
 and Out.

She also composed "Africa," an homage to the continent and a celebration of her return. The lyrics speak to the end of her long exile, her joy in coming

home
 To feel my people's warmth
 to shelter 'neath your trees
 To catch the summer breeze
 Africa.

The next year she penned "African Songbird" to honor the memory of Duke Ellington, who had passed in 1974. Her minimalist lyrics invite all of us to "Sing/naturally/like a bird." All three songs are essentially poems set to uncluttered melodies, whose simplicity, strong swing, and transcendent spirituality bear a strong kinship with the compositions of singer and songwriter Abbey Lincoln. By the mid-1970s, Benjamin strongly identified with Lincoln, who she called her musical "sister."¹¹⁶ Lincoln, whose 1973 LP *People in Me* included a paean to the continent titled "Africa," had also survived a musical partnership with a dominant man (Max Roach) and had moved from singing torch songs to political songs, finally composing her own.¹¹⁷

Ironically, Benjamin's burst of creative energy attracted Ibrahim's attention and brought them closer together. After moving back to South Africa in 1973, Ibrahim and Rashid Vally co-founded The Sun record label (also known by the Arabic name, As-Shams), and he offered to arrange, produce, and record all three of her compositions.

The session took place in March of 1976 at Gallo Studios in Johannesburg, backed by an ensemble made up of two drummers, three bass players, the African American trumpeter Billy Brooks, and the popular South African saxophonist Basil Coetzee, led by Ibrahim on electric piano. Faced with the task of filling an LP with just three songs, the soloists stretched out on "Africa," turning it into a twenty-one-minute virtuoso performance.¹¹⁸

Ibrahim and Vally wasted no time putting out *African Songbird*, which hit South African record shops in the summer of 1976. At forty years old, Benjamin finally saw the release of her first LP. It was a landmark recording for other reasons as well. *African Songbird* not only unveiled her talent as a composer but it revealed her deep and abiding interest in the freedom struggle in South Africa. Her interest became a full-blown engagement in June 1976, after some 20,000 schoolchildren of Soweto rose up to protest the state's decision to teach math and social studies in Afrikaans instead of English. Once again, the police retaliated against the protesters. The damage this time around was worse than Sharpeville: between 300 and 500 Africans were killed and over 2,000 were wounded.¹¹⁹ At the time of the Soweto Uprising, Benjamin was about four months pregnant with her second child, a daughter who they named Matsidiso ("Tsidi" for short). A few months after she was born, they fled South Africa—again—and returned to New York, where they settled into the Chelsea Hotel and became politically active on behalf of the African National Congress. Among other things, Benjamin initiated the Secacha Pioneers, a group of young ANC members in exile who met each Saturday afternoon to sing freedom songs and discuss the situation in South Africa. She opened her home to students, dignitaries, and exiled activists. And she participated in countless concerts and fundraisers in support of the ANC. As a result of Benjamin's and Ibrahim's activities as cultural workers for the liberation movement, the South African state revoked their citizenship, leaving them no choice but to become U.S. citizens.¹²⁰

The political work notwithstanding, Benjamin confronted many

difficult challenges in New York. Now that she was responsible for keeping house and raising two young children, her music hit a temporary roadblock. Inspired by *African Songbird*, she had begun composing more and thinking about ways to incorporate “Cape Town rhythms,” the distinctive shuffle beat common in the popular dance music back home. In 1979, she approached Ibrahim about making an all-Ellington LP. “I was going to record *Sathima Sings Ellington*, and I booked a downtown studio and I assumed Abdullah would do it. Then at the last minute he said ‘I’m not doing that.’” She was devastated. In hindsight, it compelled her to take more control over her music, but at the time “it made me feel like I wasn’t good enough or he was too good.”¹²¹ He agreed to produce the record, but left the task of putting together a band to Benjamin, who ended up hiring an outstanding trio consisting of Onaje Allen Gumbs on piano, bassist Bill ‘Vishnu’ Wood, and drummer John Betsch.

Even more significant, she released *Sathima Sings Ellington* on her own label, Ekapa Records, which she also launched in 1979 with Ibrahim’s help. She felt she had no choice, having lost her main musical collaborator of twenty years and feeling the obligations of motherhood. “I was at home with two small children,” she told critic Sally Placksin a few years after founding Ekapa, “and I really started feeling very left out because I couldn’t move, and I think it really happened out of sheer urgency to do something musically . . . The important thing is I felt I had to keep in touch musically with what was happening. Since there were no other venues for me, and I wasn’t able to travel, the record in a way could do a little bit of traveling for me.”¹²²

