

**Encountering Bheki Mseleku:  
A Biographical-Analytical Consideration  
of his Life and Music**

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(50% performance / 50% dissertation)*



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## **Declaration**

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## Note to the Reader

This Masters degree is consists of two components: a performance, for which I submit a portfolio of one solo performance and one ensemble performance; and a thesis, which is the text contained in the rest of these pages. Each component contributes 50% towards the degree.

The performance portfolio is available at the following links:

REFLECTIONS (solo piano)

URL: <https://vimeo.com/jazzinsouthafrica/makhathini-perf-1>

Password: Reflections

IKHAMBI (ensemble)

URL: <https://vimeo.com/jazzinsouthafrica/makhathini-perf-2>

Password: Amathambo

## Note about the Performances

### Musical Connections with Mseleku

I come to this work as one of many pianists, composers, and musicians deeply influenced by Bheki Mseleku's music. Over the years, several musicians (especially young South African pianists such as Afrika Mkhize, Mark Fransman, Andre Peterson, Bokani Dyer, Thandi Ntuli and others) have been borrowing from Mseleku's style of writing to enhance and strengthen their own compositional styles. I am no exception to the above-mentioned musicians; many of my compositions also mirror Mseleku's compositional style.

This is evident in both recitals included in my performance portfolio. The first recital (*Reflections*) is a solo piano performance that is based on how I experienced Mseleku's solo piano recordings, *Meditations* (1992) and *Beyond the Stars* (unreleased). The second recital (*Ikhambi*) draws inspiration mainly from Mseleku's album *Beauty of Sunrise* (1997), although also holds some connections with Mseleku's other records such as *Celebration* (1991) and *Home at Last* (2006). I regard both my performances as direct responses to these works.

*Reflections* is a solo piano recital. As the title suggests, it is based on my personal reflections on how I experience Mseleku's solo piano work. Some of the characteristics I identify in Mseleku's solo piano playing are short melodic themes (often moving in cyclic patterns) and spontaneous improvisations. Similar characteristics also can be found in *Reflections*, where I pick up short melodic themes and use improvisation (rather than composition and arrangement) as a tool to develop the material. This recital presents new music that is born in real-time as I explore melodic themes and possibilities. Listening to both Mseleku's solo piano albums, one feels a constant development of motifs leading to the emergence of new exploratory avenues.

In contrast with Mseleku's approach to solo piano performance, his approach to ensemble playing incorporated more musical facets, such as composition (as opposed to free improvisation), arrangements for various instruments, personnel and instrumentation considerations. Generally, his ensemble works are more structured than his solo piano recordings, which are grounded in improvisation. *Ikhambi* tries to speak to the other side of Mseleku – his ensemble work rather than his solo approach. This recital also thinks through parameters such as composition, arrangement, structure, personnel/instrumentation as observed in some of Mseleku's albums. For instance, on both *Celebration* and *Beauty of Sunrise* Mseleku used a basic jazz rhythm section: piano, double bass, and drums, and occasionally percussion. He also uses fairly standard instruments to fill out the ensemble, such as horns such as tenor saxophone, soprano saxophone, and flute on *Celebration*, and trumpet and tenor saxophone in *Beauty of Sunrise*. *Ikhambi* also employs this standard ensemble line-up – a core foundation of a trio rhythm section with four horns comprised of tenor and alto saxophone, trombone, and flute. Interestingly, *Ikhambi* also features Eddie Parker who also appeared on Mseleku's *Celebration*. This was a significant and deliberate decision from my side. My appreciation for the flute as jazz instrument was cultivated by listening to Parker on Bheki Mseleku's album *Celebration*. Compositionally, *Ikhambi* borrows notably from the two Mseleku records with regards to melodic ideas in that all the melodies are played by the horns. *Ikhambi* also utilizes carefully composed arrangements with clear intros/vamps, solo sections, and endings. Similar to Mseleku, the role of the piano is to connect (or 'glue') the rhythm section to the horns, using percussive 'comping' that locks in with the rhythm section. The piano also plays an important role in providing improvisation in the ensemble.

Although I have thus far drawn distinctions between Mseleku's approach to solo as opposed to ensemble playing, it is equally important to mention that there are some underlying threads found in all Mseleku's works. One such component is spirituality. In both Mseleku's solo and ensemble works, music and performance are used as a tools to connect with the spiritual realms (Mseleku's spirituality is

discussed at length in the Chapter Three). Both my recitals have spiritual symbolism. On the one hand, *Reflections* could be viewed as my personal channel for meditation and introspection in a similar way that Mseleku approaches *Meditations* (discussed in more details in the Chapter Four on Bheki Mseleku's album *Meditations*). On the other hand, in *Ikhambi* I think more broadly about the power of music to project healing, which was also one of the things Mseleku frequently mentioned when he discussed his views of his role as musician.

Finally, both my recitals are deliberate efforts towards celebrating a unique aesthetic that Mseleku provides within jazz in South Africa. It is also a way of thinking about jazz legacy in South Africa and ways of moving these legacies forward.

## Abstract

This thesis presents a study of one of the seminal figures in South African jazz, Bheki Mseleku (1955-2008). Born in South Africa, Mseleku is notable for his compositions, virtuosic pianism, recordings with leading jazz figures including Abbey Lincoln, Pharoah Sanders, and Joe Henderson, as well as his musical influence locally in South Africa and in London where he lived in exile. By drawing on journalistic accounts and interviews with Mseleku's family members, fellow musicians and acquaintances, as well as my own perspectives as a performing jazz pianist, this thesis constitutes the first academic study of Mseleku's life and music.

The opening chapter documents Mseleku's biography, drawing on disparate sources from print media and documentary film, alongside personal interviews. This provides the backdrop for the next two chapters, which explore two constitutive aspects of Mseleku's life and music: his exile from South Africa in the 1980s and early '90s, and his deep spirituality. Chapter Two situates the sound of exile in Mseleku's music, comparing his experiences and music with that of the earlier generation of South African exiles from the 1960s, particularly Louis Moholo. A consideration of his album, *Home At Last* (2003) plots the coordinates that inform the notion of "home" for Mseleku. I argue that exile, read against the notion of "home", represents a disconnect from community, but also signals the turn from home as a physical space to home understood as a spiritual construct. The introduction of spirituality in this chapter opens onto a prolonged exploration of spirituality in Mseleku's life and music. Chapter Three explores the diverse influences – from Mseleku's Zulu upbringing and his engagement with Eastern spiritual practices – that shaped Mseleku's conception of spirituality, and how these influenced his piano pedagogy and compositional style. Chapter Four is an analysis of Mseleku's album *Meditations* (1992). Here I highlight the importance of spiritualism in his music, but also trace the other influences audible in his sound, including African music practices and American jazz.

I close the thesis with my personal reflections on Mseleku, based on my experiences with his music and teachings through our brief friendship. It is my hope that this study lays the foundation for future scholarship on Mseleku, whose life and music has been neglected in South African jazz historiography.

## Opsomming

Hierdie tesis is 'n beskouing van die lewe en musiek van 'n prominente jazz-figure in Suid-Afrika, Bheki Mseleku (1955-2008). Mseleku is gebore in Suid-Afrika, en is noemenswaardig vir sy komposisies, virtuose pianistiek, opnames met toonaangewende figure in jazz insluitend Abbey Lincoln, Pharoah Sanders en Joe Henderson, asook sy musikale invloed plaaslik in Suid-Afrika sowel as in Londen, waar hy gewoon het as 'n uitgewekene. Hierdie tesis is die eerste akademiese studie van Mseleku se lewe en musiek, en is gebaseer op joernalistieke artikels, onderhoude met Mseleku se familieleden, mede-musici en kennisse, asook my eie perspektiewe as uitvoerende jazz pianis.

Die eerste hoofstuk dokumenteer Mseleku se biografie, en steun op verskeie bronne uit gedrukte media en dokumentêre films asook onderhoude. Dit dien as agtergrond vir die volgende twee hoofstukke, wat twee belangrike aspekte van Mseleku se lewe en musiek verken, naamlik sy uitgewekeneheid in die 1980s en vroeg-'90s, en sy diepgesetelde spiritualiteit. Hoofstuk Twee situeer die klank van uitgewekeneheid in Mseleku se musiek, en vergelyk sy ervarings en musiek met dié van 'n vroeër generasie Suid-Afrikaanse uitgewekenes van die 1960s, in besonder Louis Moholo. 'n Beskouing van sy album, *Home At Last* (2003) verken die koördinate van Mseleku se idee van "tuiste". Ek argumenteer dat in die geval van Mseleku, uitgewekeneheid as 'n verwydering van 'n sin van gemeenskap verstaan moet word, en 'n wending van 'n verstaan van tuiste as fisiese plek na tuiste as spirituele konstruksie teweeg bring. Hierdie idee van spiritualiteit in Hoofstuk Twee dien as 'n inleiding tot 'n meer breedvoerige verkenning van spiritualiteit in Mseleku se lewe en musiek in Hoofstuk 3. Hier word die uiteenlopende invloede wat Mseleku se konsep van spiritualiteit beïnvloed het verken, insluitend Mseleku se Zulu agtergrond en sy kontak met Oosterse spirituele praktyke, en die impak daarvan op sy klavier pedagogiek en komposisie styl.

Hoofstuk Vier is 'n analise van Mseleku se album, *Meditations* (1992). Hierdie hoofstuk werp lig op die belang van spiritualiteit in sy musiek, maar dui ook op ander invloede hoorbaar in sy klank, insluitend Afrika musiekpraktyke en Amerikaanse jazz. Ek sluit die tesis af met my eie besinnings oor Mseleku, gebaseer op my ervarings met sy musiek en onderrig gedurende ons kort vriendskap. Dit is my hoop dat die studie die grondslag lê vir toekomstige studies oor Mseleku, wie se lewe en musiek onontgin is in Suid-Afrikaanse jazz historiografie.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank Bheki Mseleku for sharing his music and life with all of us, and making sacrifices to ensure that today we are able to play and think about the music in the way we do. My warmest gratitude goes out to the Mseleku family both in the South Africa and in London for supporting me in this work. I give special thanks to Langa Mseleku, who gave me his blessing when I ventured into this work. *Makwande kini nonke bo Duma.*

To my family, I appreciate the support, time, and strength you have given me through the writing of this thesis. I am also grateful to all the musicians who shared their reflections on Mseleku. Many thanks to the musicians in the U.K. who performed with me during the *Ikhambi* recital at York University. I appreciate the team who recorded this performance, Jonathan Eato and Ben Eyes, and Minyung Im and Lucy Barker for recording the recital on video. Jonathan Eato was also responsible for recording my *Reflections* solo piano recording in Stellenbosch University, and I appreciate the great work done by Aryan Kaganof in documenting this work on film.

Since it is the first time such an amount of academic work has been put on Bheki Mseleku, I want thank Eugene Skeef for allowing me to use his interviews. Skeef was a friend of Mseleku, and a fellow exile. Since the passing of his friend, he has committed most of his time doing astounding amounts of work towards the remembrance of Mseleku. *Sithunyiwe.*

Finally, I want to thank all my supervisors for their contributions and guidance in putting this work together, Dr Stephanie Vos, Prof Stephanus Muller and Dr Jonathan Eato. I also would like to extend my gratitude to the South African Jazz Cultures and the Archive for involving me in their programs, which sparked ideas for my approach to this work. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the British Academy Newton Advanced Fellowship, who funded the study.

Blessings to all others who contributed to this work directly and indirectly, in realms seen and unseen. *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu.*

Thokoza,

Nduduzo Makhathini

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## Introduction

I first encountered Bheki Mseleku and his music in 2001 when I enrolled to study music at the then Technikon Natal in Durban, KwaZulu Natal. Mseleku had returned home to post-apartheid South Africa in 1994 after spending more than a decade in exile in London, and was again living in his native city Durban at the time we met. Given the personal nature of my connection with Mseleku as a friend and a mentor-figure, I approach this study from my own practice as jazz musician that has been engaged with Mseleku's musical legacy over a long period. Mseleku's role and importance as musician and the effect of exile on his music have yet to receive academic attention. This is the task I have taken up in writing this thesis.

I am greatly influenced by Mseleku's playing in terms of his articulation and his improvisational style. In many ways he created a context to jazz for someone like me, who started playing very late. His compositional style also resonates with me and is evident in most of my albums. Over the years, I have been exploring with composing music that I regard as "musical responses" to Mseleku's work.

"Umsunduzi" (*Mother Tongue*, 2014) uses the same harmonic cycle as Mseleku's "Violet Flame" (*Beauty of Sunrise*, 1997). I have a lot of other songs that mirror Mseleku's choice of harmonies over a common South African *marabi* I-IV-V progression, such as "From an Old Bag of Umkhumbane" (*Listening To The Ground*, 2015), that borrows a lot from Mseleku's "Monwabisi" (*Home at Last*, 2003). This influence has also been observed in reviews:

That Mseleku is a self-taught, and moreover, a technical wizard, means he is harder than most to honour musically. But [Salim] Washington sees Mseleku's kindred spirit in Nduduzo Makhathini (Sosibo, 2016: 5).

Bheki Mseleku was a virtuoso pianist, and performed and recorded with an impressive roster of international jazz musicians – a line-up that included Abbey

Lincoln, Joe Henderson and Pharoah Sanders. Yet little is known about Mseleku and his contribution to South African jazz aesthetics, especially in academic literature. This thesis intends to address this gap. It introduces Mseleku's life, creative work and his philosophy to the academic literature.

In the broadest sense, the study seeks to address the contribution of Bheki Mseleku in South African jazz and the British jazz scene. Mseleku arrives on both scenes after his predecessors laid firm foundations. He begins his career following in the footsteps of these earlier pianists, including Abdullah Ibrahim and Chris McGregor (both the South African exiles), Chris Schilder, Tete Mbambisa of the *Soul Jazzmen*, and Lionel Pillay in South Africa to name just a few who influenced Mseleku in some way. Among his contemporaries were pianists like Themba Mkhize of *Sakhile*, Melvin Peters, and Mervyn Africa. Though it is not easy show in musical terms how all the afore-mentioned musicians directly influenced Mseleku, it is important to mention them as the musical backdrop in which we may locate Mseleku's point of departure in constructing his distinct pianistic and compositional voice. Mseleku's musical contribution lies at the level of composition and performance, but also in the widespread influence of his work both in South Africa and in London. In assessing Mseleku's contribution, I am interested in two aspects of his musical legacy that I believe to be constitutive: his deep spirituality and the fact of his exile from South Africa. I therefore ask: What is the musical contribution of Bheki Mseleku to South African jazz with particular reference to the impact of exile and the importance of spirituality? I address these questions not only as topoi in his biography and discourse, but also plot the ways they sediment in Mseleku's music through an analysis of his album *Meditations* (1992).

I am particularly interested in the stories about how Mseleku thought about the music/life binary, and how he touched people's lives, whether through his music or the manner in which he lived his life, specifically with regard to his music and spiritual beliefs. In this way, I believe that we would be able to fill in the gaps in Mseleku's biography, situate him in a social context both in South Africa and in

exile in London and expose the reader to the kind of thinker he was. I hope that this study will contribute perspectives that will lead more writers, musicians, and artists to interact and respond creatively to his work to ensure the longevity of his legacy.

### **Situating the Study: Literature, Scope and Aims**

This is the first substantive study of Mseleku's life and work in the academic literature, and it is therefore important to note the challenges in finding material on Mseleku in secondary sources. In general historiographies of South African jazz such as Gwen Ansell's *Soweto Blues* (2004) and David Coplan's *In Township Tonight!* (2007), Mseleku receives only a passing mention as he is weaved into the broader narrative of black popular music in South Africa. Since this first academic text dedicated to Mseleku, this study mostly draws on archival material on Mseleku, including magazine articles, interviews published in the general media, newspaper clippings, and documentary films. These sources are supplemented with interviews conducted by Eugene Skeef (who was a close friend of Mseleku) as well as my own interviews with two groups of people: family members, and professional artists or individuals who knew and worked with Mseleku in a professional capacity. With regards to the first group, the interviews were semi-structured, directed towards filling gaps in Mseleku's biography that have been identified in the literature, whilst allowing interviewees the freedom to remember Mseleku in the ways that are important to them. With regards to the second group, the interviews were structured more as conversations between fellow professional musicians or insiders in the music industry. My intention was to allow musicians who performed with Mseleku to guide my understanding of what they appreciated in his musicianship, rather than prompting them to respond to my own relationship with this body of work. In my analyses of Mseleku's work, I studied audio and video recordings. I made transcriptions, and conducted aural analyses of selected material.

