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News

Simphiwe Dana features on 21 Icons



Date: Feb 12, 2016

Sunday on 21 Icons at 19:27

Simphiwe Dana –“I use my music to heal, I use my music to inform, and I use it to bring out that warm feeling inside, so I think I’m doing quite well with my freedom.”

On 14 February 2016 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed short-film series 21 ICONS will feature the 21st icon of its third season: the highly celebrated award-winning Afro-Soul and Xhosa Jazz songstress, Simphiwe Dana (35). The 21 ICONS episode will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.

Dana has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III for using music as a vehicle to address social issues in South Africa. Through the unifying power of music, she voices her opinion on socio-political challenges, increasingly making her black consciousness and feminist views clearly known. She is also the first African ambassador for the human rights initiative Amnesty International.

On her selection as an icon Dana comments, "I don't shy away from including social messages in my music. I'm an activist at heart. I'm very passionate about the continent and about justice, so my work is very much in that space at all times."

With her widespread appeal, Dana has performed at key national events and festivals such as Arts Alive, the Cape Town International Jazz Festival, and the Standard Bank Joy of Jazz and across the world in places like China, Germany, Spain, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

"I don't like to define my sound but if I were forced to, I would say it's Afro-Soul, because it's the kind of music that touches you, that makes you feel something and – I'd like to believe – also changes you somehow," she adds.

Born in 1981 in rural Gcuwa in the Transkei, she grew up in a Mayaluleni, a village in the Eastern Cape; "My formative years were spent in a village in the Eastern Cape so I will never be a city girl at heart. I can be polished in many ways, but I am still that barefooted village girl", she comments.

The daughter of a preacher, her music draws strongly on her upbringing in the gospel church and she cites the powerful singing of her mother as an inspiration for her and her siblings and a key motivator in her resolve to pursue her musical career.

"My earliest influence, musically, was my community. In the village, everything has a soundtrack: when we play, we always sing or do something rhythmic. When we work or cook, there's always a song," she says.

She matriculated in 1997 from the Vela Private School in Mthatha before moving to Port Elizabeth to study information technology (IT). In 2000, she relocated to Johannesburg to pursue her music career while completing her diploma at Wits Technikon.

She says, "Education, for me, is basically a way of getting out of life alive. It's the difference between poverty and being self-sufficient. Had I not been serious about my studies, I don't think I would be where I am today. It helped me to find and create my place in the world."

Dana first attracted attention in 2002 while singing in small clubs across Johannesburg. Roshnie Moonsamy of Urban Voices saw her perform and recommended her to the Gallo Record Company and four months later she was signed by the music label.

She recalls, "Sipho Sithole told me that when he came with the idea of signing me to Gallo Records, the other guys were like 'Are you crazy? This music sounds like Marabi music from the 50s; it's got no place in this time and age.'"

In 2004, Dana released her debut album, Zandisile, making an enormous impact on the South African music scene, achieving platinum status, and claiming the number one spot on the Billboard Chart.

She comments, "My first album blew up so much that I was thrust into a world of which I had only dreamed. I think what kept me humble and focused is the fact that I'm a village girl. Nothing can ever make me feel outside of who I am."

The title track Zandisile, 'The one who fulfils her dreams' was an ode to her unborn daughter – a guide to how life works and the role she would play in it.

Dana's second recording, the acclaimed The One Love Movement on the Bantu Biko Street, won her numerous South African Music Awards, including Female Artist of the Year.

During a portrait sitting she tells Van Wyk how while working on the album she was channelling Steve Biko and creating a dialogue for identity politics in South Africa; "We did not introduce black consciousness which is what Steve Biko preached a lot. When he said that the first thing that we need to do is to infuse back dignity and life into the empty husk of the black person because over hundreds of years we have been so de-humanised that even ourselves, we are ashamed of being black."

She continues, "So I wanted to introduce Steve Biko to the younger generation and hopefully make him and his philosophies something cool that the kids will want to get into. That was my way of, you know of introducing identity politics into our society."

Her third record, Kulture Noir, is an extension of her earlier work and the complex identities and tensions that exist within Africa and exploring ideas of building a cohesive society; "I was trying to unite the two big colonies on the continent [the French and English]. It's all African music, and I thought that would be a great way of bringing us back to the fold."

Last year Dana launched her fourth release, Firebrand – a reflection of herself; "It took many years of being in denial about the labels that people were giving me; 'You're a writer, you are a politician, an activist...' you know, all of these posh things, and I felt...I didn't want these labels. I fought them for a long time because I just wanted to be an artist and to say that whatever else I do is what informs my art. It's all about my art, but I knew I was lying to myself. So at some point after going through some experiences, I just finally accepted that I am all of these things and there's nothing wrong with being all of them."

In an intimate conversation with Van Wyk she talks about her passion for music and singing; “I love what I do. I would not change it for anything – and that’s not to say there aren’t any challenges but I love those. I’m grateful that in a world where people work jobs just to pay their bills, I can do so doing something that I am really passionate about.”

For the portrait ‘Royal Performance’ which will appear digitally on the Monday after her short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, “Dressed in Xhosa-inspired garments and draped in traditional beadwork, Dana is imagined as a regal South African queen. A reference to both her culture, and her position and success in the South African music industry, she is photographed while seated upright in a wicker chair – her pose strong, her gaze to camera fierce and unwavering.”

On the future of South Africa she says, “The student movement is the most exciting thing that has happened in this country after 1994. They are the youth of 1976 reborn. They will change our society in ways that we could never have imagined. I’ve been singing about it and hoping for this for all of my career.”

She concludes by saying, “You can be whoever you want to be. You have to believe in and trust yourself. If you can imagine it, there is no reason why you can’t have it. There is room for all of us to chase our dreams.”

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