

## Thinking of Brenda

### The desire to be

1996

I first heard Brenda Fassie sing on a languid, sunny, spring Saturday morning in the Roma valley of Lesotho. It must have been in 1984. It was one of those mornings when the world demonstrates the notion of slowness. There was the blue haze in the horizon, rural smoke rising slowly against the sky until it seemed as if the sky was floating. I remember the distant kra-a-a-k of a white-necked raven gliding somewhere in the sky, and the trees so still, as if they had sucked in through their leaves all the motion there ever was. That was the scene I saw when I finally got out of bed after waking to the sounds of 'Weekend Special' on Radio Lesotho somewhere in the house.

The music had reached me while I was hovering between the states of waking and sleeping, suspended between re-emerging consciousness and the continuation of sleep. I had not heard the song before, nor did I know who was singing it, but I will never forget the pounding thrill of it, the rhythms that I felt certain could keep a party going endlessly. And that is exactly how it turned out to be at the many parties in Maseru those years. Much later, in the *Sowetan* in 1999, Elliot Makhanya was to capture what many felt: 'Brenda Fassie is a unique creative energy and an overwhelming talent... Fassie has been singing for just over two decades, but every time you listen to her, it seems as if she has just begun.'

There are few controversial characters in contemporary South Africa who stand out like Brenda Fassie. Besides her musical talents, she has some highly marketable qualities. For example, there is a great deal of outrageous brazenness about her that newspapers simply love. That they quickly recognised what a musical catch they had in their hands came through in many headlines. At first, the headlines reflected the genuine discovery of a major musical talent: 'There's no stopping Brenda' says the *Bona* magazine in April 1984, soon after Brenda's dramatic entrance into the entertainment industry through her hit song 'Weekend Special'.

But even back then there were signs of another media prize: Brenda's mouth. 'I have been through a lot of difficulties paving my way to success,' she told *Bona*. 'Now that I have reached this stage of my career, I am not going to turn back. My ambition is to become a number one musician in this country and... well... make a lot of money.' Here was a rags-to-riches story that landed in the hands of the press like a bird. The profiling of Brenda as a musician shifted dramatically from her music towards the drama of her private life.

There is a telling sequence of pictures in the supplement to *Drum* magazine of December/January 51/91, depicting township life over forty years as captured by the magazine's photographers. There are many pictures of musicians and dancers, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s who are shown performing on stage. Dancers, in particular, are captured in dramatically frozen motion. In contrast, Brenda Fassie, a dynamic contemporary performer, is shown in her wedding dress, on her wedding day, with Yvonne Chaka Chaka, her senior bridesmaid, mopping the bride's brow on a 'steaming hot Durban day'. Chicco Twala, her producer and manager, is shown leaning against his Mercedes-Benz

with his huge double-storey house in the background. At the bottom is a head-and-shoulders picture of Mbongeni Ngema, accompanied by a comment on how he 'is now a wealthy playwright and music producer who counts among his friends Quincy Jones and Oscar-winning actor Denzil Washington'. Further, the headline runs, boldly: 'Affluence and confusion strike a chord in the 90's'. The music and performance of these artists are downplayed in favour of gossip about their private lives.

Indeed, in 1987, three years after Brenda had broken into the musical scene, she was on the cover of *Drum* with half of the picture, in which she is seated on the floor, dominated by her exposed right thigh, knee and boot. The other half is her smiling face. Her face radiates a mix of innocence and calculated sexuality. 'Brenda – I can't buy me love' goes the cover headline.

The story inside has a juicy heading: 'She's looking for a lifetime special! Brenda tells all on Chicco, a lesbian fling, and one-night stands.' And Brenda, the star of 'Weekend Special', rises to the occasion and rattles on about men and love, building on what was to be her characteristic style of self-exposure: 'I know that most of them are just lusting after me. They don't love me. They just want to go to bed with me.' And then follows her characteristic sudden shift in focus as something strikes her: 'I can also seduce a man if I want to.'

Later on in the same interview, she pronounces: 'It was a good experience,' referring to what the article calls 'a lesbian fling'. 'I was just curious. I wanted to know how they make love to other women'. Just an experiment, which, it turns out later, has been a defensive method to maintain self-respect. If the public has a problem with lesbians, Brenda was merely experimenting. She was not one herself. But because a part of her really is, she has to protect herself against herself and protect her self-esteem to herself: 'I am always nice to lesbians. I don't snub them. I hope I will never become a lesbian.' This is a verbal distancing effect for the public, and is designed to facilitate and maintain an internal coherence. And so, Brenda keeps 'telling all' to the excitement of *Drum* magazine and many shocked readers whose appetites are whetted for more stories, more of Brenda's musical hits and more appearances at festivals, where they will endure long hours waiting for her to appear.