The broader scholarly backdrop for this study is the literature on South African jazz, and specifically jazz and exile since this is a significant theme in Mseleku's life and

music. Gwen Ansell notes that the earliest exiled artists already left South Africa in the late 1940s, for instance painter and pianist Gerard Sekoto who established himself in Paris (Ansell, 2004: 221). More particular to the United Kingdom, where Mseleku spent most of his time in exile, we could discern three generations of South African exiled musicians. The first generation of exiles arrived in London in the late 1950s and early 1960s, notably musicians such as Miriam Makeba, followed soon by Joe Mogotsi and Hugh Masekela (Dalamba, 2006: 26-31). This group also included members of the *King Kong* cast, who toured to London in 1961 (Ansell, 2004: 221) and many of whom chose to remain there in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre. Other significant artists from this first generation are Abdullah Ibrahim and the Blue Notes, who arrived a few years later in 1963 and 1964 respectively. The second generation of exiles includes those whose departure roughly coincided with the Soweto Uprising and the era of Black Consciousness in the 1970s. This generation includes Julian Bahula, Pinise Saul and Lucky Ranku, who remained in London after 1994. The 1980s, the decade preceding the advent of democracy, presents a third generation of exile. Musicians who went into exile during this period include Bheki Mseleku, Eugene Skeef, Thebe Lipere, Mervyn Africa and Russell Herman, who formed Mseleku's immediate musical community in London. The three generations of exiled musicians I identify here were, of course, not isolated from each other. Indeed, there are several continuities and overlaps in their interactions, music and ideas.

By far the most academic literature on South African jazz and exile has been devoted to the first generation of exiled musicians. Studies include those by Lindelwa Dalamba on the autobiographies of Miriam Makeba, Joe Mogotsi and Hugh Masekela (2006), Stephanie Vos on Abdullah Ibrahim's early years of exile (2016), Sazi Dlamini's extensive analysis of South African influences present in the work of the Blue Notes (2009), and Carol Muller's joint biography with South Africa jazz singer Sathima Bea Benjamin (2011). The second and third generations I have outlined remain to be represented more extensively in the academic literature. Colette Szymczak's Masters thesis and article on Jonas Gwangwa (2004; 2007), and

Shirli Gilbert's article about the ANC's Amandla and Mayibuye cultural groups' activities in the 1980s (2007) are notable exceptions, albeit focused in other geographical locations of exile than the United Kingdom.

As part of creating links to existing literatures on the discourse on jazz and exile, I would like to acknowledge touching points with themes that emerged in studies that preceded mine. Already in the 1960s, Lewis Nkosi noted that this decade saw an influx of musicians enter Europe from the oppressive apartheid dispensation in South Africa (Nkosi, 1966: 34), which pushed the musicians directly or indirectly out into exile as musicians strove for creative opportunities curtailed by the apartheid regime (Coplan, 2007: 230; Muller, 1996: 129). This emotional violence of exile is undeniably articulated of the music, notably that of the Blue Notes upon their arrival on London jazz scene (Nkosi, 1966: 34). In an interview with Gwen Ansell, another early exile, Ndikho Xaba, from a musical *Sponono* of 1962, stated that the music at the time was a reflection of issues faced by black people in South Africa during apartheid (Ansell, 2004: 228-229). Dlamini's work specifically pays attention to the application and the role of 'jazz-influenced' repertoires in articulating cultural identities in exile, as well as the legacies of these repertoires – focused around the *Blue Notes* (2009).

This thesis also strikes a resonance with Washington's work in trying to explore the two modalities and musical possibilities explored by South African musicians in exile, versus those who remained during apartheid (Washington, 2012: 91-109). Washington's work is especially important because Mseleku's music introduces the encounter between exiles and inxiles after the end of apartheid in his collaborations with musicians who remained in South Africa under apartheid for his record *Home at Last* (discussed at length in the section 'Home at Last' in Chapter Two). Muller notes that both exiles and what Washington called 'inxiles' encountered some form of ostracization and displacement (e.g. the so-called 'forced-removals' or homelands systems), which further challenges the notion of exile as only a form transnational geographic displacement, and introduces other forms of exile such as 'cultural exile'

(Muller, 1996: 130-141). That said, Muller also argues that the suffering of the exiles has not received sufficient attention, especially since there is an opposing debate about the ‘legitimacy of having been in exile’ (Muller, 1996: 129). The lack of any academic study on Bheki Mseleku at the time of my writing is a case in point.

In many ways, this study is a typical life and works consideration of a historically and musically important artist. What makes this study unusual is the individuality, and even idiosyncrasy, of its subject – Bheki Mseleku - especially in an academic sphere. Themes like his spirituality (discussed in Chapter 3) chafe against the academic norms of rational discourse. These are, however, a central aspect of his life and works that cannot be overlooked.

My study is the first to document Bheki Mseleku’s life and music in academic scholarship. As such, it lays the foundation for future inquiries by collating a wide range of archival sources, magazine articles, interviews and documentaries of Mseleku. In each chapter, I consider some of the most important themes of Mseleku’s life, namely his biography, exile and spirituality, and also consider the influences that shaped his music most significantly. There are, of course, many other themes worth pursuing, including questions of how Mseleku’s experiences of exile compare to those of his peers and predecessors, a more detailed analysis of how his music bear influences of earlier exiles’ work, or even how identity and power politics shaped his life and music. The scope of this study, as a thesis accompanying a performance portfolio for a Masters degree, does not permit me to pursue these fascinating avenues. I hope, however, that this study enables further inquiries on these and other questions that elucidate Bheki Mseleku’s life and art.

Most importantly, I would like to emphasize that my aim is to let Mseleku’s voice be heard in this writing through zooming into his music (compositionally and pianistically) and its cultural and symbolic significance. Moreover, by employing quotes from him and those of people who were close to him, I want to allow Mseleku’s unique thinking about and through jazz music to emerge.

## Chapter Outline

The first chapter presents a biography of Bheki Mseleku, assembling fragments of available and previously unavailable sources, including written materials and interviews. Through the biography, I aim to create a context for the rest of my text.

In the second chapter, I consider Mseleku in the context of his exile; exploring how his notions of exile versus notions of home manifest in his discourse and also in his music. Placing Mseleku within a longer lineage of South African musicians in exile in London throws into relief the particularities of Mseleku's experience of exile, and the way his music articulates with a broader discourse of music and exile. In this chapter, I argue that Mseleku made a unique contribution to the music of exile.

The third chapter interrogates the intersections between Mseleku's music and his various modalities of spiritualism such as Buddhism, Christianity and African spirituality evident throughout Mseleku's life and music. I further consider how these different various beliefs affected Mseleku's conceptions about his music practice.

In the fourth and final chapter, I draw on all the aspects discussed earlier and explore how they manifest sonically and symbolically in Mseleku's solo album *Meditations* (1992). Through a narrative-based analysis and transcriptions of selected musical passages of *Meditations*, I show musical and spiritual influences evident in *Meditations*. Lastly, I situate these influences in the construction of his pianism and multi-instrumentalism.

The thesis also contains a discography of Mseleku's recordings as a bandleader and soloist, and also as a sideman. It is hoped that this will be of use to future researchers and musicians who are interested in exploring this extraordinary musical legacy.

# Chapter 1

## Introducing Bheki Mseleku: Towards a Biography

This chapter introduces Bheki Mseleku through his biography, which serves as an anchoring point for the ensuing chapters' discussion of his exile, his connections with spirituality, and a close reading of his album *Meditations*. Because so few studies of Mseleku exist (especially in the academic literature), a large part of the work in constructing his biography lies in assembling the narrative from different sources. The sources I draw on are mainly in the public domain, and tend to fall into two categories: obituaries, which, by dint of being surveys of his life, need to strike a compromise between detail or thoroughness and retrospective appreciation; and articles published at particular points of his career, which afford only a partial view of Mseleku's life and activities at the time of writing. This chapter supplements these sources with interviews involving people who knew Mseleku. Given the scope of this study, the biography is not complete, nor has it exhausted all the sources. It is my hope, however, that this outline lays a foundation for future studies to build on, and introduces new sources on Mseleku's life.

The multi-instrumentalist Bhekumuzi Hyacinth Mseleku was born on 3 March 1955 in Lamontville Township in Durban, South Africa. He came from a musical family. His father, William Mseleku, was a student of the composer and choirmaster Reuben Caluza, and played the guitar, saxophone and violin. As the leader of a group called variously Amanzimtoti Players, Amanzimtoti Zulu Choir or Mseleku's Party, Mseleku senior was a seminal figure in the vaudeville productions that became popular among both black and white communities in the mid-1930s (Ballantine, 2012: 3 and 204-5). Apart from William Mseleku's contributions as a composer for Amanzimtoti Royal Entertainers, he also often recorded with His Masters Voice. He had nearly thirty recordings credited to his name, featuring his wife, the singer Alvira Mseleku, his siblings Alfred and Mavis Mseleku, and other prominent singers including Victor Khumalo. Besides his role as a performer, William Mseleku was a

teacher and a politically active member of the ANC's Natal branch as well as the burgeoning trade union movement of the 1940s (for a more extensive description of William Mseleku's musical contributions, see Erlmann, 1991: 92-4, also see Coplan, 2007: 159; Ballantine, 2012: 72). Mseleku senior obtained a Bachelor of Music degree from the University of Cambridge in England, the country where Bheki Mseleku was later exiled (Erlmann, 1991: 92-4, Ngidi, 2015).

Bheki Mseleku was the sixth of seven Mseleku children of which three, including Bheki himself, took on music as a career. His sister Pinkie Mseleku became a singer, and his brother Langa Mseleku became a composer and keyboardist. It was Langa who gave Bheki his first piano lessons (Lusk, 2008). Apart from this initial introduction to the piano, Mseleku was a self-taught musician. He started playing on the family piano that his father would lock when he was not at home, leaving the keys with their mother Alvira Mseleku. Occasionally Mrs. Mseleku would secretly give the keys to Langa Mseleku, Bheki's older brother who was a more advanced piano player than Bheki at the time. This went on for a while until Langa Mseleku would also give Bheki the keys, and soon the family discovered the exceptional talents of the young Mseleku. His father noticed this and thereafter gave all his children unlimited access to the piano, although he was concerned that music was a distraction from schoolwork (Fordham, 2008).

During Mseleku's upbringing, he was exposed to traditional Zulu music, church music, and later to RnB, jazz and Indian classical music (Sinker, 1987). At home, Mseleku always gravitated towards the piano (Fordham, 2008). After his father's passing, the family were in dire financial need and Mseleku recalls how they had to chop up the piano for firewood (The South Bank Show, 1994). The young Mseleku also assisted in this process, unaware that later in his life he would become a pianist. It was also in his early youth (the date is not clear), that Mseleku was involved in a go-karting accident in which he lost the first joints of his right hand's fourth and fifth fingers (Willgress 1994; Lusk 2008; Bheki Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994; The South Bank Show 1994).

Reflecting on this incident later in his career, Mseleku commented (The South Bank Show 1994):

But as I understand if I was white in South Africa they could have put them together. So that's how I lost my [finger joints] which in a way kind of [affects] my playing to some certain degree so I have to compromise and do my own kind of harmonies.

It is only at the age of seventeen that Mseleku recognized that he had a unique talent of playing and improvising on the piano. In contrast with many musicians' accounts of their struggles to attain proficiency on their instruments, Mseleku claims that his development was effortless. In his own words, "when I started playing I discovered that I could play effortlessly... I must have heard a lot of music when I was young and I guess it has to do with that plus South Africa is a very musical environment..." (Bheki Mseleku in The South Bank Show, 1994).

Mseleku began his early musical apprenticeship with The Drive, a local group in Durban founded by alto saxophonist and bandleader Henry Sithole and guitarist Bunny Luthuli. In the band, Mseleku featured as an electric organ and synthesizer player, notably for the album *Can You Feel It* (1975), alongside Sam Sithole on tenor and baritone sax, David Sithole on trumpet, Tony Sauli on bass and Nelson Magwaza on drums. Upon losing two of the founding members in a car accident in 1977 ("A Rare One from the Drive", 2012), the band could no longer sustain itself. The remaining band members were incorporated into two significant bands in South African music history, Sakhile and Spirits Rejoice (Temple, 2011).

Since Mseleku did not have a piano at the time, singer Busi Mhlongo introduced Mseleku to Tu Nokwe, a singer and guitarist, whose family's piano he used to practice on (Nokwe, 2011: 7-10). The Nokwes were a musical family, with Alfred Nokwe (Tu's father) a musician in a jazz swing band and Patty Nokwe (Tu's mother) a soprano (Nokwe, 2011: 7-10; "Nokwe, Tu", *SAHO*: 2017). As Coplan

puts it, “the charming, sensitive aesthete Bheki was no match for the tough township environment and Tu’s protectiveness led after some time to their marriage” (2007, 317), which was later blessed with a daughter, Nirvana Nokwe. It was Bheki Mseleku who encouraged Tu to pursue her career in music (Nokwe, 2011: 7-10; “Nokwe, Tu”, *SAHO*: 2017).

In 1975, a year before the Soweto Uprising, Mseleku went to Johannesburg to start his professional career. One of the places where he performed was at The Pelican Night Club in Soweto, a lively environment where musicians congregated, jammed, and often met up with future band members (Eugene Skeef interview with Nomvula Ndlazilwana, 29 September 2015; personal communication with Linda Olifant, 3 August 2017; also see Coplan, 2007: 305; Ansell, 2007: 147). In Johannesburg, he joined the afro-funk group Spirits Rejoice. This group was responsible for launching some of the most important musicians emerging in the mid-’70s (Coplan, 2007: 293). The group comprised of Gilbert Mathews (drums), Siphso Gumede (bass), Mervyn Africa and Bheki Mseleku (keyboards), Paul Petersen (guitars), Robbie Jansen (alto sax, flute and vocals), George Tyefumane and Thabo Mashishi (trumpets). These were politically volatile times in South Africa, which also registered in the music scene. As Abdullah Ibrahim commented, ‘[the] Soweto uprising was just starting [and] for us we thought it was important that we focus on the mood of the people of the time’ (Abdullah Ibrahim in Hirsch, 2002). This sentiment resounds in the song “Mannenbergh” (1974, also featuring Robbie Jansen) which became an “unofficial national anthem” at political rallies countrywide (Mason, 2007: 26).

It was also in 1975 that Mseleku joined the popular group Malombo, led by guitarist Philip Tabane (Fordham 2008). In the following year, Mseleku started playing with the Jazz Ministers, the band led by trumpeter Johnny Meko and saxophonist Victor Ndlazilwana, father to pianist Nomvula Ndlazilwana. Mseleku and Nomvula Ndlazilwana were later married and had four children (Lusk, 2008; personal communication with Maria Mbalenhle Ndlazilwana; Coplan, 2007: 247; Gedye,

2017; Mathe, 2016). It is not until 1977 that Mseleku went on an international tour to perform at the Newport Festival in New York with Spirits Rejoice and Malombo Jazz (Sinker, 1987; Fordham, 2008). There, Mseleku met African-American pianists McCoy Tyner and Alice Coltrane. He clearly made a good impression given that Alice Coltrane gave Mseleku the saxophone mouthpiece that John Coltrane used during his recording of *A Love Supreme* (Fordham, 2008). Despite his intentions to stay in New York, this did not materialize due to poor logistics (Sinker, 1987).

Upon Mseleku's return to South Africa in the late 1970s, he continued working with local musicians in South Africa, such as guitarist Allen Kwela, guitarist Johnny Fourie and saxophonist Barney Rachabane among others (Mathe, 2016). Later Mseleku played with the singer Babsy Malangeni and The All Rounders, the group featuring among others Peter Modise (bass), Dennis Mpale (trumpet) and Duke Makasi (tenor saxophone, personal communication with Linda Olifant, 8 August 2017). Mseleku and his close friend, the percussionist and cultural activist Eugene Skeef, however, found the political climate and diminished music industry too restrictive for their creative work. They decided to leave South Africa, thereby going into exile in 1980 (Sinker, 1987; personal communication with Eugene Skeef 14 October 2017).

Historically, Mseleku was part of what might be thought of as the third generation of South African exiles in London. The first generation arrived in Europe in the '60s and included the Manhattan Brothers, members of the *King Kong* cast, Abdullah Ibrahim and the Blue Notes (Nkosi, 1966). The second generation included percussionist Julian Bahula, guitarist Lucky Ranku and vocalist Pinise Saul, who left South Africa in the 1970s and were influenced by Black Consciousness (Coplan, 2007: 230). The third generation arrived in the 1980s, and include musicians like Mervyn Africa and Mseleku.

Reflecting on the jazz scene in apartheid South Africa during this time, Coplan remarks that the musicians often faced the choice of "fight or flight", meaning that

musicians faced the choice between joining the struggle against apartheid, or exile (Coplan, 2007: 229). Coplan argues that musicians' decisions to go into exile were not only motivated by political protest, but also by the need for artists to realize their creative potential and establish professional careers, something that was indeed difficult to do in the diminished music industry in South Africa (Coplan, 2007: 229).