Her records did quite a bit of traveling for her. Having taken control of her career, she slipped out from Ibrahim’s shadow, developed new relationships in motherhood and in the antiapartheid movement, and found her voice—or at least found a way to project her voice amid the din of the jazz police and the African purists. Between 1979 and 2006, she released eight discs: *Sathima Sings Ellington*, *Dedications*, *Memories and Dreams*, *Windsong*, *Lovelight*, *South-*

ern Touch, *Cape Town Love*, and *Musical Echoes*. Each of these recordings received rave reviews, and *Dedications* was nominated for a Grammy in 1982. A mix of standards, old Tin Pan Alley songs, and original compositions, these recordings reveal the full range of her talent as a singer, songwriter, and bandleader. Her controversial "Liberation Suite" (1982) consists of three compositions, "New Nations a-Coming," "Children of Soweto," and "Africa." It departs sharply from most "political music" intent on representing the conditions of black South Africans. Originally inspired by a visit to Mozambique in 1982 on behalf of the ANC, she deliberately created pieces that imagine a liberated future grounded in love rather than in the current crises. "You can see the joy [the Mozambicans] feel in just having their country back, even though there's a lot of work to be done."¹²³

Benjamin found joy in the most oppressive circumstances because she was part of a generation who lived through some of the worst ravages of apartheid and managed to create some of the most beautiful and joyous music on the planet. Indeed, in spite of spending most of her professional life in exile, Benjamin's distinctive musical and political voice was formed during the first decade of official apartheid, just as South Africa's vibrant urban popular culture was under siege all over the country. In response, many black and Coloured artists and intellectuals turned to either modern jazz or township music (or both) as the way forward, in opposition to the retrograde "native" policies of the new regime. It was in this context that former nightclub singers such as Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, and Dorothy Masuka embraced township music and created popular protest songs. At the same time, these singers symbolized a new, urban, female sexuality; glamorous photos and profiles of them in *Drum* magazine contributed to their popularity and to Benjamin's marginalization. Benjamin shunned cheesecake photos and stayed committed to jazz, singing standards and old American and English ballads, often at slow tempos and in a style akin to Billie Holiday and Sarah

Vaughan. Moreover, she gravitated to artists dedicated to jazz, such as Abdullah Ibrahim, whose passion for Thelonious Monk made him a kind of rebel among South African musicians—though a highly respected outcast.

And yet, while her once outcast husband became one of South Africa's best-known jazz musicians, she has spent the better part of her life working in relative obscurity, struggling to be seen and heard. As I've suggested, essentialist notions of culture had rendered Benjamin illegible—not African enough for some, not American enough for others, and certainly not commercial enough for a market that traffics in familiar, digestible commodities. Perhaps most important, Sathima Bea Benjamin was not *man* enough to sustain her own music on her terms—at least not until she launched Ekapa Records, began booking her own gigs, and seized control of all aspects of her career. In other words, in her long struggle for visibility, gender was decisive. She was initiated into a world where she put up with sexual harassment from musicians on whom she depended for practical skills, gigs, even transportation. She escaped a near-rape by her benefactor, Paul Meyer—and he was considered one of the “good” guys. As a female balladeer in an era when South Africa's modernists sought ways to express the cry of freedom and the cadences of mass resistance, Benjamin's sensitive love songs were often drowned out. Even her relationship with Abdullah Ibrahim—her closest collaborator and most enthusiastic supporter—had at times a stifling effect. One poignant story speaks volumes of the depths of her marginalization. Although she had spent the better part of a decade working for the ANC's cultural wing and composing paeans to the movement, including “Winnie Mandela, Beloved Heroine” and her three-part “Liberation Suite,” Benjamin was not invited to perform at President Nelson Mandela's inauguration in 1994. Ibrahim was, however, and in her words she had to “steal” one minute from his five allotted minutes so that she could sing for her new president.¹²⁴

Today, Benjamin no longer has to “steal” time from her husband. In the land of her birth, at least, she has finally earned the kinds of

accolades befitting an artist of her stature. In October 2004, South African president Thabo Mbeki honored her with the Order of Ikhamanga Silver Award in recognition for her “excellent contribution as a jazz artist,” as well as for her contribution “to the struggle against apartheid.” More recently, Don Yon made her the subject of a sensitive documentary film, *Sathima’s Windsong*.

Benjamin may have struggled for visibility, but she was never invisible. No matter what obstacles stood in her way, she never abandoned the music. She honed her skills surrounded by musicians who saw themselves as modern, urban, cosmopolitan people whose tastes and cultural influences knew no boundaries. America spoke—via jazz, blues, and a hip politics of style—and Africa listened. But what they heard was filtered through their experience—in the townships, the dance halls, the embattled community centers, the rent parties, the mass demonstrations—and transformed into music that was both local and global, native and international. So while America spoke and Benjamin listened, she spoke back again, creating what she calls “musical echoes.” Those echoes reverberate, from Saint Helena to Cape Town, Mauritius to Manhattan, Swaziland to Switzerland. Her distinctive interpretations of jazz standards, Ellingtonia, English theater songs, and original tone poems are South African by virtue of the fact that her core musical knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities were forged in South Africa. Even in exile her native land remained her point of reference. “It’s a spiritual embrace,” is how she put it, “so I’m always home. It’s like I took Africa within, and that’s the coming home. I’m here, but Africa is with me all the time.”¹²⁵