'One malicious columnist,' complains Brenda, 'wrote that I look like a horse. And some people say that I am ugly'. Revealing another talent for the art of reversal, she continues, 'I don't want to be beautiful. My ugliness has taken me to the top. I have proved that I have style, and all that glitters is not gold.' Once, she was asked why she hadn't been to the United States, where she could build on her fame. She retorted that Michael Jackson did not come to South Africa to be famous. Very early, Brenda firmed up her mouth as one of her best assets.

Covering the next major episode in her life, *Drum* magazine is found standing diligently on Brenda's side in March 1989 when she does indeed find her 'Lifetime Special' in Nhlanhla Mbambo. 'Mass hysteria as Brenda says "I do" announces the cover of *Drum* with a picture of the smiling couple dressed in white. *Drum* dubs it the 'pop wedding of the year'. However, in August 1990, *Drum* announces the dramatic end of Brenda's marriage with another cover story. It shows us another picture of the couple. This time they are dressed in black leather clothing. There is no smile on Brenda's face. She is looking pained and sad, but also decidedly petulant; her husband is trying to smile. The headline goes: 'Brenda and hubby: our marriage based on jealousy and infidelity'. It is not long after this announcement that the couple makes up. But, marital bliss is not for them. After a

separation announced in November, the Sowetan announces on 10 December: 'Curtain falls on Brenda's marriage'. And so it does.

Since 1984 when she broke into the musical scene with 'Weekend Special' Brenda Fassie, Ma-Brrr, and her music have lived through some of the most significant changes in the history of South Africa. Today, she still 'Wows audiences', as a typical Sowetan headline would put it. In all that time, she floated into our personal and public lives as sound and rhythm. As sound she has come at us in two ways: music and speech. In a way, whether she has been on-stage or off it, hers has been a continuous performance. That is why, in this connection, it seems inappropriate to separate her public from her private persona. They are one.

It is useful to recall some of the major public events through which we travelled with Brenda Fassie, and during which, for sixteen years, she has been at centre stage. Some of these events are captured so well in a book called *Mandela, Tambo, and the African National Congress*. In the summer of 1984-85, the time that we were listening and dancing to 'Weekend Special', a

...new pattern of protest grew [in South Africa]. It consisted of stay-at-homes, roving demonstrations challenging the police patrolling the townships, and attacks on the businesses, houses, and persons of Africans charged with collaborating in the new Community Council system. Local grievances became the vehicle for protest against the apartheid system as a whole, spreading from township to township through a population thoroughly mobilised by student participation in school boycotts and broader involvement in the anti-constitution campaigns. At the same time, the existence of national bodies such as the UDF provided new means for coordination or protest, epitomised in the Transvaal stay-at-home of November 5-6, 1984, in which an estimated 800 000 participated.

Beyond that, the struggles progressed through several other phases. We witnessed the state of emergency, necklace killings, economic sanctions, rent and rate boycotts, the calls for 'liberation now, education later', increasingly successful ANC guerrilla attacks against the apartheid state, the release of Mandela, the constitutional negotiations and the historic elections of 1994, then years after 'Weekend Special'. And now that we have entered the phase of democracy, governance and delivery, Brenda is still there, continuing to make an impact.

On all this time she has hungered for love, made money, got married, divorced, confirmed her bisexuality, wrecked her life through drug addiction, during which she experienced one of her most painful moments: the death of her lover Poppy, seemingly from a drug overdose. Through a difficult struggle, thanks to Chicco Twala she recovered and is falling in and out of love once more, while continuing to make new music, which continues to enjoy enormous popularity. As an interviewer, Immanuel D'Emilio, observes in *The Namibian*:

Controversial songstress Fassie has an honours degree from the University of Hard Knocks, but she never let traumatic life events get in her way of having a good time. Now that she has made peace with her odious past, she's embarked on a mission to regenerate her reign as the inimitable queen of the South African music industry. Her Highness spoke to me about love, drug addiction, loss and power of fame.

Although the tone of D'Emilio's writing is exploitative and disparaging, it shows how the media, in reflecting the ups and downs of Brenda's life, took advantage of her. But it is Brenda's own words that ring loud: 'I am a born again musician', she announced to the *Sowetan*. Remarkably, these ups and downs are reflected in many of the lyrics of her music. Her life and her music are inseparable. What could it all mean?

For one artist to remain at the centre stage of South African popular music for sixteen years is a phenomenon that has to resonate with special meaning for the times. Allister Sparks makes an interesting observation of crowds at political rallies in the 1980s in his book *The Mind of South Africa*:

Here the anonymous individuals of a humiliated community seemed to draw strength from the crowd, gaining from it the larger identity of the occasions and an affirmation of their human worth. Their daily lives might seem meaningless, but here on these occasions the world turned out, with its reporters and its television cameras, to tell them it was not so, that their lives mattered, that humanity cared, that their cause was just; and when they clenched their fists and chanted their defiant slogans, they could feel that they were proclaiming their equality and that their strength of spirit could overwhelm the guns and armoured vehicles waiting outside.