Mseleku's motivation to leave South Africa and go into exile seems to confirm Coplan's statement. Although he was reluctant to leave his community in South Africa, Mseleku also averred that apartheid did not present him (or the musicians before him) any other option but to leave (Mseleku in *The South Bank Show*, 1994). Through Eugene Skeef and his then wife, Mary Skeef, Mseleku met pianist Abdullah Ibrahim when he arrived in Germany. Ibrahim, in turn, informed Mseleku that Johnny Dyani (the bassist of *The Blue Notes*) was looking for a pianist in Stockholm, where he lived at the time (Sinker, 1987). Between 1980 and 1983, Mseleku settled in Stockholm, playing with Dyani and occasionally with African American trumpet player Don Cherry. From there, Mseleku visited London on a number of occasions to play with another *Blue Notes* member, Louis Moholo (Fordham, 2008). Mseleku never owned a piano until later in his life. In order to practice, he relied on forming good relationships with club owners – among them the owner of the well-known jazz club *Fasching* in Stockholm – whom he convinced to lock him in overnight to enable him to spend time at the piano. This was a habit Mseleku had already adopted in South Africa, and which he continued in the various places where he lived abroad (personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 23 October 2017; interview with Linda Olifant, 3 August 2017).

In 1984, he travelled to Zimbabwe to visit his sister, Pinkie Mseleku, who told Hugh Masekela about her brother's visit. Masekela invited Mseleku to participate as saxophonist and keyboardist on the album *Waiting for the Rain*, which was recorded in Botswana and released in 1985 (Hugh Masekela in *The South Bank Show*, 1994). Afterwards, Mseleku travelled with Masekela to London to promote the album (Hugh Masekela in *The South Bank Show*, 1994) and remained there after the tour.

Until that point, Mseleku performed mostly as a sideman. It was in London, however, where he started his solo career (Fordham, 2008). By the time he had settled in London, Mseleku was already known on the jazz circuit owing to his earlier gigs with Louis Moholo and Chris McGregor. Between 1985 and 1986, Mseleku participated in jam sessions and earned respect among musicians, although this did not immediately translate to work opportunities or offers from record labels. This also meant that Mseleku could not sustain himself financially as a performer. Through the help of Eugene Skeef, who had become a director at Oval House Music School in south London, Mseleku was able support to himself as a music teacher (Johnson, 1994; personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 23 October 2017). By all accounts he was a good teacher, and his somewhat unusual style of teaching became popular among students and fellow teachers (who were also exiles) such as Thebe Lipere, Pinise Saul, Lucky Ranku and others. Mseleku's method involved communal workshop sessions (as opposed to one-on-one lessons) and was not instrument-specific. His was a holistic teaching approach: it involved meditation on the challenges faced by students, and compositions made for students in answer to particular difficulties they experienced. These compositions sometimes also made it into Mseleku's recorded repertoire (e.g. the track "Supreme Love" on the album *Celebration* is one example of a pedagogical piece that was later included on an album; personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 23 October 2017). Furthermore, Mseleku frequently performed solo concerts at the Oval House, which he saw as part of his teaching (personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 23 October 2017).

If an orientation towards performance influenced his approach to teaching, the reverse was also true: his teaching approach also spilled over into his performances. In an ensemble setting Mseleku's performances presented a communal space for exploration and incorporated a workshop ethos. Reflecting on performances with Mseleku, the flautist Gareth Lockrane, who later played with Mseleku, remembers:

Often Bheki would start a duo concert with a bridge of one of his tunes through all twelve keys as a kind of a cyclic kind of... as a practice thing... also to get into each other's mindset of the cyclic harmony workout ... (Gareth Lockrane interview with Eugene Skeef, 14 March 2017).

Courtney Pine (in *The South Bank Show*, 1994) similarly commented:

...The great thing about Bheki is that he didn't really tell us all what we did wrong, when we were doing it wrong, because he knew [what we did wrong]... He guided us, you know, the right way. (*The South Bank Show*, 1994)

In 1986, Mseleku appeared on Winston "Mankunku" Ngozi and Mike Perry's album *Jika*, recorded in Addis Ababa alongside South African exiles Lucky Ranku, Claude Deppa, and Russell Herman. His solo breakthrough finally came in 1987, when Mseleku did his debut performance at the prestigious Ronnie Scott's jazz club (Fordham, 2008). The pianist Horace Silver organized a two-week residency at the club for Mseleku, (Johnson, 1992) to perform in a smaller upstairs venue, while established artists such as Dave Holland were performing on the main stage. By all accounts, Mseleku impressed both the audiences and Ronnie Scott himself, who personally invited the media to attend the performance (Fordham, 2008). This is where drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith discovered Mseleku and started to jam with him.

It was during this time that Mseleku started his collaborations with the trombonist and music producer and trombonist Jonas Gwangwa. In 1987, Mseleku worked with Gwangwa on the soundtrack for the television film *Cry Freedom* (Sinker, 1987). When Gwangwa visited London in 1988 to perform at Nelson Mandela's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday Tribute concert in Wembley Stadium, he also recorded his album *Flowers of the Nation*, which featured Mseleku on piano, keyboards and alto saxophone. As Gwangwa explained in an interview, "Flowers of the Nation was [a phrase] coined

by Oliver Tambo in reference to the women section in the ANC” (personal communication with Jonas Gwangwa, 15 September 2017).

Although Mseleku was not explicitly involved in politics or activism, his involvement in projects with Gwangwa in particular suggests that he was not indifferent to the struggle against apartheid. He averred that “jazz has to do with people fighting for their freedom” (Ansell, 1997). Even though many South African musicians were more explicit about music as a mode of protest, Mseleku was mainly concerned with music as a mode of attaining freedom, whether it be political or spiritual freedom. This became apparent when, in 1989, Mseleku joined the Amandla Cultural Group led by Gwangwa in Angola. The Amandla Cultural Ensemble originated among exiles who were part of uMkhonto weSizwe – the ANC’s military wing – based in Angola, and operated as ambassadors for the African National Congress (personal communication with Linda Olifant, 20 August 2017). In Shirli Gilbert’s description (Gilbert, 2007: 422):

[Amandla] offered large-scale, increasingly professionalized performances incorporating choral singing, jazz, theatre and dance. Its performances were intended not only to raise international awareness about apartheid, but also to present an alternative vision of a more dynamic, inclusive South African culture.

Mseleku’s composition “Angola”, which appeared on his 1991 album *Celebration*, originates from this period.

It is not clear when Mseleku returned to the United Kingdom and what the circumstances were that led to his return, but by 1991 he was back in London. This was a historic year for Mseleku, for he finally managed, with the help of his manager Russell Herman, to secure a record deal with World Circuit label, owned by Nick Gold (Fordham, 2008). This resulted in his album *Celebration*, which featured British artists Eddie Parker (flute), Courtney Pine (soprano saxophone),

Steve Williamson and Jean Toussaint (tenor saxophones), along with American artists Marvin “Smitty” Smith (drums) and Michael Bowie (bass), as well as South African Thebe Lipere (percussion) and Bheki Mseleku himself (piano and tenor saxophone). *Celebration* garnered much media attention and earned Mseleku a nomination for the Mercury Prize (Johnson, 1992). Although Mseleku increasingly performed as a soloist, he continued to perform as a sideman for other artists, notably on the album *Green Chimneys* (1991) by UK singer Cleveland Watkiss. This record features Mseleku’s composition “Song for You”, which he later recorded on his own album *Beauty of Sunrise* (1997) with a different title, “Woody’s Tune”.

The solo album *Meditations* (1992), a recording of a live performance at Bath International Music Festival on 4 June 1992, soon followed, released under Russell Herman’s independent record label Samadhi Music Production (Fordham, 2008). This performance, which I discuss at greater length in Chapter 4, features Mseleku on piano, tenor saxophone and vocals. In this year Mseleku also appeared as a pianist on Courtney Pine’s record called *To the Eyes of Creation* (1992).

By 1993, Mseleku signed a record deal with the Verve label, which allowed him the opportunity to record in New York with figures he venerated (Mseleku in *The South Bank Show*, 1994). The first album he recorded on Verve, *Timelessness*, featured a rhythm section comprised of Marvin “Smitty” Smith and Elvin Jones (drums), Michael Bowie (bass), Rodney Kendrick (piano) and Bheki Mseleku (piano, vocals, alto and tenor saxophone), alongside guest artists Abbey Lincoln (voice), Joe Henderson, and Pharaoh Sanders (tenor saxophones) and Kent Jordan (flute). *Timelessness* was released in 1994, receiving a five star rating in Japan’s *Swing Journal*. For the first time in his life, Mseleku was able to afford a piano, and he also remarked that he enjoyed a better standard of living than before (Mseleku in *The South Bank Show*, 1994). *Timelessness* led to further collaborations with the artists featured on the record; for instance, Mseleku performed in the prestigious Royal Festival Hall with Joe Henderson (Johnson, 1994). Reflecting on Bheki Mseleku’s

playing shortly after this performance, Joe Henderson (in Bheki Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994) commented:

Bheki has got an enormous amount of talent... it's like he should have been part of the '60s in America. I mean his writing reminds me of the writing that went on in New York City between 1960 and 1968.

He later toured with Joe Henderson's band in the United States, Europe and India (Lusk, 2008). In December of 1993, Mseleku featured as saxophonist on Rodney Kendrick's album, *Dance World Dance* (1993), alongside Arthur Blythe and Patience Higgins.

These were not only seminal years for Mseleku, but also in South Africa's political history. Nelson Mandela was released in 1990 after 27 years of imprisonment, and in 1994 the country held its first democratic elections. Mseleku finally moved back to South Africa in 1994 (Okapi, 2016), joining a number of exiled musicians who returned, including Hugh Masekela, Letta Mbulu, Caiphus Semenya, Abdullah Ibrahim, Sathima Bea Benjamin, Hotep Galeta and Jonas Gwangwa (Coplan, 2007: 340; Okapi, 2016). In this year, Mseleku participated in a British Council-funded project called Ngoma, touring and performing in Chatsworth, Mamelodi, Clermont and Umlazi. In the words of Thebe Lipere, the project sought to "remind our people that Africa has a culture and art" (Ngidi, 1994). Directed by Eugene Skeef, Ngoma involved a three-month residency by the London Philharmonic Orchestra in South Africa. Mseleku was among the leading musicians, including Pops Mohammed, Busi Mhlongo, Vusi Mchunu, Thebe Lipere, Madala Kunene and Sibongile Khumalo, who performed with the orchestra and presented workshops.

In mid-1994 Mseleku went on tour with Joe Henderson again, performing at festivals such as the Umbria Jazz (Italy) and the prestigious North Sea Jazz Festival in the Netherlands alongside Roy Hargrove, Kenny Garrett, and Hugh Masekela.

Mseleku went to California in 1995 to record his fourth album, *Star Seeding* (Verve). This is an interesting record, as it captures Mseleku's abilities as a multi-instrumentalist displayed through overdubbing techniques rather than simultaneous playing (as on *Meditations*). *Star Seeding* is essentially a trio record, although it presents the spirit of a quartet. The album features Billy Higgins (drums), Charlie Haden (bass) and Bheki Mseleku (piano, tenor saxophone, and less prominently guitar and voice; Fordham, 2008). Haden had previously recorded with Ornette Coleman, and Coleman knew of Mseleku and wanted to work with him. This never materialized:

I wasn't feeling well. ... And that's the time when Ornette Coleman was here. He wanted me to play at the [Royal] Festival Hall. He'd invited me, he'd heard the album.... They even got the piano for me – but then I couldn't go (Sinker, 1994: 39).

At the inaugural Kora All Africa Music Awards held in South Africa the following year, Mseleku won the category for Best African Instrumentalist (Mojapelo, 2008: 289). In 1997, Mseleku released another record with Verve titled *Beauty of Sunrise*. Besides displaying Mseleku's virtuosity on the piano, *Beauty of Sunrise* also showcases his compositional and arranging skills, which are rarely spoken about. The album personnel comprise Elvin Jones and Ralph Peterson (drums), Ravi Coltrane (the son of John Coltrane, tenor saxophone), Michael Bowie (bass) Graham Haynes (the son of Roy Haynes, cornet and flugelhorn), Daniel Moreno (percussion) and James Spaulding (flute).

After 1997, it is difficult to find traces of Mseleku in any available sources. He reappears in the line-up of the Art Alive program in South Africa, for a performance at Mega Music Warehouse (which later became the Bassline) on 17 September 1999 (Ansell, 1999). In an interview with the writer Gwen Ansell, Mseleku explained the challenges he faced with the music industry in South Africa. Mseleku had been struggling to get a decent piano for his performance, and he blamed government

institutions for their lack of spiritual awareness (Ansell, 1999). It is during this time that Mseleku attempted to do the first recording of his work in South Africa, but this did not succeed until later, as Mseleku felt the idea was perhaps premature and needed more conceptual work (Ansell, 1999).

During Mseleku's time in South Africa he collaborated with various artists, notably when he appeared on singer and composer Sibongile Khumalo's album *Immortal Secrets* (2000). The album was produced by pianist Themba Mkhize and also featured former exile Hugh Masekela, Afrika Mkhize (a student of Mseleku) and Moses Molelekwa (a keen follower of Mseleku). Here Mseleku features as a pianist and co-composer on a song titled "Spirit Ascending".

Between 1999 and 2003, Mseleku spent most of his time in Durban, where he moved between teaching informally at Technikon Natal and spending time in the Buddhist temple in Berea. The academic space in South Africa was not particularly welcoming to Mseleku. He was never appointed formally at the Technikon Natal, and writer Sandile Memela (Fordham, 2008) speculates that this was because he had no qualifications. If this was the case, there are no indications that this lack of qualifications prejudiced his teaching or his students. His informal interactions with students made a deep impression, as is evident in a recollection of my former piano teacher, Neil Gonsalves (personal communication, 14 March 2017):

Bheki is perhaps the most influential of all jazz musicians ... So being with him [Mseleku] was like going back to school and I learnt so much from him. [...] It took a long time to internalize those new voicings and get comfortable in all the keys. He was incredibly generous [...].

It was during this period, in 2001, that I met and started to spend time with Bheki Mseleku at the Technikon, at his home and at the Buddhist Temple where we went every Thursday. This was a difficult period for Mseleku, in part because his health was deteriorating. He had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and moved in and

out of psychiatric hospitals (I visited him at Fort Napier Hospital in Pietermaritzburg around 2002), and he also suffered from diabetes. The lack of performance opportunities and recognition (Okapi, 2016) also meant that he could not sustain himself financially. During this period, Mseleku lost the saxophone mouthpiece he received from Alice Coltrane (Okapi, 2016). The only concert of Mseleku's I attended was in 2002, when he performed at the Standard Bank Awesome Africa Music Festival on 28 and 29 September. At this concert, Mseleku performed with an all-South African band featuring Andile Mseleku (voice), Mfana Mlambo (tenor), Lex Futshane (bass) and Ayanda Sikade (drums).

In Mseleku's last release, *Home At Last* (Sheer Sound, 2003), he embraced the South African jazz aesthetic more explicitly than before (*The Guardian*, 2008). With the exception of Thebe Lipere on *Celebration* (1991), this is the first of Mseleku's albums that featured South African musicians – a significant gesture through which Mseleku reunited with his fellow musicians who remained and contributed to the jazz aesthetic in South Africa during apartheid. *Home At Last* features Winston Mankunku and Ezra Ngcukana (tenor saxophone), Feya Faku (trumpet and flugelhorn), Enoch Mthlane (guitar), Herbie Tsoaeli (bass), Tlale Makhene (percussion), Philip Meintjies and Morabo Morojele (drums) and Bheki Mseleku (piano).

Mseleku's hopes to settle in South Africa permanently were dashed due to lack of work and also a lack of recognition, and in 2006 Mseleku returned, disillusioned, to London (Okapi, 2016). The jazz scene in post-1994 South Africa took a turn from a commercially marginalized protest music with limited airtime on official radio and television channels, to an increasingly corporatized, commercialized and conformist medium. Due to the opening of the jazz market, many musicians started shifting their musical focus to match the trends that were set up by the new systems of music dissemination (Ballantine, 2012: 195). Radio, television and record companies (through the Artist & Repertoire offices and producers) all had preconceived ideas about how music should sound like in order to reach their commercial goals. Some

people accused Mseleku of succumbing to these commercial imperatives with his recording *Home at Last* (2003). However, having been with Mseleku around the time he recorded this album and after, I would rather support Carr's interpretation that *Home at Last* should be viewed as a "concept album", Mseleku's way to address the paradox of home by creating a musical representation of the two worlds in which he lived (Carr, 2004). Mseleku maintained that he wanted to create an album that embraced South African forms to a greater extent than his previous albums, and which would appeal to a broader South African audience. At the core, there was the desire to connect with home (South Africa) and the longing for community.

