

# Miriam Makeba

## “Mama Africa”

**Gail Hovey**

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*My life, my career, every song I sing and every appearance I make, are bound up with the plight of my people.*

—Miriam Makeba, *Makeba: My Story*

**A**s a teenager in South Africa, Makeba listened to Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday on a wind-up record player. Her older brother Joseph, a saxophone and piano player himself, introduced her to the American jazz greats and taught her American songs. When she would sing with Joseph, she recalls, “sometimes I don’t even know what I’m saying, but I put my all into it” (Makeba and Hall 1987, 21).

Makeba learned how to sing from the musicians she performed with, having had no formal musical training. Among the first were her nephew Zweli’s band, the Cuban Brothers. They were not from Cuba, had never been there, had never met a Cuban, and none of them were brothers; the name was a fantasy from the movies.

Her first paying job was with the Manhattan Brothers, a popular group in South Africa in the 1940s and 1950s. The contacts she made landed her a small role in Lionel Rogosin’s film *Come Back, Africa* (1959). Rogosin, an American filmmaker, took Makeba and the film to Europe. While in London she met Harry Belafonte, who came to a screening of *Come Back, Africa*. Makeba told him that all his songs had been translated into South Africa’s African languages. He told her to get in touch with him if she came to the United States. Rogosin wanted Makeba to do just that, but her visa only allowed her to travel in Europe. In no time, Belafonte arranged for her visa and she entered the United States in November 1959, at the age of 27.

It was overwhelming. Within a week she appeared on the *Steve Allen Show* in Los Angeles and opened a four-week run at the Village Vanguard in New York’s Greenwich Village. Belafonte became her guardian; she called him Big Brother. He brought guests to hear her sing—Sidney Poitier, Duke Ellington, Diahann Carroll, Nina Simone, and Miles Davis. After she sang, Makeba says, their applause was like thunder, and it electrified her.

Press reviews compared her to Ella Fitzgerald, Ethel Merman, and Frank Sinatra. Belafonte praised her as “easily the most revolutionary new talent to appear in any medium in the last decade.” *Time* magazine wrote, “She is probably too shy to realize it, but her return to Africa would leave a noticeable gap in the U.S. entertainment world, which she entered a mere six weeks ago” (Makeba and Hall 1987, 89).

Catapulted to international fame, Makeba remained first of all a South African. She was in New York when she heard about the Sharpeville massacre. Two of her uncles were among the 69 dead. In the same year Makeba’s

Perhaps more than any other public figure, Miriam Makeba embodies the connections between the African and North American continents and the gifts each has to give the other. Her life also illustrates the harassment and alienation suffered by many of those who spoke out publicly against apartheid. This profile of Makeba draws on her autobiography and on published memoirs by her two husbands, Hugh Masekela and Stokely Carmichael.

mother, who was ill, phoned that it was time for Makeba's nine-year-old daughter Bongi, who lived in South Africa with her grandmother, to join her mother in the United States; she did soon after. Not long after that Makeba's mother died.

Makeba applied to the South African consulate for permission to return for the funeral. She watched as an official stamped her passport "Invalid," placing her permanently in exile.

For an instant my breath catches in my throat as I realize what has happened . . . I am not permitted to go home, not now, and maybe not ever. . . . Everything that has gone into the making of myself, gone. . . . I have gone too far. I have become too big. . . . I have not said a word about politics in all the newspaper stories about me. But I am still dangerous. . . . I am in exile. I and my daughter alone in a West that is bright and rich but is foreign to us. I hold Bongi tight and try to protect her from the terrible things I feel. (Makeba and Hall 1987, 98)

Makeba's troubles with the authorities, South African and American, were just beginning. She accepted an invitation to address the United Nations Special Committee Against Apartheid on July 16, 1963. "My country has been turned by the Verwoerd Government into a huge prison," she told the committee. "Therefore, I must urge the United Nations to impose a complete boycott of South Africa. The first priority must be to stop the shipment of arms. I have not the slightest doubt that these arms will be used against African women and children" (Makeba and Hall 1987, 112).

