



PRESS RELEASE

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Hugh Masekela – “When you see the excellence of a people’s culture in their song and dance and couture and design, maybe you will respect them better because you understand where they are coming from.”

Trumpeter, singer and composer Hugh Ramopolo Masekela, commonly and affectionately known as Bra Hugh, is the first of three musicians to be featured on **21 Icons South Africa**. He graces the screen with his trademark wit, philosophical depth and innate talent for storytelling on Sunday **September 29** on SABC3 at 6.57pm.

A two-time Grammy award nominee, Masekela left South Africa shortly after the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 to pursue music studies in the UK and at the Manhattan School of Music in New York, US. He received enormous assistance from another South African musical icon, the late Miriam Makeba, who was already living in the US and introduced the 21-year-old musician to international stars such as Harry Belafonte, Dizzy Gillespie and Miles Davis.

By the time he was ready to return to South Africa four years later to teach others what he had learnt, Nelson Mandela and other anti-apartheid activists had been incarcerated, the country had become a brutal police state and for Masekela it had become “impenetrable”, as he writes in his biography, “Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela”.

He tells the 21 Icons team: “I couldn’t come back anymore because I’d been hanging out with Belafonte and Miriam, who were banned from South Africa, and they’d done an album called “An evening with Belafonte and Makeba” with all the protest songs of those days that we got from the students in exile who came into town. And of course Miriam had addressed the UN in 1963 and that was the first time the world really ever heard about what was really happening in

South Africa. So I wanted to come home — I was ready to come back home then, but my passport had been at the South African embassy for two years and it was obvious they were not going to renew it.”

Masekela ended up staying in New York for another 26 years and would only return to South Africa after Mandela’s release in the early Nineties. While in exile, in 1968, he recorded his smash hit “Grazing in the Grass”, which was released in the US and topped the Billboard Hot 100 charts at number one, selling four million copies. In the **21 Icons South Africa** short film, he describes with his telltale sense of humour, a concert in Detroit where 30 000 people danced to the irresistible tune and insisted on three encores of it: “People were dancing like fools, so when we came backstage I said to [record executive] Russ Regan, Did you see that? What’s that all about? He said: ‘Stupid, that’s the number one record in the world.’”

But Masekela had had a brief moment of fame much earlier, as a schoolboy in Johannesburg, when his band received an instrument from the legendary Satchmo – jazz trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong. He describes it thus in **21 Icons South Africa**: “I was already crazy about Louis Armstrong; we sang all his songs. Trevor Huddleston, who had been the school chaplain, met Louis Armstrong and told him about the band and Armstrong sent us his trumpet and we became famous here in South Africa. We even appeared on the cover of The Farmer’s Weekly — ‘Black Boys get Louis’s Trumpet’.”

Stories such as these, however, can mask the haunting pain of being exiled and far away from home, and viewers get a poignant taste of the latter when Masekela describes his fear of losing his ability to speak South African languages. “I used to have a place in Central Park where I would go to talk to my imaginary friends. I was terrified that I was going to lose my language. So I would go there and I would start to speak in Sotho first, and I would change from that to Zulu and then to Xhosa and then I would go into tsotsi Afrikaans.”



When Mandela was finally released, Masekela cried as he watched him on television walking out of Victor Verster Prison. “We just looked at this ... we didn’t even know we were crying, but it was tears of joy because I knew that day that I would be able to come home after 30 years.”

In 1991, Masekela launched his first tour of South Africa, which was sold out throughout the country's major cities. Since then he has made Johannesburg his home, but he continues to enthrall audiences worldwide and will celebrate his 75th birthday next year with a concert in March in the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, California.

A career spanning almost 30 albums and too many appearances to mention are testament to Masekela's belief that, to paraphrase the German philosopher Nietzsche, “life without music would be hell”. And claiming one's heritage proudly remains his passion.

Describing the time the 21 Icons team spent with this legendary and world-famous musician, filmmaker and photographer Adrian Steirn says: “There's no one quite like Hugh Masekela. He's got this presence that made us all feel like we were musical, for three hours. He's the coolest man you'll ever meet.”

Steirn's portrait of Masekela, signed by the musician, will be auctioned at the end of the series and the money donated to a charity of Masekela's choice. Readers of the Sunday Times can get their own copy of the portrait in the September 29 edition of the newspaper, on sale countrywide.

Public participation is invited on **Twitter: @21icons;**
www.21icons.com and
www.facebook.com/21icons.

21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Nikon and Deloitte and supported by The Department of Arts & Culture as a nation-building initiative.

PROGRAMME SYNOPSIS

Filmmaker Adrian Steirn extracts highlights from the incredible life and times of iconic musician Hugh Masekela, who, among other gems, reveals why he was called “Slow Poison” on the soccer field, and why he would talk to imaginary friends in New York's Central Park during his 30-year exile from South Africa.

PHOTOGRAPH DETAILS

Shot in a public park near Hugh Masekela's home in Bryanston, Johannesburg, photographer Adrian Steirn's portrait plays on the musician's smash hit “Grazing in the Grass”. The image captures Masekela playing his beloved trumpet while standing in a field of grass, evoking the artist's unique brand of African jazz. Steirn wanted to shoot it outside but simultaneously create a shot-in-studio feel to it, combining the natural and the artificial — the African field and the sprawling city

ENDS

On behalf of **21 ICONS South Africa**

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