Back in London in 2006, Mseleku worked closely with a Gareth Lockrane. Lockrane first encountered Mseleku's music while he was still a student, and it became a big influence on his own playing (Lockrane, 14 March 2017). Mseleku's influence on a younger generation of musicians continues to this day. UK saxophonist Shabaka Hutchings recently reflected on how Mseleku influenced his early beginnings in jazz (Geyde, 2016: 6). Similarly, alto saxophonist Soweto Kinch recalls: "One of the things that kickstarted me being interested in playing the saxophone was seeing a Bheki Mseleku poster when I was eleven years old" (Davis, 2011). This confirms the extent to which South African exiles contributed in the construction, development and future of the jazz vocabulary in London (also see Eato, 2011).

Later, Lockrane performed in various configurations with Mseleku, but mainly in duets such as their performance at the Theosophical Society in April of 2006. Like his former teacher, Eddie Parker, Lockrane transcribed Mseleku's music and took on the role of Mseleku's assistant in the projects on which they collaborated. Between 2006 and 2007 Mseleku also toured with a quintet with Gareth Lockrane (flute), Byron Wallen (trumpet), Simon Thorpe (bass) and Winston Clifford (drums), performing in Sheffield, Cardiff, Brighton, Nottingham, London and Dorking. In June 2007, Mseleku performed with a quartet at the Jazz Hastings with Gareth Lockrane (flute), Gene Calderazzo (drums) and Simon Thorpe (bass). Lockrane mentions that towards the end of Mseleku's life they were reworking some of the

material that Mseleku recorded in the 70's with The Drive – reconnecting with Mseleku's musical beginnings (Lockrane, 14 March 2017).

Bheki Mseleku's last performance activity on record is 'Bheki Mseleku – The Last Rehearsal', filmed by Sunara Begum with Tunde Jegede (music director), Cleveland Watkiss (vocals), Maya Jobarteh (harp), Naville Malcolm (bass), Rod Youngs (drums), Bheki Mseleku (piano) and a string quartet featuring Daniel Battacharya (violin I), Roger Simpkins (violin II), John Boyd (viola) and Amanda Atkins (cello). The rehearsal took place a few of weeks before Mseleku's passing and it was in preparation for a performance at the Royal Festival Hall.<sup>1</sup>

Mseleku died of diabetes in his flat in London on 9 September 2008 at the age of 53, (Fordham, 2008), leaving behind his family and eight children (Lusk, 2008). His widow, Nomvula, who found his body after he slipped into the diabetic coma from which he never recovered, remarked (Zvomuya, 2008):

When I look back, his music really affected him. It really affected his health. ... The intensity at which he pushed himself, later in his life affected his health. 'Cause mental health has to do with stress and pushing yourself too far, ... and it affected him (interview with Eugene Skeef, 29 September 2015).

He was buried on the 27 September 2008 at Merebank Muslim Cemetery (Sosibo, 2016; Geyde, 2016; Sibiya, 2008). Mseleku's musical legacy lives on in several projects: Eugene Skeef's Memory projects, both Garreth Lockrane and Afrika Mkhize's arrangements of Mseleku's work for big band configurations, Andrew Lilley's transcriptions of Mseleku piano works and my own performances of what I call "musical letters" to Mseleku.

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<sup>1</sup> Video clip available on YouTube, posted by drummer Rod Youngs. Available: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk-fHr5\\_0HI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tk-fHr5_0HI), accessed 25 October 2017.

## Chapter 2

### Bheki Mseleku and the Sound of Exile

#### Introduction

Bheki Mseleku belongs to a younger generation of jazz musicians who followed the first wave of musical exiles abroad during the latter part of the twentieth century. In contrast to his exiled predecessors – specifically the Blue Notes in London, an influential group whose music often embraced free-form structures and robust, protest-like improvisation (Nkosi, 1966; Sinker, 1987) – Mseleku’s style could be described as more overtly tonally rooted, structured, carefully arranged, and gentle in both mood and timbre. In this chapter I consider what makes Mseleku’s musical voice one that is distinctive in exile: one with an idiosyncratic mode of protest and response to pain. I explore the role of musical memory in the construction of his sound, and also the role of collaborations with British and American musicians in exile.

Through a discussion of Mseleku’s record *Home at Last* (2003) and its symbolic representation of ‘home’ – the opposite of exile – I argue that Mseleku’s notion of home is rooted in his long-lasting connection to his community of musicians in South Africa. I therefore propose that exile should be understood as the disconnection from a sense of community, and suggest that in Mseleku’s music, notions of a home and exile should be understood as symbolic rather than physical phenomena.

#### A non-national notion of exile?

Mseleku’s view of exile has always been an interesting one even among fellow exiles; saxophonist Steve Dyer who was with Mseleku in Botswana in the mid-’80s recalls some of Mseleku’s thoughts around the exile discourse:

One of the striking things I remember about Bheki is that at a time where most South African exiles were pre-occupied with “home” and the struggle against apartheid; he did not have a nationalistic outlook, and was more concerned about the state of global human consciousness (Steve Dyer, personal communication, 11 March 2017).

This concern with the abstract idea rather than the concrete and specific political situation, is a notion that Mseleku’s cultivates even further during his later exile in London in the 1980s and early ’90s. It is also a valid for his position on exile when he returns to South Africa after the first democratic elections in 1994. Considered together with his broader views on spiritualism (discussed in detail in the third chapter of this thesis) brings us closer to an understanding of his holistic outlook on life.

Ideas of jazz as a tool for protest and a means to express social concerns are present since the early stirrings of this music. In slave culture, music presented a mode through which slaves and their descendants maintained connections with their culture in a faraway land (Gioia, 2011: 237). The slave trade also gave birth to new musical forms that expressed black pain, namely in the blues and work songs. Slavery as a forced absence from one’s home and culture could be understood as a parallel to exile (Brown, 1995: 440). In this respect, music as a repository of cultural memory and mode of performing a connection with home, as well as a mode through which a present subjectivity is expressed, functioned similarly in slave culture as in South African exile in the latter twentieth century. Similar parallels exist between music and its social context in free music connected with the Black Nationalist Movement that emerged in the ’60s in the United States. This music, too, bears witness to a mode of protest (Nicholls, n.d.).

The functional role of music as a mechanism of memory plays out somewhat differently in the African context that frames Mseleku’s music and in the holistic

approach he cultivated. At the core of Mseleku's practice was not only resistance to a particular regime or social hierarchy, but a bigger aspiration to remind humanity of the role of music as a mode of spiritualism and a way of promoting a universal consciousness and peace in the world (Willgress, 1994). I therefore argue that Mseleku's mode of protest was different to earlier generations of South African exiles in London. Not surprisingly, Mseleku's approach recalls the views of his guru, African American pianist and composer McCoy Tyner, who situates the (political) role of music within modes of spiritualism that imply ways of transcendence:

Politics to me has a more of a secondary place in life because it changes... [and] politics [are] very unstable but... it serves the means for some people temporarily but I think there is a higher concept... I think it is more of a spiritual concept with me... This is the reason for it to exist... People originally used music to worship by... (McCoy Tyner interview with NRK1 TV, 1975)

### **Mseleku's Style As Distinct From Older Exiles**

Like many before him, Mseleku fled into exile in the 1980s as he found the political climate unbearable in the country of his birth (Lusk, 2008). The country he fled was a South Africa after the Soweto Uprising of 1976, when black students protesting against Afrikaans as a compulsory language of tuition, were shot by police. During this time in South Africa, thousands of people were detained, media coverage was restricted, and black political organizations were banned ("The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising", *SAHO*, 2012; Hirsch, 2002). These political events had a profound impact on artists. Besides the decline in music infrastructure (such as performance venues) due to apartheid legislature (including pass laws, the requirement for separate amenities for differently classified racial groups, and restrictions on group meetings), the music itself was regarded as a mode of activism, and consequently artists were suppressed and music censored by the apartheid regime (Music Africa,

2016). Even if the music did not contain overt political statements, jazz practice itself defied apartheid as ideology. To paraphrase Sazi Dlamini, jazz as a socially integrative performance medium demonstrated the unworkability of apartheid's segregation, and thereby became a subculture that mobilized people politically (Dlamini, 2010: 33).

It is important to note that Mseleku's decision to leave the country emerged from his passion and aspirations for the music, and his frustration that he could not freely practice his art in South Africa during these trying times (The South Bank Show, 1994). Describing the mood of the 1980s on the film *Amandla*, exile Thandi Modise commented that "[t]he spirit of the people was broken by the shootings, by the banning of the organization [the ANC] [and] by the exodus of the leadership" (in Hirsch, 2002). Considering some of the music that came out of South Africa in the '80s, it becomes evident how the music became central in reconstructing low morale and provided a sense of hope. In an explicit way protest songs presented these layers of realities experienced by the people. I would argue, through Bheki Mseleku, that music also provided a more implicit way of healing the broken spirit.

In going into exile after meeting his idols, McCoy Tyner and Alice Coltrane, at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1977, Mseleku arguably pursued a musical home; one that he eventually found outside of South Africa during his exile years in the '80s. It is particularly during his time in London and in Mseleku's interaction with the Blue Notes that the similarities and differences between Mseleku and the earlier generation of South African exiles, is thrown into relief.

The Blue Notes had created a name for themselves in the spheres of free improvised music that was deeply rooted in South African folk music (Nkosi, 1966: 34).

Mseleku worked with the founder member of the Blue Notes, pianist Chris McGregor, and other South African exiles (Fordham, 2008), notably in a quartet consisting of Chris McGregor (piano), Gilbert Mathews (drums), Ernest Mothle (bass) and Mseleku (tenor). Even though Mseleku had similar ideas to those of the

earlier exiles about what jazz represented – recalling his statement that “Jazz has to do with people fighting for their freedom” (Mseleku in Ansell, 1999) mentioned in Chapter 1 – Mseleku’s music is not as explicitly political. Resistance registers indirectly in his philosophical beliefs about the role of music and in the symbolism of his compositional techniques.

Musically, Mseleku drew direct influences from the modal structures pioneered by John Coltrane and McCoy Tyner in the 1960s (Fordham, 2008). This is distinct from his UK predecessors in exile, such as pianist Chris McGregor, drummer Louis Moholo, alto saxophonist Dudu Pukwana and trumpeter Mongezi Fezi, who took much of their early international influence from American hard bop (as well as Ellington in McGregor’s case) before combining this with the innovations of the burgeoning American free music movement (Washington, 2012: 92; Nkosi, 1966: 34-36). The music of both Bheki Mseleku and the members of the Blue Notes was rooted in South African jazz idioms such as *marabi* and *kwela* (Such, 1993; Lusk, 2008), but in the case of the Blue Notes’s free music, or what is sometimes referred to as avant-garde jazz, emerged as a way of confronting oppression and exercising freedom (Anderson, 2007). This was partly because of their connections to American music and the emergence of collaboration opportunities with some of the leaders in American free music such as American trumpeter Don Cherry, who teamed up with South African bassist and exile Jonny Dyani in Sweden (Fordham, 2008; Sinker, 1987). Other Blue Note group members’ notable collaboration with some of the revolutionary African American musicians included well-known figures such as Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Idrees Suleiman, Beaver Harris, J.C. Moses, Cecil Taylor and Shihab Sahib among others (Washington, 2012: 92). As Salim Washington remarks, “musicians in exile such as Chris McGregor and Mongezi Feza had fully assimilated the ultra-modern music of Albert Ayler (whom Coltrane described as having started where he left off), Cecil Taylor, and others” (Washington, 2012: 92).

Mseleku's music in exile was more concerned with creating and channeling a "vibration" that would harmonize the world, with his efforts focused primarily towards achieving a universal awareness to existence (The South Bank Show, 1994; Sinker, 1987). Perhaps owing to his gentle personality and often fragile health, Mseleku was on a journey of cultivating new methods of protest that were more concerned with the inner-self, as distinguished from the external and physical projection of freedom. However, it is also important to note that Mseleku's quest for freedom occasionally manifested in more visible ways. Among other things, Mseleku challenged the notions of freedom in dressing the body, which he viewed as a form of imprisonment of the self (Nomvula Ndlazilwana, interview with Eugene Skeef, 29 September 2015).

### **Musical Responses in Exile**

With the help of Russell Herman as manager (Herman was a fellow South African exile and a talented guitarist and composer), Mseleku started his solo career (Fordham, 2008). This was achieved mainly through his breakthrough residency at the prestigious Ronnie Scott's jazz club, where he also met most of the UK-based musicians with whom he later worked, including Eddie Parker, Courtney Pine, Jean Toussaint and Steve Williamson (Lusk, 2008). Most of these musicians were already familiar with the early innovators of South African jazz in exile (the Blue Notes), and with American drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith and bassist Michael Bowie, and they formed the groups with which Mseleku developed his unique contribution to the musical discourse of exile (Fordham, 2008). It is not a stretch to say that Mseleku's melodic and modal harmonic style was influenced by his spiritual beliefs in Eastern philosophy and music, especially North Indian classical music (this is discussed at greater length in Chapters 3 and 4). Mseleku spent periods in spiritual retreat in the Shyama Ashram Radha Krishna Temple in London, where he learnt to play Hindu devotional music and became a sought-after harmonium and flute player (Guru Dass, 2017; personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 20 July 2017).

Indeed, Mseleku dedicated his debut album to his spiritual gurus, and we can infer that spiritualism was Mseleku's preferred mode to deal with disconnections of exile.

From an interview in *Wire Magazine*, we learn that Louis Moholo believed that The Blue Notes's adaptations of free music had to do with their history in South Africa under oppression (Moholo, 1991: 36). Moholo explains in this interview how they used the music as tool for exercising their freedom through stretching the conventions of "time and harmony" (Titlestad, 2004: 140). For instance, "Sonke" from the album *Bra Louis, Bra Tebs/Spirits Rejoice* (1995) by Blue Notes drummer Louis Moholo, is a good demonstration of this. The song is in IsiXhosa and it speaks about solidarity and unity as a tool to support a people through oppression, arrests and assaults whilst also utilizing shared laughter and communal song as a tool for healing. "Sonke" is a protest song; it employs spoken word, singing, free and collective improvisation over a bass ostinato to capture the mood of the people through the turmoil. Towards the end, the song is released into a slow swing with hard, straight quarter notes on Moholo's cymbal, perhaps implying the hoped for freedom. This section invites relief, an invitation strengthened harmonically by the walking bass that moves from intense tension (ostinato) to a release over a walking bassline. There is a strong connection between these musical gestures and Moholo's quest for freedom for his people:

Free music is *it man*, it's so beautiful. The word "free" makes sense to me. I know that's what I want; freedom, let my people go. *Let my people go!* And that's interlinking with politics, they embrace each other. It's a cry from the inside, no inhibitions... Louis Moholo (Moholo, 1991: 36).

With this in mind, I want to argue that Mseleku developed a very different response to pain during his exile years. Furthermore, I want to consider how his response manifested in his compositions throughout his career and I seek to outline the differences in the musical tools he used to those of the earlier exiles. In an interview

with Melvyn Bragg for the BBC's The South Bank Show in 1994, Mseleku stated that:

I get attracted to playing these kinds of changes... because of the flow. This has to do with trying to heal myself [and] to heal the vibration where I'm in rather than to distort things... Nature can seem very unorganized at sometimes producing earthquakes and winds (that) can disturb a lot of people... But I think another part of us lives in a realm that is not affected by any outward things that are happening so it's always still and peaceful. I try and tune in to this part hence I try sometimes to play things that move gentle and harmoniously (Bheki Mseleku in The South Bank Show, 1994).

This "gentle and harmonious" movement Mseleku refers to is evident in music where he often employs melodic themes that modulate smoothly and innocuously (rather than abruptly or dramatically) based on very clear harmonic progression and distinct, discrete structures. Good examples of this can be heard on songs such as: "Cycle" from the album *Celebration* (1991); "Timelessness" from *Timelessness* (1993); "Melancholy in Cologne" and "The Age of the Devine Mother" from *Star Seeding* (1995); "Violet Flame" and "Aja" on *Beauty of Sunrise* (1997); and "Mamelodi" from *Home at Last*.

All these compositions, and indeed many others by Mseleku, are based on systematic motifs that often move over II-V-I chord progressions that modulate in systematic ways by dividing the octave into equal parts through tritones, augmented axes, diminished axes, whole tones or chromatic movements. This writing also mirrors that of Mseleku's significant influence, John Coltrane's early explorations of the "Coltrane [multi-tonic] Changes" on *Giant Steps* in 1959. It is highly significant that Coltrane also linked his understanding of composition and improvisation to his spiritual beliefs (Nettl, Russell, 1998: 150-151).