With this speech, Makeba was no longer just a brilliant entertainer. She became the voice of Africa's oppressed people. Immediately the apartheid government banned the sale of her records in South Africa. But African leaders reached out to her and she became friends with the heads of newly independent states like Kwame Nkrumah, Sekou Toure, and Julius Nyerere, as well as leaders of liberation movements like Eduardo Mondlane and Amilcar Cabral. It was an exciting time, as one after another African nation became independent. "There is so much hope and promise," she rejoiced. "It is the dawn of a new age" (Makeba and Hall 1987, 92).

In May 1964 Makeba married South African musician Hugh Masekela, and they welcomed many into their home in New York. Masekela recalls:

The African community, especially the diplomatic and exile population, was growing in leaps and bounds, and our place had become a home away from home for many people from these groups. Students, ambassadors, musicians, actors, writers, dancers, and activists. . . . The civil rights and African-American communities held a special place in their hearts for her. More than that, people of all nationalities . . . recognized and loved her with a sincerity I have seen reserved only for a few very special people in the world. Miriam was extraordinarily special then, and always will be. (Masekela and Cheers 2004, 169-70)

But life with Makeba was not easy, Masekela says, and the couple divorced. Although her increased outspokenness did not go unnoticed

by the U.S. and other Western governments, it was not until 1968, when she married the radical SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael, that Makeba's career was seriously threatened. The bad news came in a phone call from her manager Bob Schwaid. Her bookings were being canceled right and left (Makeba and Hall 1987, 159).

Carmichael was surprised. "I hadn't expected this. I'd figured, at most, some people would criticize her. Racists might boycott her shows, maybe stop buying her records. But this? All at once? It had to be an organized campaign. . . . It had to be organized across the industry" (Carmichael and Thelwell 2003, 653-54). Indeed, according to Ekwueme Thelwell, who completed Carmichael's autobiography after the SNCC leader's death, actions of the Internal Revenue Service later made clear that the federal government played a role in the continuing harassment of Makeba (654).

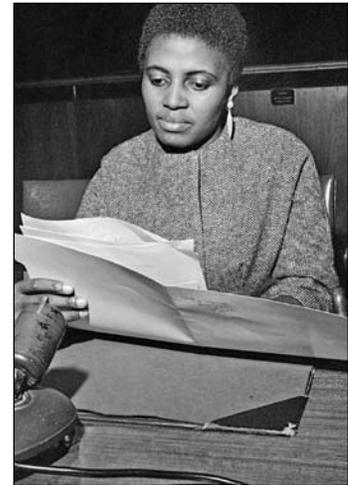
At almost the same time, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis. Makeba had been performing in Los Angeles, but she immediately got on a plane to return home to Washington, DC, where she and Carmichael lived. Washington was in flames, black neighborhoods under military curfew. With the sirens and occasional gunfire, it "seemed to her like South Africa all over again" (Carmichael and Thelwell 2003, 656).

Makeba and Carmichael decided to act on a long-held dream and move to Africa. They had begun their relationship in Guinea, and President Toure had long encouraged them to live in his country. Makeba lived the next two decades in Africa, performing there and in Europe. She served as a member of the Guinean delegation to the U.N. General Assembly, an opportunity that again allowed her to speak out about South Africa.

By the time Miriam Makeba returned to South Africa in 1990, after 30 years of exile, she was known as the Empress of African Song and, more simply, as Mama Africa. She was welcomed home personally by Nelson Mandela. Her first concert in South Africa was held in 1991 and was a huge success. It was followed by a world tour that included the United States and Europe.

It was her friend Philemon Hou, a fellow South African musician, who taught Makeba a poem she repeated with her grandchildren while still in exile (Makeba and Hall 1987, 198):

We are an African People  
An African People!  
An African People!  
We are an African People  
And don't you forget it!



Miriam Makeba addresses the United Nations Special Committee on the Policies of Apartheid, March 9, 1964. *UN Photo.*