Similarly, in the apparent futility of daily life under oppression, Brenda seems to succeed in giving meaning to the daily details of life by affirming them in song. When her audiences recognise those social facts, and sing along, imprinting them anew in their minds, and dancing to the rhythms that carry the picture or message-bearing words, they participate in a vital process of self-authentication and regeneration.

'Zimb' izindaba ...' begins the song 'Kuyoze Kuyovalwa' on the CD *Abantu Bayakhuluma* (*People Talk*):

Mina ngihamba ngo-7  
Kuyoze ku clozwe  
Izikhaye zilahleke  
Bese bayavula vele  
Kuyoze kuyo valwa-ke  
Sihanba ngo 7  
Thina siyalala la  
Thina siyalalala

[We're not leaving this party. We'll be here until daybreak. They may close and throw away the keys, but will surely open again until daybreak.]

This mock defiance of hosts is partly a result of known characters, who never take hints and overstay their welcome. But it is also an expression of pure pleasure: how fun it is at the party. However, hosts must be warned, the party-goers may just stay until daybreak. The popular format of 6p.m.-to-6a.m. festivals (dusk to dawn) replays this potentially anarchic social game at an immensely grand scale.

'Lyrically, Fassi's [sic] songs are a mish-mash of the latest township lingo, sometimes barely comprehensible even to locals, but they stick in the minds of her listeners', says a report on Brenda Fassie in *World Music: The Rough Guide*. 'Mish-mash' suggests confusion. Not necessarily. What

Brenda does, and this seems in part an ingrained pattern of behaviour, is bring together unusual juxtapositions that make sense only in context. For example, the bumper sticker on her car reads HULLO BU-BYE, KOKO COME IN. This may look like incomprehensible 'mish-mash' to the socially uninitiated. But it is a free-spirit expression of the social energy in the endless comings and goings in the township, the meetings and the partings, and the opening and the closing of doors. It is a dramatic validation of common experience.

Perhaps the most controversial act of validation is Brenda's outspokenness on the taboo subject of sex. The problem for society, comes precisely at the point where, for Brenda Fassie, the wall between the private and the public totally collapses. What could be more outrageous in public, coming from a popular star, that to utter this very private of sentiments: 'Some men cry because I sing; I sing when I make love, I sing for them', as she told *Vrye Weekblad*. This obliteration of the divide between the private and the public is at the bottom of her verbal ungovernability is a factor of not only the intention to be free, and if the act of rendering the State ungovernable is itself an act of freedom, then Brenda's voice enters the public arena as ungovernable, the ultimate expression of personal freedom. While she may shock, she is at the same time admired, not for her courage (for this is not courage at play) but for being representative of the value of expressiveness. She made real in the personal domain the public political quest for an abstract notion of freedom. She brought the experience of freedom very close.

Indeed, long before the issue of sexual preference became a burning constitutional issue, Brenda had widened the doorway.

But there is yet another way that Brenda touched a significant chord in a national context. Here we are looking at the impact of the politics of culture in creating a national identity. I had occasion to reflect recently on binding factors that could explain why it would be difficult for the South African state to disintegrate in conflict. In the essay 'The Lion and the Rabbit I observed in 1999 that:

[A]n increasingly familiar commercial and industrial landscape has progressively drawn the population into a unifying pattern of economic activities. A replicated landscape of major commercial chains throughout the country has, over the decades, become a feature of how the land is imagined. Spatial familiarity of this sort renders the land familiar, less strange and more accommodating wherever you may be in the country. This kind of familiarity may have a binding effect, which cuts across the particularising tendencies of geographic and ethnic location. Linking the country is a complex network of a communications system, which promised accessibility of every part of the country to every citizen. This sense of universal accessibility was sensed as an achievement even before Codesa was underway.

In this context it is remarkable how extensively Brenda toured the country to sing and entertain. Particularly noteworthy are the festivals held in the homelands. Between September 1991 when she performed at the Mphephu Resort, in Venda, and December 1994, when she performed at Phuthaditjhaba Stadium, in Qwaqwa, Brenda Fassie visited all the homelands put together nineteen times. In a hectic schedule, she could move from homeland to homeland in one weekend. In this way her music, given the political context of a difficult struggle, helped to consolidate a view of culture as social affirmation. Secondly, it contributed to the consolidation of a sense of South African musical space, familiar to millions across the land. Some symbols changed in the process. Stadiums associated with bogus independence became sites for a social assertiveness heavily suggested in Brenda's style.

So who is Brenda Fassie? In Sesotho, I would say Ke sebopuoa (God's own being).