In an interview, Mseleku has explained the implications of playing and writing in a manner where the music ends up where it started, a cyclical or ouroboros structure. He tells a story about not knowing where and how to stop within changes, as the last chord naturally takes you to the beginning without noticing. That Mseleku attaches a spiritual meaning to the cyclicity in his work is evident when he comments that he adopted this style of composing and improvising as a means to purify himself and the vibrations around him (Mseleku in *The South Bank Show*, 1994).

As was the case for many exiled artists, exile as an absence from home had both a positive and a negative impact in Mseleku's music and his life. Exile gave Mseleku the creative freedom he had always wanted, whilst also inflicting a lot of pain because of the disconnect with his family and friends in South Africa (Mseleku in *The South Bank Show*, 1994). This dichotomy was also evident with the earlier exiles. Exile has always presented a conflict between two worlds; the everyday world experienced by exiles versus the world of their home in their memory and imagination. As Louis Moholo said in an interview: "Your mind is in a country that you belong in and your body is in a country that you are in so there are these two things happening and it's tough to cope" (Bakari *The Blue Notes and Exiled Voices*, 1992: 00:01 to 00:10). Fellow exile Abdullah Ibrahim similarly reflected: "The hardest thing in exile was dreaming cause you would dream that you were at home... and waking up to the reality that you are not and you can't go back" (Abdullah Ibrahim in Hirsch, 2002). I suggest that the earlier exiles found concrete ways within their music to create the world they were missing ("home") compositionally, in language and through their modes of performance (see, for instance, Lucia, 2002). These home was South Africa, whereas for Mseleku it increasingly became a spiritual place without geographical coordinates.

Bringing these discrepancies between the reality of exile and a dream world or an imaginary of home closer to Mseleku, the latter describes the harshness of the apartheid era as that of a time responsible for cutting one's "umbilical chord", or that nourishing primal connection to the source (Matshikiza, 2002). It is therefore

displacement, disconnect with the people, their cultures and their music that constitute Mseleku's definition of exile, constituting the opposite of how one could define "home". This disconnect, and the metaphor used by Mseleku, is especially significant in the context of Zulu culture, as the umbilical chord is considered the material connection with a geographical location that is "home". It is perhaps owing to the incommensurability of the material connectedness with home and the condition of exile as being away from home, that Mseleku starts thinking of home increasingly as a "spiritual construct" rather than a geographic location. Thus, home becomes about one's connection with the people (Matshikiza in the liner notes of *Home At Last*, 2003). In an interview with *The Star* newspaper in 1999, Mseleku referred to himself as "a child of the universe", which could be considered a manifestation of his devotion to eastern religions (Ansell, 1999; Matshikiza in the liner notes of *Home At Last*, 2003). According to this logic, Mseleku in his later life viewed terms such as Zulu, musician, and other narrow identity constructs as problematic, "artificial", and insufficient terms.

Mseleku's philosophical ideas challenge us to rethink our ways of approaching the exile discourse by forcing us to consider the spiritual dimensions of what constitutes a home in a foreign place, as well as beyond the notion of a nation state. One way that the notion of home as a geographical consideration is suspended, is in the context of reincarnation. Steve Dyer, another South African exile, recalls Mseleku's questioning of the notion of home:

While I didn't know his spiritual beliefs, I know that his world and spiritual view was such an expansive one unlimited by national boundaries and borders. If people asked him about home he would ask what home is (personal communication with Steve Dyer, 11 March, 2017).

As Gwen Ansell observes elsewhere, in Mseleku's view, the notion of a home in terms of geographic considerations becomes an "incomplete" and "one dimensional" perception (Ansell, 1997).

Mseleku would, according to this logic, dismiss his cultural links to constructs such as “Zuluness”. Yet his use of ancient Nguni chants appears in all his records. Songs like “Celebration” (on *Celebration*), “Meditation Suite” (*Meditations*), “Vukani” (*Timelessness*), “Thula Mntwana” (*Star Seeding*) and “Suluman Saude” (*Beauty of Sunrise*) show that Mseleku’s early musical influences in KwaZulu Natal played a major role in the construction of his voice in exile through memory. Such nuances suggest a lasting connection to his upbringing in KwaZulu.

### **Home at Last**

In considering Mseleku’s record *Home at Last* (2003), I want to reflect upon Mseleku’s music in terms of this lasting connection with his country of birth, his people and their music. *Home at Last* marks a symbolic time in his career, an assumed end of his years in exile upon returning to a democratic South Africa post-1994, and reunion with his people and the music of his country of birth (Hatteau, 2004). Mseleku had previously recorded five albums outside South Africa during his years in exile, namely *Celebration* (1991), *Meditations* (1992), *Timelessness* (1993), *Star Seeding* (1995) and *Beauty of Sunrise* (1997). These records featured British flautist Eddie Parker, saxophonists Courtney Pine and later African American musicians such as saxophonist Pharaoh Sanders, singer Abbey Lincoln, drummer Elvin Jones, saxophonist Joe Henderson and others, but only one South African – Thebe Lipere. It is tempting to read Mseleku’s decision to record with local musicians upon his return to South Africa as an important “homing” gesture after his years abroad when he worked with the great masters and innovators of jazz.

Unlike Mseleku’s previous releases, *Home at Last* carries strong connections with his early musical influences in South Africa. Moreover, the record pays tribute to some of the innovators and contributors to the South Africa jazz aesthetic that developed in South Africa, exile and the diaspora (Washington, 2012: 108; Carr, 2004: 570). *Home at Last* gives us a glimpse of what might have been playing at the

backdrop of Mseleku's mind during his years in exile. The record demonstrates significant connections with musicians and audiences in South Africa.

Compositionally, *Home at Last* takes the listeners on a journey through South African developments of jazz, from the early *marabi* of the '20s (Ballantine, 2012: 8-9) to his later influences of R'n'B, "soulful hard-bop" in the '70s with bands such as Expressions, The Drive and Spirits Rejoice (Lusk, 2008). This album is deeply rooted in South African music traditions (Washington, 2012: 108; Carr, 2004: 570). In a composition like "Nants' Inkululeko" (a dedication to the release of Nelson Mandela from prison; Hatteau, 2017), Mseleku projects a nostalgic feeling that suggests a lasting connection with South African music even after more than a decade in exile. On "Sandile", a song dedicated to his friend and guitarist Sandile Shange, Mseleku goes from a slow '70s soul groove to an energetic *marabi* groove dominated by a *mbaqanga* guitar riff (Hatteau, 2017). Another tribute tune is "Monwabisi", dedicated to saxophonist Winston Mankunku, where Mseleku demonstrates the possibilities for a commonly used South African ed *kwela* I-IV-V progression to evolve by modulating his theme to different tonalities.

In a sense, *Home at Last* presents a kind of closure. *Home at Last* was to be Mseleku's last album before his passing, and also signals a return to his roots – thus completing a geographic cycle. *Home at Last* suggests a reconnection of the broken "umbilical cord", but Mseleku's return from exile in the '90s was not accompanied by the recognition that is commonly associated with musicians who were in exile under apartheid (Devroop and Walton, 2007: 22-23). His relative obscurity and lack of professional opportunities (Okapi, 2016; Memela, 2008) led to his disconnecting from his physical home once again, and heading back to London where he passed away in 2008. At the time of his death, Mseleku was working on an album (unreleased), evocatively titled *Beyond the Stars*, as if in a gesture of transcending the material world. Nevertheless, the unreleased album has a track called "eKhaya", which signals that even in the world beyond this material one, he was still looking for the home of his youth.

## Chapter 3

### Spirituality in Bheki Mseleku's Music

*Music should be just experienced every time, all the day[s] of your life. It should also [be] a spiritual thing, a ritual.*

Bheki Mseleku (The South Bank Show, 1994)

#### Introduction

In this chapter I explore various notions of spirituality at work in Bheki Mseleku's life and music. Drawing on interviews, personal correspondence, published articles, documentaries and Mseleku's musical output, I am especially interested in Mseleku's own remarks concerning music and spirituality, ultimately to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of his music and performance process. My approach in this chapter stems in the first instance from the way in which Mseleku embeds both his music and his worldview or life philosophy in an acute awareness of spirituality:

I live my life by being more aware of the spiritual world; I am attracted for instance to the spiritual masters; the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of Buddha, the teachings of Krishna, the teachings of Guru Nanak, the prophet Mohammed [and] of all different religions. (Bheki Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994).

References to spirituality and mysticism abound in Mseleku's musical aesthetic, as is evident in album titles like *Meditations* and *Timelessness* as well as track titles like "The age of the divine mother", "The age of the inner knowing" and "Looking within", to name a few); but also in his discourse about music, for instance in liner notes or interviews. Before his contract with Verve, Mseleku recorded on the label

Samadhi, a Buddhist and Hindu term that refers to the state of consciousness induced by complete meditation (Jazzwise, 2007).

A study of Mseleku's life and music cannot sidestep the theme of spirituality, which is inextricably part of Mseleku's construction of his musical practice and the narratives surrounding his life and music. The persistent foregrounding of spirituality, however, poses difficulties for academic writing which, on the whole, suffers from the generic constraints of (Western) conventions and their demand for reason and science. The historic role that spirituality played as a counter-discourse to Western ideals such as rationality and Christianity, especially in jazz practice and in black resistance discourses (Civil Rights and Black Consciousness movements), offers one way of understanding Mseleku's ideas. The ways that Mseleku's spiritual ideas play at the edge and often transgress the boundaries of accepted academic conventions – in other words, the moments of academic unease in this text – perform this understanding of spirituality as a counter-discourse. This chapter therefore deliberately does not shy away from these tensions.

Perhaps this interpretation of spirituality as resistance is not the only way to view Mseleku's spirituality. Marcel Cobussen's understanding of the interplay between music and spirituality may also provide a helpful frame of reference for what follows. For Cobussen, "music is able to instigate a rethinking of spirituality", whilst the resultant reimagining of spirituality "opens up new possibilities to encounter music" (2008: 26). "Dwelling in this space that is both created by and allowing of reflection", he continues, "becomes simultaneously the act of transforming it, adding on, replacing, altering, transgressing the already existing limits" (Cobussen 2008: 26).

In what follows, I discuss modalities of spirituality in Mseleku's music and worldview as avenues for "transforming..., adding on, replacing, altering, transgressing the already existing limits". In the following two sections, I will focus on three such modalities, namely Christianity, African philosophies and Eastern

mysticism, which display and oscillate between both these interpretations. I then discuss how Mseleku's spirituality informs his musical development and aesthetic.

### **South Africa: Between Christianity and Indigenous Practices**

Christianity in South Africa has a long history that is intimately linked (as elsewhere) with colonialism. It is important to note that, since the arrival of the Dutch settlers in South Africa in 1652, Christianity increasingly became the administered religion. The constant flow of missionaries from Britain and elsewhere, and their tireless efforts to translate the Bible into local dialects and languages, further popularized and perpetuated the spread of Christianity (Elphick and Davenport, 1997:118). As a result, Christianity is still a dominant religion in South Africa (Erasmus, 2012:45).

This predominance of Christianity is even more evident amongst individuals who demonstrated an interest in learning to play musical instruments. As missionaries introduced Western classical musical instruments, they also introduced the skills to read and write this music (Ansell, 2005: 9). By the 1950s, missionary establishments still played a big role in music education among black South Africans. Father Trevor Huddleston, the head of the Anglican St. Peters College, initiated the jazz band that became the training ground for prominent South African musicians such as Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa and others who later worked with Mseleku (Masekela and Cheers, 2004: 63-5; Ansell, 2005: 96 and 213).

Mseleku's family attended St. James Roman Catholic Church in Lamontville, where his father William Mseleku was choir conductor and composer. His older brother, Langa Mseleku, later became a conductor and organist in the same congregation (personal communication with Langa Mseleku, 20 August, 2017). As much as many families were Christian, this was not to the exclusion of African spiritual practices, as noted by Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport who wrote "But alongside the [holy] Spirit, some churches also recognize 'the spirits' – ancestral beings who

appear in dreams to convey messages to the living” (1997: 222). Alluding to this hybridism in South African religions, Langa Mseleku also confirmed in a conversation with me that the Mseleku family maintained links with African spiritual practices.

In keeping with African views of music as bound up with the spiritual domain and healing practices, Mseleku viewed himself as a medium through which healing might be channelled (The South Bank Show, 1994). Although partly indebted to Eastern philosophies (as we will see in the next section), this kind of thinking bears a strong resemblance to African modes of healing or *ubungoma*. Typically practiced by traditional healers in Southern Africa, *ubungoma* is believed to be the link between the seen and the unseen, the unseen being the realm of the ancestors. *Isangoma* is a medium, someone who is chosen by ancestors and entrusted with the gift of healing and divination (Ogana and Ojong, 2015). Although never undergoing the conventional initiation process of *ukwethwasa* (as discussed in detail in Peek 1991: 27), Mseleku’s conviction that he was to act as a medium bears the hallmarks of *ubungoma*. Describing the process of conceiving “Umgoma”, a song Mseleku claims to have received from a dream, he relates the process of *ubungoma* through music:

I also see myself a medium but using sounds, using music and I try to be more conscious of this working towards purifying the tube which this energy runs through (The South Bank Show, 1994).

Before Mseleku, there were other artists similarly committed to these practices in their music, notably guitarist Philip Tabane (Galane, 2010: 6-11). As the reader will recall, Mseleku played in Philip Tabane’s group Malombo early in his music career when he was still in Johannesburg. At a time when many South African jazz musicians went into exile abroad, Philip Tabane remained in South Africa and developed a distinct jazz sound that drew deeply on endogenous music practices. He also viewed his music practice in these holistic spiritual terms. Tabane’s use of the

*malombo* drum (and its invocation in the name of his band), is significant since the *malombo* invokes the ancestors in Venda music and spiritual practices.

### **The South African-American connection**

Like John Coltrane, Mseleku embraced a universal consciousness that encompassed all religions. Perhaps through these parallels one can argue that similar to the American Civil Rights discourses in the 1960s, embracing different forms of spirituality functioned as a counter-hegemonic strategy in Mseleku's artistic work and within a broader context of the black South African community. In her essay "Appropriating Universality: The Coltranes and 1960s Spirituality", Franya Berkman remarks that the shift by jazz musicians to spirituality was a significant contribution in the creation of a new jazz aesthetic, suggesting that it is therefore limiting to view the music of this period entirely within political frameworks (Berkman, 2007: 41).

Mseleku's preoccupation with spirituality has its precursor in a generation of jazz musicians who were prominent during the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. This period coincided with a transformation in the articulations and the aesthetics of experimental jazz, one that was marked by a quest for spiritualism (Pitchfork, 2015; Berkman, 2007: 41-62). It is also interesting that when saxophonist Joe Henderson first encountered Mseleku's music during the recording of *Timelessness*, he located Mseleku's music within this period in jazz: "It's like he should have been part of the '60s in America... I feel a very strong kinship with him" (Bheki Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994).

In the 1960s in America, Black political leaders, artists and musicians experimented with different modalities of spirituality: the distinctly Christian ethos of Martin Luther King Jr and the practice of non-violent protests (History.com Staff 2009) but also Islam, Eastern, African, Swahili and Arabic traditions (Pitchfork, 2015; Berkman, 2007: 41).

It is important to stress that this turn towards religion and spirituality occurred in the name of freedom, a freedom that refused to conform to the social and religious norms imposed by the governing classes. One of the landmark albums that led the way in this regard is John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. Released in 1965, the album features McCoy Tyner (piano), Elvin Jones (drums), and Jimmy Garrison (bass) (*The NPR 100*, 2012). *A Love Supreme* is entrenched in devotion, religion and spirituality: "*A Love Supreme* has even spawned something of a religious sect." (Westervelt, 2012). A notable group of musicians followed Coltrane's lead, amongst them the pianist McCoy Tyner, pianist and harpist Alice Coltrane, saxophonist Pharaoh Sanders, saxophonist Archie Shepp, and saxophonist Albert Ayler, all of whom at one time or another played in Coltrane's band (COS 2016; Red Bull Music Academy Daily, 2016).

Most musicians in the 1960s were becoming more explicit about their quest for spirituality. As examined by Berkman, the Eastern approaches to spiritual enlightenment became evident in their interviews, song titles and liner notes. Moreover, these artists were also practicing Yoga, Hinduism, Buddhism, Ahmadiya Islam and Bahá'í. This influenced their compositional styles and sometimes instrumentations (Berkman, 2007: 41).

### **Eastern philosophies**

Mseleku's engagement with Eastern notions of spirituality became more evident during his years in exile in the 1980s. Although Mseleku embraced diverse modalities of spirituality (The South Bank Show, 1994; Bheki Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994), he was especially inclined towards Eastern philosophies or ways of doing (Fordham, 2008). Amongst these, Buddhism deserves special mention. Taken broadly, Buddhism is concerned with spiritual awakening through meditation and with detachment from the material world (Pande, 1995). For Mseleku, the Buddhist temple became an important space of retreat and reflection, both during his time in

exile in the 1980s and upon his return to South Africa after 1994. As John Fordham wrote in an obituary shortly after Mseleku's death in 2008:

[T]ypically, the fragile Mseleku backed away ... retiring for two years of occasional teaching and contemplation in a Buddhist temple, with no phone, and no piano. He was to tell me at that time: "I feel if I evolve spiritually, the music will have more depth. Maybe even from one note, like Pharoah [Sanders] does" (Fordham 2008).

Whilst in exile, Mseleku would occasionally set aside routine comforts and material possessions, retreating from the music scene to spend time at the Shyama Ashram Radha Krishna Temple on Balham High Road in London. This incidence in Mseleku's life resembles that of Alice Coltrane in 1976 when she renounced the world and devoted herself to the Hindu traditions where she participated in learning Vedanta philosophy and played devotional music until her death in 2007 (Berkman, 2007: 43). It was during this time in Mseleku's life that he received a devotional name, Kishoridas (or Kishori for short), given to him by his guru, Mataji Shyama. When she left the temple, Mataji Shyama assigned her first disciple, Guru Dass, to care for Mseleku (personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Unlike musicians such as Abdullah Ibrahim, Yusef Lateef and Art Blakey, (Curtis 2010: 308) Mseleku did not change his name to signal a religious and personal shift, but rather retained Kishoridas as a devotional name.

Partly in response to frustrations he experienced in the music industry, Mseleku's habit to retreat for extended periods attests to an enduring commitment to a spiritual life in tandem with a process of self-purification (Eugene Skeef, personal communication, 27 July 2017; Fordham, 2008), as well as a keen awareness of the implications, challenges and responsibilities

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<sup>2</sup> Guru Dass is identified as Mataji Shyama's first disciple in the acknowledgments Mseleku wrote for *Timelessness* (1994) and *Star Seeding* (1995).

that stemmed from his approach to music and improvisation (The South Bank Show, 1994). Mseleku believed that an overt purification of the self was integral to the process of becoming a “medium” that could channel healing (The South Bank Show, 1994):

...From a spiritual point of view, I still need to let go more and open myself, purify myself more for let [sic] the complete Holy Spirit to come through and work through me... (Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994).

Cobussen’s idea (cited in my chapter introduction) that spirituality “opens up new possibilities to encounter music”, holds true also for Mseleku. Thus, retreats to the Shyama Ashram Krishna Temple became occasions for learning and ultimately mastering Indian ragas on multiple instruments, namely saxophone, harmonium and flute. Before the recording of *Star Seeding* (1995), few of Mseleku’s musician colleagues knew about his considerable abilities on instruments other than the piano, since professionally, Mseleku regarded himself as a pianist (Guru Dass, 2017; The South Bank Show, 1994). Guru Dass was responsible for introducing Mseleku to *yogananda* teachings/modes of meditation (this form of meditation is based on the teachings of Parhamhansa Yogananda, which are based on self-realization among other things; Yogananda, 1946), and later also to *swaminarayan* mantras (a key mantra within the swaminarayan faith believed to relieve devotees’ karma bondages; Guru Dass, 2017). The idea of a mantra – a repeated phrase capturing a spiritual idea – features prominently on Mseleku’s *Meditations* album of 1992, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4 (Fordham, 1993).

In an interview with Eugene Skeef, Guru Dass shared his recollections of Mseleku’s talents and involvements in the Temple (Mseleku played flute, saxophone and harmonium during meditation in the Temple):

He was a man who had multiple talents, he was very attractive, [and] he was very good looking... He was like a Krishna playing flute... (Guru Dass personal communication, 2017).

Others, such as trumpeter Hugh Masekela, saxophonist Courtney Pine and drummer Marvin “Smitty” Smith, have remarked on the importance Mseleku accorded spirituality (The South Bank Show, 1994; Marvin “Smitty” Smith interview with Eugene Skeef, 2016). As Masekela commented: “He is very sincere and committed to his spiritual beliefs. ... It helps him. I don’t say he leans on it, but I say that some of [Mseleku’s] magic ... comes from [it]” (The South Bank Show, 1994).

Although Masekela attributed Mseleku’s “magic” in part to his spirituality, Mseleku himself was aware of both the necessity and limitations of excellent technical ability. That Mseleku possessed exceptional pianistic abilities cannot be denied. What is intriguing, however, is how he would always stress the importance of spirituality as something independent of technique, although he was attentive to the ways in which excellent instrumental technique could be pressed into the service of spirituality:

...There are people who are maybe touched by the spiritual side of the music, which has nothing to do much with technique though technique can help...  
(Bheki Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994)

Furthermore, Mseleku draws attention to the importance of capturing through music lived experience, beyond the confines of the purely technical. It is almost as if Mseleku was in a constant trance — not unlike what one would encounter in shamanism — allowing him to transcend the merely physical (discussed at length in Lewis, 2003: 25-51):

Technique is something but experience is something else. Some people have a good technique but they don’t have a story to tell because they haven’t lived deeply (Bheki Mseleku quoted in Willgress, 1994: 30).

It is perhaps this part of Mseleku, the story he had to tell and the place from which he was able to tell that story, which lends his music its appeal (Willgress, 1994: 30).

### **Intersections between Mseleku's musical development and spiritual notions of transmission**

I now want to turn to Mseleku's musical development, specifically in relation to the learning of different instruments, and how this pedagogy informed – and was informed by – different modalities of spirituality. It is interesting that, unlike most of his colleagues, Mseleku never received any formal music education, let alone private lessons with mentors or teachers. Typically, he spoke about his proficiency on multiple instruments without any conventional sense of training and technical challenges:

When I started playing, I discovered that I could play effortlessly. I must have had a lot of music when I was young... (Bheki Mseleku, The South Bank Show, 1994).

In Mseleku's account, his musical development transpired through a series of realizations, or what he referred to as memories from past lives. Implicit in this last phrase is Mseleku's assumption that this was not his first life, signaling his belief in reincarnation and a previous incarnation in which he may have been a musician in a former life or lives (Ansell, 1999; Fordam, 2008).

...I use a lot of theories, my own theories. What I'm saying is that it's natural for me... That knowledge comes from my past life. So there is nothing new I can bring to anyone else, because there is nothing old. Life never started, life always was (Bheki Mseleku in Sinker, 1987).

The idea of an afterlife is often mentioned in various texts in Eastern religions with reference to enlightened beings who undergo voluntary rebirth as a result of their

compassion for the enlightenment of fellow beings (Chitkara 1998: 1). In a different context, a similar idea can be distinguished in African modalities of spirituality, namely in a form of *idlozi* ancestral spirit (Bryant 1995: 140). Having myself grown up in semi-rural KwaZulu Natal, I encountered similar notions amongst *maskanda* players who, like Mseleku, were skilled instrumentalists without any formal training. These musicians would often claim that their skills were transmitted, or given them, by ancestors, in a dream, or during a ritual which often involved them spending time by the river or in a particular cemetery. Even amongst a younger generation of musicians, there is the idea that Mseleku's capabilities on numerous instruments were somehow linked to his sense of deep spirituality. Pianist Moses Molelekwa, himself an admirer of Mseleku's music, had this to say on the subject:

Spiritually he is at a very high level to learn all those instruments and master them in this life. It tells me he has been here before, maybe two three times before (Molelekwa, 1999-2000).

Or as the Stephen Graham notes elsewhere:

There is a zen-like sense of repose with Bheki Mseleku. It's not just his piano playing, or when he manages, quite extraordinarily, somehow to play a saxophone and accompany himself on the piano at the same time; it's his persona, the Zulu in his soul, the meditative aura that is central to everything he stands for. (Graham, 2007)

### **Situating spirituality in Mseleku's music**

Mseleku's music, compositional style, album texts and liner notes all bear testimony to the different modalities of spirituality discussed in this chapter. A spiritual symbolism is significantly present in his choice of song titles, harmonies, chord progressions and melodies; a symbolism derived from his conviction that music brings forth a certain vibration capable of spawning harmony or dissonance (The South Bank Show, 1994).

I get attracted to play[ing] these kind[s] of changes... going from... the key where I started until I've played [all] 12 keys... Because of the flow... This has to do with trying to heal myself and to heal the vibration where I'm in rather than maybe distorting things... (Bheki Mseleku, The South Bank Show, 1994).

Most of Mseleku's compositions were built from cyclic structures that modulate in a systematic way through all twelve keys before the cycle repeats itself. This compositional technique became more ubiquitous ever since John Coltrane explored Nicolas Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* in pieces such as "Giant Steps" and "Count Down" (Demsey, 1991). Mseleku's preference for cyclic forms ties in with his belief that all life is realised according to a similar pattern, namely reincarnation, which is itself a cyclic progression (The South Bank Show, 1994; Ansell, 1999). I want to suggest that the conclusions Mseleku reached on these matters stemmed also from an enduring interest in cosmogony and Pythagorean studies (Ansell, 1999), all of which are concerned with the origins, cyclic and geometrical nature of existence (Baldry, 1932). Such abstract thinking in jazz has always existed through musicians like Sun Ra. Ra was an African American keyboard player who became popular for fusing Afrocentric and futuristic thinking. He had an interest in Egyptology, numerology, astrology, interplanetary travels and, similar to Mseleku, Ra believed he carried messages from past lives (Rollefson, 2008).

From a musical point of view the compositional technique was borrowed and inspired by John Coltrane's "Coltrane Changes", first recorded on "Giant Steps", one of Coltrane's most popular songs (Porter, 1985). According to Mseleku, this kind of writing was aimed at projecting a positive vibration to consciousness, his surroundings and as a way of healing himself (The South Bank Show, 1994):

Whenever I can get the time, to go within [myself] and feel a sense of purity, peace and security, I try to convey this to my music... The major intension is that of simplicity but it doesn't mean something that is advanced... a tune like "Giant Steps"... is not simple, it is simple because he [John Coltrane] was thinking the same way that I'm thinking about love... It's a mystical thing (Bheki Mseleku, *The South Bank Show*, 1994).

Mseleku's spiritual connections are especially embodied in song titles, often intended as tributes to life, spiritual gurus or musicians. From his debut, *Celebration*, he used titles such as "The Age of The Inner Knowing", "Supreme Love", and "Closer to the Source". His spirituality is equally witnessed in album liner notes. Printed on his *Star Seeding* album is a dedication: "This album is dedicated to the divine mother." In the liner notes, we find a striking example of the eclectic and multi-layered ethos of Mseleku's spirituality, all embedded in a belief in the oneness of life:

Thanks to Billy Higgins, Charlie Haden and their families, to all the Polygram staff, to Jean Philippe and Francois Zalacain. Thanks to all my friends and to all my family. Special thanks to The Supreme Spirit, The great Beloved Father, Mother, God and all the Masters of spiritual enlightenment; Mataji Shyama, Muktananda Baba, Paramahansa Yogananda and the great avatars; Sri Lord Krishna, Beloved Jesus Christ, Beloved Gautama Buddha, Beloved Prophet Mohamed, Meera-Ma, Sai Baba, Nitya Nanda, and to archangel Michael The Divine Protector (*Star Seeding*, 1995).

Another instance that makes explicit Mseleku's spirituality is his 1992 solo recording, *Meditations*. As examined by Berkman, the embrace of Eastern philosophies gave birth to novel nuances in the jazz music of 1960s America (2007: 44). The same could be said about Mseleku's transition to *Meditations* (1992), where his compositions carry a strong intension and intensity similar to those of Indian ragas (Fordam, 1993). Similar descriptions (borrowing vocabularies from Eastern

traditions) within jazz emerged in the 1960s in America, further outlining these commonalities in the music:

Coltrane was clearly getting at music using this vehicle of composition...a modal approach to playing in which he transformed from not focusing on playing jazz chord changes, but rather on delivering a single emotion, similar to a purpose of a raga (Rez Abbasi, Demsey, 1991: 171-172).

### **Concluding thoughts**

Mseleku held firm to a belief in the universal oneness of things, a belief that drew on Eastern philosophy and ancient African philosophy alike. We witness the manifestation of such teaching in how Mseleku viewed life, navigated and shared performance space with his various ensembles but also how he shared himself with communities he lived in (Fordham, 1992):

I'm completely open and I am for the union of all religions and also the union of all the people on earth because I feel like that, I think that I attract the universal consciousness so that if I'm playing something will come through and attract the people who are inspiring, who want the world to think this way (Bheki Mseleku: Talkin Jazz, 1994).

It is quite evident that Mseleku's music and thoughts were connected to even a greater quest of creating harmony in the universe: "...We are all part of one being... Because that alone will lead us to Godhead" (Mseleku in Sinker, 1987: 30)

Though Mseleku never imposed his spiritual beliefs on fellow band members, the connections between his music, life and spirituality, as this chapter has shown, are important. Someone like Courtney Pine, who played with Mseleku during his London years, has remarked on Mseleku's connectedness to the music that always brought a sense of hope, a spirit of positivity and a feeling of transcendence. In this

way Mseleku's spiritualism touched the musicians he played with (The South Bank Show, 1994). Even though some of these musicians, like the drummer Marvin "Smitty" Smith, didn't necessarily share Mseleku's beliefs, they remained alert to this transcendental energy in the music (Smith interview with Eugene Skeef 2016).

It is highly significant that, besides channelling positive vibrations to the universe in his understanding of music and music making, Mseleku's music became a platform for personal transcendence. As someone who struggled with fragile mental health, Mseleku needed – and found in his music and spirituality – therapy and healing. When understood together with the way in which his notions of "home" developed in exile to encompass the transcendent universal (as outlined in Chapter 2), spirituality and "home" emerge as entangled concepts. Mseleku is in many respects a troubling presence for a politicized South African jazz discourse of exile and struggle. Not because he did not struggle, and not because his exile was not painful and real. But Mseleku's musicianship was not easily assimilable to political resistance, and his ideas and psychologically and spiritually infused music did not (and still do not) lend itself to the kind of reductionist narrative that sees music as a utilitarian offshoot of politics. In a sense Mseleku's great gift to the post-apartheid consciousness of history is that it presents a music of resistance and struggle and exile and enlightenment that is open-ended, and allows the listener to embark on discoveries that predate the loss of innocence that made these things political choices.

## Chapter 4

### Meditations

Bheki Mseleku's 1992 album, *Meditations* (Samadhi Music Production) captures the spectrum of Mseleku's key musical influences from his childhood in the 1950s to exile in the '80s. In the album's liner notes, jazz critic John Fordham lists some of these influences:

Though he is a gifted and generous ensemble player, his unaccompanied performances [...] embrace township music, church music, the simplicity of eastern meditative chants and the hustle of American jazz [...] they most vividly reveal the depths and rich colours of his art (*Meditations* liner notes, from an article first published in *The Guardian*, March 1993).

In this chapter, I trace these and other influences discernible in Mseleku's album *Meditations*. In particular, this chapter's analysis of *Meditations* reflects on two of the seminal impulses that shaped Mseleku's music practice and have been discussed in this thesis. On the one hand, it presents a sonic demonstration of how references to South African music practices pervade his music, a reference of home significant in the context of exile. On the other hand, Mseleku's search for spiritual awakening is evident in the notion of meditation invoked in the title itself and in the structure of the track "Meera-Ma".

This chapter's analysis outlines the broader structure of the album, but also highlights particular moments where these particular approaches or influences may be discerned. It does so through a consideration of the instrumentation, compositional and improvisational styles, and the spiritual symbolism apparent on this album. It is not an exhaustive or complete analysis of all aspects, but rather one that enables me to show the musical shaping of the forces the previous chapters introduced.

I come to this analysis not only as a jazz pianist who is deeply influenced by, and familiar with, the musicians who Mseleku listened to and admired (e.g. McCoy Tyner, Keith Jarrett, Alice Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, Frédéric Chopin), but also as a *sangoma* who is immersed in traditional music practices in South Africa, notably Zulu music practices. This informs my sonic frame of reference as a listener, and enables me to recognize the techniques and influences I identify in Mseleku's music.

### **Situating *Meditations* in terms of Mseleku's biography, exile and spirituality**

*Meditations* was recorded during an interesting period in Mseleku's life: more than a decade after he left South Africa, and two years before his return in 1994. Although it was his first solo album, solo playing was a familiar performance medium since his residency at Ronnie Scott's in London in 1987 in their upstairs venue. These early performances were already noted for their "meditativeness" and Mseleku's simultaneous performance on multiple instruments (Fordham, 2008).

*Meditations* was recorded during a live performance at the Bath International Music Festival in England on 4 June 1992, shortly after the release of Mseleku's critically acclaimed debut album *Celebration* (1992, released 21 April 1992). The Bath Festival recording was not intended to be released as an album. Skeef recalls that it was during an informal listening session of the concert recording, late one evening at his home, that the idea to release the recording as an album took shape.