Charl Blignaut, of the famous interview in the *Vrye Weekblad* headlined “In bed with Brenda”, ponders the conduct of his subject during the interview. As we have noticed, she strays from answering questions while she digresses on minor intrusions. ‘Over the years,’ Blignaut writes,

I have come to the conclusion that there is no way to write a Brenda interview without its being personal. That’s because there really is no such thing as a Brenda ‘interview’. Every self-respecting hack who’s been around the block has done the ‘Waiting for Brenda’ or ‘Trying to keep up with Brenda’ piece. You don’t ‘interview’ Brenda, you experience her. You could be the recipient of her venom or of her devoted attention. Most likely it’ll be both – with switches happening when you least expect them. Then again, maybe it’s just me. As I said, it’s personal.

One minute she’s outside crying on the balcony because you’ve really upset her and hurt her career, the next she’s feeding you her lunch. And that’s probably because, like any serious pop star anywhere in the world, Brenda Fassie has a love-hate relationship with the media. I’ve interviewed other famously difficult people like Naomi Campbell and Boy George and have remained reasonably calm. But, without fail each time I prepare to interview Brenda, I’m deeply on edge for days. Because no matter what you’re thinking, you seldom know what she’ll do next; you’re never quite ready for her. The point is that Brenda Fassie, whether she’s topping the charts or lying in the gutter, is every inch a star. She makes her own rules.

There are two observations I would like to make about Blignaut’s experience. The first is how he may not have fully realised the extent to which Brenda is a ‘personal thing’, a feeling that he expresses though a public medium, he lives, for a moment, in Brenda’s world in which the personal and the public not only coexist but seem to merge.

Secondly, I doubt that Brenda really has a special ‘love-hate relationship with the media’. While she would never be totally indifferent to the media, her swings of mood are not necessarily a calculated desire to be outrageous, to wound and then to make amends in order to keep the lines of communication open. They are part of the fabric of her life. One moment she berates Yvonne Chaka Chaka for living in the suburbs, the next moment she declares her a true friend.

When Brenda gets angry, it is because anger is natural. But whatever the case might be, you never sense hatred. But affection, even love, is never absent. You find it, however tenuously, even in the most outrageous statement. Being the kind of person she is, essentially trusting, Brenda is likely to experience many moments of vulnerability, and be wont to feel sharply the pain of disappointment. “Akusese mnandi, yo/Monday Buti yo/ Ungishaya ngaphakathi” (It’s not pleasant anymore/ Monday Blues/ the pain of it, I feel deeply within). She tries to come to terms with the pain of being let down and transcends it through song. It is a quality of innocence that lies at the core of her life. It makes no sense to be angry at the storm or, in contrast, to declare love for the sun. They are both facts of life indifferent to how you may feel about them, even though it may be comforting to imbue them with human attributes.

American journalist Donald GM McNeil Jnr, confirms this impression when he reflects on the inappropriateness of comparisons between Brenda and Madonna. ‘In interviews,’ he says in *A Common Hunger to Sing*,

[T]he comparison to Madonna seems ridiculous. Madonna is a study in calculation; Fassie is all impulse. She cannot sit still, leaps to answer phones that are not hers, peremptorily sends people out for things like artificial fingernails to ice cream bars. She brags that she’ll tell anybody who her sexual partner was the previous night.

On the other hand, Mark Gevisser in the Mail & Guardian concludes: 'She is a textbook tabloid commodity: her fix, and her downfall, has been notoriety, not cocaine'. Not quite I think. Her fix, not really a fix because it is who she primarily is, is her innocence, which may have courted notoriety as a method of expression, bumped into along the way. If Brenda had discovered something exciting about being a nun, something about which, as a musician, she could say some outrageous things and swing her pelvis on the stage in the process with the kind of zeal some born-again religious people can demonstrate, she would have played around with saintliness as a method of expression. At bottom is the desire to be. Unbridled freedom, though, like the political strategy of ungovernability, can burn the one that wields it.

If this has been a personal, imaginative embrace of Brenda, I have also now made the personal, public. I think the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was also about making the private, public. I think that only if we attempt this pouring out of personal feeling and thinking into the public domain will a new public become possible. We cannot tell what kind of public it will be, but we do need to release more and more personal data into our public home to bring about a more real human environment: more real because it is more honest, more trusting, and more expressive.

And so, the journey that began in my bed on a languid spring morning in 1984 in the Roma valley in Lesotho is far from over. Twenty years later, I am in a free country and Brenda Fassie is dead. But we have her music.

**This essay appears in**

**Njabulo S Ndebele. *Fine Lines from the Box* (Roggebaai: Umuzi, 2007)  
[www.umuzi-randomhouse.co.za](http://www.umuzi-randomhouse.co.za)**