To me, it is very interesting that *Meditations* is a live recording and Mseleku was able to move deeply inward without being distracted by the presence of an audience and the nature of a festival atmosphere. As a solo performer myself, I appreciate how completely exposed one is in a solo performance, and how deeply one needs to draw within oneself to achieve the focus needed for a solo improvised performance in front of an audience. Keith Jarrett uses the word "vulnerability" when he

describes his live solo performances, and further explains: “It’s like my ego isn’t strong enough to protect me at those moments. Sometimes I feel as if I’m putting my finger on an electric line and leaving it there” (Jarrett in Gilmore, 1979). Eugene Skeef, a close friend of Mseleku, recalls that Mseleku had been “meditating and playing throughout the night [...] before Russell Herman drove him to Bath International Festival where his solo concert was recorded became the album *Meditations*” (personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 14 October 2017).

By 1992, Mseleku was already in the habit of occasionally leaving the music scene to spend time in intense “meditations” at the Shyama Ashram Krishna temple in London (Guru Dass interviewed by Eugene Skeef, 30 July 2017). I propose that in *Meditations*, Mseleku seeks to create a metaphorical temple within himself and his music (Fordham, 1993). Mseleku ascribed the significance of meditation for his music practice by saying that “I feel if I evolve spiritually, the music will have more depth. Maybe even from one note, like Pharoah [Sanders] does” (The South Bank Show, 1994). One way Mseleku invoked spiritual practices in his performance spaces was through the burning of incense. While the burning of incense perhaps most readily evokes Eastern spiritual practices, it is also a significant part of Zulu spiritual practices. Mseleku’s early life in KwaZulu Natal exposed him to various cultural practices of the amaZulu, and Mseleku’s burning of incense during jazz performances also has a resonance with the Zulu practice of burning *impepho* (a type of incense) at *emsamu* (a sacred place), specifically to invite the ancestors to a particular ritual (Zondi and Ntshangase, 2013: 219). Mseleku, I suggest, sought to create this spiritual space in each performance.

*Meditations* consists of two tracks. The album opens with the track called “Meditation Suite” (32 minutes duration) followed by the track called “Meera-Ma (Divine Mother)” (14 minutes). “Meditation Suite” is the track that perhaps affords the broadest display of Mseleku’s musical influences, among them, quotes from earlier albums (“Closer to the Source” and “Angola” on *Celebration*), South African endogenous music practices (to use Ballantine’s word), and spontaneous Keith

Jarrett-like improvisations. “Meera-Ma” leans more towards Eastern and African outlooks of meditative music in that it incorporates modal systems, the repetition of a short cycle and mantra-like incantations. Interestingly, the running order of songs on the final release of *Meditations* was not the order of performance in Mseleku’s concert, but rather a production decision proposed by Russell Herman (personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 14 October 2017). What sets this record apart from Mseleku’s other albums is that *Meditations* uses extended forms and elements of spontaneous improvisation, whereas his other albums feature pre-composed material. Stylistically, too, Mseleku travels along a different axis. As one review puts it, *Meditations* presents “an eclectic journey through musical idioms” (“Picks and Pans Review: Meditations”, 1995).

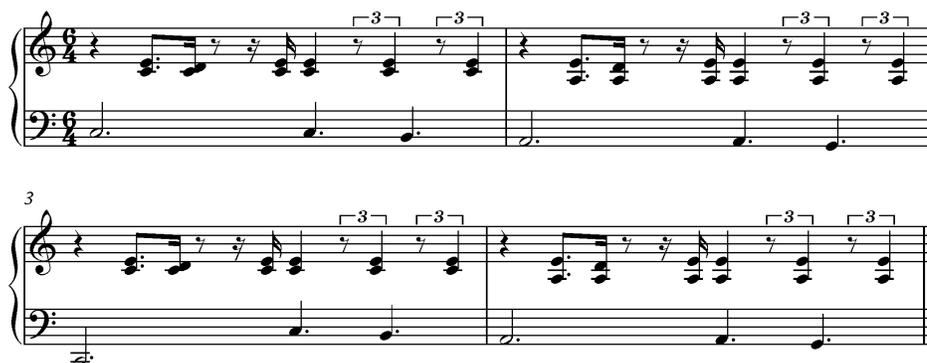
### **“Meditation Suite”**

The track “Meditation Suite” progresses seamlessly through a series of movements that accentuate Mseleku’s broad piano vocabulary and display a variety of his musical influences. It is not by chance that Mseleku calls this piece a suite: the track goes through several sections with their own tonality, groove and thematic material. These sections are performed without a break and are connected through transitions. In the following analysis, I discuss the influences that populate “Meditation Suite” and point out how they relate to Mseleku’s spiritual and cultural background.

The first movement (00:00 and 08:19) starts with a piano groove in 6/4 metre, oscillating between C major and A minor (see Figure 1). Mseleku introduces the melodic theme over this groove, based on the C pentatonic scale, played in the right hand and doubled by his voice. The melodic line is harmonized in fourths and fifths that are commonly used in South African traditional music, a harmonization practice that ethnomusicologist Simha Arom terms “parallelism” (Arom 1991; 37). Mseleku’s high-pitched voice is a familiar feature within vocal chanting in traditional Zulu music. (Busi Mhlongo, with whom Mseleku also worked, uses a similar vocal timbre in her music.) This forms the central motif to which Mseleku

returns in this movement after short diversions through other material. The compound metre feel is reminiscent of the music of the Nguni people of South Africa (Rycroft 1967). Moreover, this movement is grounded in a distinctive triplet motion that draws on the Zulu *indlamu* or *izangoma* drumming and Bapedi of Southern Africa.<sup>3</sup> In Mseleku’s piano groove, I also hear musical traces of the BaSotho and Zulu accordion music of the 1900s, later popularized in the 70s in South Africa (“Accordion Jive Special – Vol. 1”, *Electric Jive*, 2015).<sup>4</sup>

Figure 1: “Meditation Suite” piano groove which forms the core of the first movement. Transcription by the author.



At 01:39 Mseleku introduces a bridge section venturing to tonally more distant harmonies than the first section’s C major tonality, including A $\flat$ , B $\flat$  and E $\flat$ . These two sections form the basis of the first movement. Mseleku returns to the first section, with cyclical material oscillating between C major and A minor, at 02:05 where he introduces a slight melodic variation.

It is not only South African musical influences that are audible in the first movement. Mseleku’s use of a more percussive attack and the pentatonic scale in his

<sup>3</sup> Compare with the Zulu *indlamu*, for instance “Jabulani Hostel Zulu Dancers”, *YouTube*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PY0OXlh6pS0>, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPL8nIOe8gE&list=PLYfMV\\_R5GQdJ6Y-eY2HhDIYW5UKX3W9\\_5](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XPL8nIOe8gE&list=PLYfMV_R5GQdJ6Y-eY2HhDIYW5UKX3W9_5), accessed 27 October 2017.

<sup>4</sup> See “Dinaka Txa Mashobohlang”, *Youtube*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvzzHOZZFxY&list=PLnOSH5j1sQh8ocGXE-ikLbjehsQfgptqf>, accessed 27 October 2017.

improvisation at 03:15 is reminiscent of McCoy Tyner. McCoy Tyner embraced modal structures and pentatonic scales derived from Eastern musical ideas. Here, Mseleku bases his improvisation on an E $\flat$  pentatonic scale using straight sixteenth notes over a whole tone chord movement from A $\flat$ , B $\flat$  to C (NPR, 3 November 2017).

Figure 2: “Meditation Suite”, example of the McCoy Tyner influence in Mseleku’s improvisation, in his use of pentatonic scales. Transcription by the author.



Mseleku plays around with more subtle nuances of South African musical styles when the main theme returns. When he recapitulates the vocal chant at 04:39 to 04:59, the melodic phrase leans more towards “maskandi”, a Zulu folk music popularized by Phuzushukela in the ’60s. Mseleku soon changes to a different melodic rhythm that suggests the rhythms of the Bapedi people of the Northern Sotho by implying a double time feel (05:00-05:18). These musical influences are also used by pianist Moses Molelekwa, for instance in the song “Rapela” on his record *Genes and Spirits* (2000). At 05:44 Mseleku reintroduces the original theme with a call and response between the voice and the piano.

As a whole, the first movement is a “quote” of the track titled “Closer to the Source” from Mseleku’s debut album, *Celebration*. The *Celebration* version has a different instrumentation, featuring UK musicians Courtney Pine (soprano sax) and Eddie Parker (flutes) with fellow exile Thebe Lipere on percussion and Mseleku himself on piano. This self-quotation helps locate Mseleku’s thoughts through the title, and thus connects further with the idea of “meditations” as a tool to bring us closer to where we come from and thus to a sense of completeness.

At 08:43, Mseleku starts transitioning to the next movement through a reflective section with Chopin-like flourishes in the right hand. The second movement (09:52 – 15:14) displays both influences of western classical music and jazz, as well as techniques drawn from other instruments. This movement consists of a short, modulating theme which is Baroque-like in its chordal structure and voice leading (see Figure 2). The movement does not have one tonal center, but rather moves cyclically through different keys. Incidentally, the chord progression Mseleku uses here – and the way it modulates through the twelve keys – is the same as in the track “Angola” on his album *Celebration* (1991).

Figure 3: “Meditation Suite”, the modulating theme on which the second movement is based. At each cadence, the tonic becomes the subdominant of the next phrase. Transcription by the author.

The musical score for "Meditation Suite" is presented in two systems. Each system consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The first system begins in C minor (C min:) and features a bass line with chords labeled  $i^6_4$ ,  $v$ , and  $i$ . The second system starts at measure 5 in G minor (G min:) and features a bass line with chords labeled  $iv$ ,  $i^6_4$ ,  $V$ , and  $i$  etc. The right hand part of the score shows a melodic line with various rhythmic patterns and articulations.

The movement’s structure is akin to that of a western classical chaconne, where the modulating harmonic progression forms an ostinato over which the right hand improvises different inventions or “variations”. These “variations” include the use of syncopated chords harmonizing the bassline, melodic embellishment, arpeggiations outlining the harmony, the use of licks, and different rhythmic punctuation and changes in feel (for instance, at 11:22 Mseleku introduces a medium swing 2/4 feel).

A particularly remarkable variation is one (at 10:31 – 11:05 and again at 14:09 – 14:22), that draws on saxophone techniques. Mseleku starts his improvisation with an extended, uninterrupted phrase of sixteenth notes played at high speed in a single

phrase of nearly thirty seconds. It recalls the extended phrases showcased by saxophonists (like John Coltrane, Roland Kirk, and later David Murray among others)<sup>5</sup> made possible through circular breathing – thus producing a virtuosic display. While this is not something that is technically impossible for pianists, it is nevertheless an unusual technique in jazz piano improvisation that requires technical stamina.

Figure 4: “Meditation Suite” extended phrase drawing on saxophone circular breathing techniques. Transcription by the author.

The image displays a musical score for an extended phrase, likely for saxophone, consisting of nine staves of music. The notation is in treble clef and includes various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. The score is heavily annotated with circular breathing techniques, indicated by numbers 3, 6, and 3 above or below groups of notes, often with horizontal lines connecting them. The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The piece concludes with a double bar line on the final staff.

<sup>5</sup> See Rahsaan Roland Kirk, “Misty & I Want Talk, Live Montreux 1972”, *Youtube*, available at: [youtube.com/watch?v=Liy6TQ8FLR4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Liy6TQ8FLR4), accessed 27 October 2017.

The third movement (15:15 – 21:29) is the longest movement in the piece. It is based on a short theme in G minor characterized by a descending melodic minor scale in the bass line (G-F $\sharp$ -E $\flat$ -D, or in an extended form, G-F $\sharp$ -E $\flat$ -C-B $\flat$ -G-F $\sharp$ -G). As in the previous section, Mseleku repeats this bassline with melodic variations. From 16:52, however, this pattern is changed to modulate: after an initial descending stepwise movement in the bass, there is an *échappée* (usually a leap of a fourth or fifth) which becomes the dominant of the next tonic, from which this pattern repeats again. The rest of the movement oscillates between G minor as tonal centre for the bassline pattern, or its modulatory variation. The movement closes in a reflective mood (21:30 – 22:04), with the kind of gentleness that could be found in Keith Jarrett’s live solo piano in *The Köln Concert* (1975). Jarrett was a musician who Mseleku admired and he was especially fond of this recording (personal communication with Eugene Skeef, 14 October 2017).

A long, episodic transition (22:05 – 24:29) leads into the fourth movement. There is a brief section (22:05 – 23:19) where Mseleku breaks into a Monkish style of playing, with percussive, angular articulation and phrases composed of dissonant melodic intervals and riffs drawing on the half-whole tone scale (see Figure 5). Thelonious Monk was indeed regarded by many as the “most inventive improviser over whole tone chords” (Levine, 1989; Watkins, 2011: 2). As the songs Mseleku dedicated to Monk show, notably “Monk’s Move” on *Beauty of Sunrise* (1997) and “Monk the Priest” on *Home at Last* 2003, Thelonious Monk was a major influence in Mseleku’s compositional style.

Figure 5: “Meditation Suite”, an example of Monk’s influence discernable in the augmented chord outlined in the first three notes (deriving from the wholetone scale), and perfect fourths in F-D-G and again in E-B-F sharp. Transcription by the author.



At 23:21 – 23:40 there is a brief flashback to the third movement’s thematic material, but overall the material is improvisatory and has no clear tonal centre. Mseleku’s hardbop jazz foundations fleetingly shimmer through between 24:05 and 24:24, with sixteenth-note runs over the characteristic II-V-I progressions.

Mseleku ends the “Meditation Suite” in a slow, reflective mood in the fourth and final movement (24:58 - 32:24). The movement in A minor is characterized by glissandi on white keys of the piano lending it a modal aura. Indeed, Mseleku’s use of glissandi is reminiscent of Alice Coltrane’s harp playing in “Atomic Peace” on the album *A Monastic Trio* (with Jimmy Garrison and Rashied Ali).<sup>6</sup> Mseleku introduces subtle references to the descending pentatonic melodic material from the first movement (at 25:17 – 25:20; again at 25:47 – 25:52 and 28:16 – 28:18). A short coda reaffirming the A minor tonality concludes the track from 29:05 onwards. Here, the tone brightens, and the playing becomes more rhythmically punctuated and bluesy. At 30:27 – 30:30:30 there is a more overt reference back to the first movement’s main theme, which brings the “Meditation Suite” full circle.

From this description of “Meditation Suite”, it is evident how eclectic Mseleku’s musical frame of reference is. He connects with South African music practices, American jazz practices and western art music in the form and techniques he employs. Perhaps it is in bringing together these wide-ranging fields of experience and influence that “Meditation Suite” is most reflective of the album title *Meditations* (at least in its most immediate connotations): rather than any overt musical aspect that might be deemed “meditative”, it is through an all-embracing holism and reflection on a lifetime’s experiences that “Meditation Suite” connects with the notion of meditation as stream of consciousness. In the next track, “Meera-Ma”, Mseleku connects more explicitly with one of the principles one might associate with meditative practice: mantra-like repetition.

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<sup>6</sup> Compare with Alice Coltrane, “Atomic Peace”, with A Monastic Trio, available on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYLPz2HPk0U>, accessed 25 October 2017.

## “Meera-Ma”

A mantra is a series of sounds repeated to aid focus and achieve greater depth during meditation. Based on a vamp-like chant, “Meera-Ma” invokes the notion of mantra through its repetition of a short musical phrase. As in the second movement of “Meditation Suite”, a descending bass line forms the ostinato on which “Meera-Ma” is based. From a structural point of view, therefore, “Meera-Ma” is less complex than “Meditation Suite”. What makes the track notable, however, is its instrumentation: here, Mseleku plays piano and saxophone simultaneously. This section will not give a comprehensive description of each variation. With the aim of tracing the musical influences in Mseleku’s style, it rather selectively foregrounds some of his variation techniques and use of instruments.

“Meera-Ma” (Divine Mother) is a dedication to the Divine Mother; it symbolizes Mseleku’s commitment to spirituality. While the track title might immediately evoke Eastern notions of spirituality, I will show that Mseleku presents both African and Eastern references in this piece. This is in line with Mseleku’s pan-spiritual outlook, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The track begins with a prayer-like introduction in G# minor (which remains the tonal centre of the track throughout) with a subtle tremolo on Mseleku’s right hand. At 01:06, Mseleku first introduces a chant-like, meditative saxophone line (see Figure 6) that is based on both natural and sometimes harmonic minor scales also known as *Kirwani* raga (McNeil, 2007: 13) in Indian classical music. Unlike Mseleku’s records like *Star Seeding*, where Mseleku goes for a crisp Joe Henderson kind of sound in his saxophone playing (Fordham, 2001), his sound on “Meera-Ma” resembles that of Indian classical instruments such as the *shehnai*. Mseleku purposefully uses a lot of vibrato, further resembling reed instruments from North Indian classical music. At times, one can actually hear the vibration of the reed.

Gradually, Mseleku develops to a call and response between his saxophone and piano leading to a subtle groove suggested in Mseleku’s piano at around 02:46.

Figure 6: “Meera-Ma” saxophone theme, also demonstrating how the saxophone (top stave) and piano accompaniment (bottom stave) is split to be played by one instrumentalist. Transcription by the author.

The image displays a musical score for the "Meera-Ma" saxophone theme. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a saxophone staff (top) and a piano accompaniment staff (bottom). The saxophone staff features a melodic line with eighth notes and rests, marked with triplets (indicated by a '3' above a bracket). The piano accompaniment staff has a bass line with eighth notes and rests, also marked with triplets. The second system continues the piece, with the saxophone staff starting on a new line and the piano accompaniment staff continuing the bass line. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is transcribed by the author.

At 03:45 Mseleku introduces a chant that evokes traditional vocal styles of Southern African music found in Nguni singing styles. The incorporation of his voice seems to inspire his groove in a different way than his use of the saxophone: it suggests a strong down beat on beat one as opposed to beats two and four stressed earlier (02:46 – 03:45). This is probably due to the dexterous challenge of playing piano and saxophone at once. The emphasis on beat one is, however, a key characteristic in the Zulu traditional dance and music (Rycroft, 1959: 25–30)

At 04:21, Mseleku moves into a fast Tyner-like improvisation, as was also heard in “Meditation Suite”, using various combinations of related pentatonic scale and a more percussive attack. Mseleku brings back the saxophone theme at 04:54, first in the saxophone, and then, almost as a response, in the vocals, thus adding another

layer of instrumentation. At around 06:03 Mseleku introduces another layer, doubling his right hand improvisation with his voice almost as if commanding the piano to speak his native tongue. After a short piano vamp he continues to improvise, but this time his vocal scat is an octave lower than his piano improvisation.

There is a drastic change in dynamics at 11:20, where Mseleku plays quietly but with sustained intensity. At 11:39, Mseleku introduces a spoken form that I cannot place within any language. In this section, I want to argue that Mseleku had transcended to a higher mode of consciousness. The closest I could come to describing the energy channeled in this particular section is that it is a trance-like equivalent to “speaking in tongues” within some Christian modes of spiritualism that Mseleku also embraced. At 12:05 Mseleku recalls the initial vocal chant, followed by an open call and response once more between the piano and the saxophone from 12:45. This time, Mseleku references another big musical influence, Pharaoh Sanders. At 13:02, Mseleku adopts a “Pharaoick” sound that we can find on Sanders’s earlier works and later in “Yanini” on *Timelessness* 1993.<sup>7</sup> Soon after that Mseleku plays his last piano statement.

## Conclusion

Mseleku’s diverse influences have been observed by many writers and musicians. Salim Washington puts the seamless integration of South African and African American influences in perspective:

He expressed himself in traditional ways and non-traditional ways. That the man is virtuoso is clear, but he is identifiably South African within that sound. But more than many South African jazz artists, he is the one that understands the African-American aesthetic in the most complete way. He has done it in a way that combines both aesthetics. Mseleku absorbed

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<sup>7</sup> Also compare this with Sanders’s sound on “The Creator Has a Master Plan”, *Youtube*, available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13L6sjk080c>, accessed 17 October 2017.

[Thelonious] Monk, absorbed McCoy Tyner, he absorbed Bud Powell and made it Mseleku (Sosibo, 2016).

The seamlessness that Mseleku achieves in drawing on a diverse range of influences is a metaphor for how Mseleku's biography might be understood: an absorption of the cultural practices of South Africa that co-exist with those in which he immersed himself during exile (including his interactions with British and American musicians in his recordings and as models for his jazz craft) as well as Eastern musical practices.

Due to my own positionality as a pianist from similar cultural coordinates as those from which Mseleku hails, I hope to have contributed to the sense of a musical backdrop in ways that authors before me might not have done – or at least have done in such detail. This close observation of particular influences and techniques justifies the endeavor of performing a close reading (a close listening) of one album, as opposed to conducting an overview of Mseleku's entire oeuvre.

Perhaps the key to understanding Mseleku and his music is in his quest for inner depths within the self through constant meditations. The album *Meditations* provides one example of this musical quest. John Matshikiza observed that Mseleku went beyond being a musician towards becoming the music itself through his devotion to his musical practice (quoted in Fordham, 2008).

*Meditations* explores the notions of freedom beyond the constraints of time and space, home and exile. The creative freedom that Mseleku strove towards, and presents on *Meditations*, is a legacy he leaves behind for future generations. *Meditations* allows the living generation of improvisers a platform to start a dialogue around the question of hybrid cultures as opposed to puritanism. *Meditations* is also a great study of how different modes of spirituality manifest and meet within improvised music. Lastly, *Meditations* demonstrates in a profound way how memory and nostalgia are performed in the process of music creation in exile through Mseleku's musical influences.

## **Bhekumuzi (The Keeper Of The Home)**

### FIRST MOVEMENT (Reflections)

In this movement I try to list in a chronological order some of the encounters with Mseleku that I personally feel had very crucial lessons embedded in them. I also try to articulate some of my views on what I think Mseleku was about and represented as an artist and as a master.

I met Bheki Mseleku in 2002 at the then Technikon Natal in Durban, KwaZulu Natal, where he had previously lectured. I was then doing my first year in the jazz program that I was enrolled in. Because of my lack of any formal musical background, I had done a foundation course the previous year which was basically on “music literacy”. So I met Mseleku at a time when I was still struggling to find meanings within this music and also seeking connections between my semi-rural background (with all the traditional Zulu repertoires that I had absorbed over the years from a range of rituals), and this new giant genre called jazz (that was presented either theoretically or historically as foreign music).

The very first time I encountered Mseleku was at the Arthur Smith Hall, which was a recital hall for the department and was often used by senior students for practicing. I would often walk in to listen to them play. But on this day I could tell it was not one of our students or even lecturers, but it was someone who knew the world even more deeply. The minute I opened the door it felt like entering a different dimension of existence. This was the only time I had ever felt this kind of intensity since I had been in the program. It took me back to my early childhood music influences in which sound was always perceived as a means of transcendence. I also felt this was the kind of connection I had been looking for in jazz.

As I walked in, a beautiful aroma of good incense welcomed me. It also seemed like Mseleku was not distracted by my presence. I came very close to him, where I

eventually sat down. As I sat quietly and listened to him for hours, I started pouring with tears and he somehow felt this and he turned around and asked if I was okay and I said yes. Then he kept on playing, about an hour later I fell asleep in the most peaceful way. Hours later he woke me up and kindly asked if I could invite everyone to come and have something to eat. I couldn't believe what I had just heard since the campus was filled with music students practicing. I was later to learn that this culture of practicing at campus overnight was partly inspired by Mseleku's routines.

Still amazed at Mseleku's gesture, I did as instructed and called all the students to come for a meal with Mseleku at the nearest restaurant. The closest we could find was a fast food 24-hour Steers on Smith Street. I remember we all walked behind him as he was telling stories about music being a medium to other planes of consciousness and how we could view music as a mode of transcendence. His take on music immediately reminded me of what my grandmother used to tell us about the role of music in worship as a way of connecting with the high being. It was wonderful and very encouraging for me to hear someone echo these teachings in a jazz/improvised music context.

The following day I went to our music library to enquire about Mseleku's music and discovered that the library had a couple of his albums, like *Timelessness*, *Celebration*, *Beauty of Sunrise*, *Star Seeding* and *Meditations*. Being exposed to this was the beginning of my journey and I now wanted to know more about the man behind the music. Days went by as I listened to the music. The music broadened my love for jazz; I think mainly because through Mseleku's sounds I could hear overtones of Zulu traditional music that I grew up listening to. Some of the songs even employed lyrics that were in my native tongue, such "Vukani Madoda" from *Timelessness* to "Thula Mntwana" from *Star Seeding*. The music soon became a soundtrack of my life. Witnessing our friendship grow stronger everyday gave me a sense of hope that I would soon be able to channel some of my thoughts and beliefs through music in a similar way.

Among other things, Mseleku wanted me and other students to open up to Eastern philosophies, as he felt there were a lot of parallels between their belief systems and that of indigenous African spiritual beliefs. He therefore religiously took me and other students to a Krishna temple in Berea, where we were exposed to various readings and philosophies around the Buddhist idea regarding the ultimate freedom, methods of meditation and other metaphysical teachings. Mseleku felt that these practices were useful for all musicians and artists who viewed themselves as mediums, and he linked most of it with some of John Coltrane's thinking and music, as I later discovered. He also spoke very passionately about the importance of people like John Coltrane for the music that we play and how Coltrane, Sanders and other innovators in jazz were contributing to a universal consciousness by spreading positive vibrations through their music.

I visited Mseleku at his house a couple of times. He stayed in a very compact apartment where he had his rare Steinway upright piano that he bought during his period with Polygram (Verve label). He told me that this was the first piano he ever owned; now, looking back, I realize that it was probably his last piano too. One of the things that intrigued me about his home was that it had a very calming effect. When I commented about that upon my first visit, he told me that it is something that he has always deliberately cultivated and that he achieved this effect through rituals like chanting various mantras, burning incense, playing harmonious music and through his discovery of circles. All of these constituted some of his daily rituals and routines at his home. Mseleku told me that this was important as one's contribution to making the world a better place for all, adding that he had other rituals that he would practice outside his home, like hugging trees, and providing food to the poor. These attributes attracted me to Mseleku's music and later also to some of his thinking.

I learned over time that Mseleku also suffered from diabetes. He was vegetarian, believing that eating animals created a heavy energy around human beings. Often, because of his lifestyle, he would be admitted to hospitals where I would visit him.

These periods frustrated him and led him to experiment with his diet and reconsider his dietary conceptions. Once, during a holiday, I was in Pietermaritzburg at my parents' house, and I received a call from a mutual friend saying that Mseleku was admitted in a psychiatric hospital, Fort Napier, after a disagreement with some shop owner about selling water. The shop owner concluded that Mseleku was a mad man and called the police. He was then escorted to a psychiatric hospital.

After hearing the news, I called to speak to Mseleku and told him I was around. He asked me to visit him and also insisted that I bring him some chicken, which came as a surprise. Upon arrival, I found him seated and playing on a badly out-of-tune piano. I stood next to him for a while until I got his attention. He seemed very excited about seeing me and then started telling me about how unfair the world could be, but also why we have to play the music. We play, he said, as a way of neutralizing and balancing cosmic energies. He then started playing again, but this time my ears couldn't handle the dissonance in his playing and I asked him how it was possible that he could play on such a badly out-of-tune piano. He responded with a long lecture about how one could cultivate the senses to a level at which one can choose what one feels, tastes, sees, smells and hears. He also mentioned that this is the same practice that is needed in navigating our everyday lives, just like we approach our improvisation. He talked about how humans have an ability to attract what eventually comes their way through karma, which is also derived from Eastern philosophy. Soon the visiting hours were over and I left, deeply reflective of what I had heard.

When Mseleku was eventually discharged, he went back to his usual routine: healthy diet, practicing, going to the temple and inviting us to watch movies with him. I once heard a story from one of Mseleku's students about the time he was lecturing at Technikon Natal. He told me that Mseleku once took him to the same movie every day for a week and soon he heard him play almost the whole film score by heart. I didn't find this difficult to believe, since I once witnessed Mseleku playing long concertos from memory. He had a special gift.

During my time away from school I had been listening to a Mseleku record, *Timelessness*, which featured some African American jazz greats such as Pharoah Sanders, Joe Henderson, Abbey Lincoln and Elvin Jones. I remember asking Mseleku about this session and he told me that it was an honour for him first and foremost to record in New York, a city he felt had a special energy; and secondly, to record with these great masters for whom he had a lot of respect. He also told me that they did find some of his music very challenging. Even after many years of listening to this music, I still find it very complex.

Returning to *Timelessness*, I recall this one time, after I had been listening and transcribing one of his songs called “Through The Years” featuring Abbey Lincoln, going to Mseleku’s house to ask him to help me with some parts of his solo. He first asked me to play the song. I did, and he seemed very impressed. Then he started talking to me about improvisation as a spontaneous thing in the same way that we come across new situations in our daily lives. This is how he believed we should respond to improvisation. And that was my lesson for the day: he didn’t play a single note on the piano. In retrospect I think it’s good that Mseleku didn’t show me much on the piano, although he was always interested in cultivating my thinking so I could be a better musician. It has to do with his belief that meanings are found deep within oneself, and that masters are there to trigger that out of their disciples.

The idea of discipleship can be very intense at times. I recall thinking about cutting a joint from two of my fingers because I was getting frustrated that I was not getting the Mseleku sound on the piano. I started thinking that it might be that the joints Mseleku lost from his fingers in an accident that gave him this special sound. That would have required a lot of faith to execute, and if I had done it, perhaps today there would be a lot of younger pianists who would be tempted to imitate my gesture. Had this happened, this would have become a way to identify a Mseleku disciple, just like in ancient African traditions. I do believe that a disciple carries a responsibility of passing the legacy of his master forward in a dignified way. One

day I tried to confront Mseleku about not wanting to show me stuff on the piano. He challenged me by saying: “If you want to learn from me then bring your bags here and come stay with me, because what I am not prepared to do is invite you and in the end be claimed by an institution...”. This made a deep impression on me. It made me think about some of my commitments to my family around my studies and their expectations. According to Buddhist teachings, fear of the unknown is our greatest enemy.

Towards mid-2002, Mseleku left for Johannesburg after he had been signed by Sheer Sound to record his sixth record, *Home At Last*. This record was symbolically significant, since Mseleku had not recorded any of his records in South Africa before; nor had he recorded with any of his fellow musicians in South Africa. After the album’s release in 2003, he came back to Durban and I was very curious to know about the new record. Being young and not so careful with words, I asked him which was his favourite album among the six that he had recorded. He kept quiet for a while and said, “Check out *Star Seeding...*”. I had already listened to this record, but I was surprised when I learned that he was also the musician on tenor saxophone on this record. We then continued talking about *Home At Last*, he told me that one of the reasons he recorded this album was to assist his friends who were struggling to get enough work in South Africa. When this record deal was proposed, he felt it to be the only way he could assist them as he was not a wealthy man. I was amazed by such kindness. He continued to say that the recording was very challenging to put together musically, but it contained a very strong sense of brotherhood.

Around the end of 2003, a couple of friends and I (Mseleku disciples all) put together a concert at The Jazz Rainbow in Morningside. We titled our event “Bheki’s Corner”, meaning the ones who had been inspired by Mseleku. Fortunately Mseleku was around to attend this tribute performance. I remember him sitting in the front row with the late Zim Ngqawana as I went on stage with my group. I was very nervous, especially about playing some of his compositions in his presence. Almost throughout all the performances, Mseleku was talking to Ngqawana, expressing how

unhappy he was about us playing his music. At the end of the concert I found him standing outside. I really didn't know how to approach him and eventually I summoned the strength to ask him about his thoughts on the performance. He expressed his sincere appreciation for the gesture, but he also made it clear that he felt we weren't ready to perform his music. He also spoke to us about the importance of understanding the narrative and the energy that each tune seeks to articulate before learning the actual music.

My last lesson with Mseleku, and probably the last time I ever saw him, was at the gate of Howard College. It was after a Zim Ngqawana concert that he had come to watch with a close friend of his, Mfana Mlambo, a saxophonist. They were driving in a *bakkie* (a South Africanism for a small pick-up truck) and Mseleku was seated on the passenger seat. We stopped them at the gate and asked for a lift. When Mseleku refused, we were all surprised, since we knew him to be a very kind person. I told him that it was very dangerous for us to walk at night, as we might get robbed. He quickly responded, saying that at times we all need those experiences as a way of assisting to us to compose and play music with a bit of meaning and depth. That was not the answer we expected.

## SECOND MOVEMENT (The Letter)

Dear Duma kaMseleku,

Since I last spoke to you, during our call when you were at your London home in 2006, your voice has not stopped echoing in my ears and spirit. How I wish you had notified me that this was the last time we would speak, did you even know? I think you did. I have so many questions for you and they remain unanswered apart from the answers that live in your music and your teachings. Is this perhaps the only way to communicate with you in this lifetime?

When I heard about your departure on 9 September 2008, I could not believe my ears. I cried. Cried because I knew how unhappy you were about the realities that you faced back home in South Africa. I know how deeply it impacted on you and your music. Do you think this is something that could perhaps change for the current generation of jazz musicians in this country? What can be done to create change?

I have also been thinking how things are on the other side. Is it any different? I cannot stop imagining how amazing it must have been for you to see Coltrane and play music together. I have so much to talk about; I hope you visit soon so we can catch up.

I will be waiting to hear from you.

Your friend and disciple  
Nduduzo Makhathini

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