

BUSINESS DAY
LIFE /ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

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Protest music of SA, Cuba and Italy delivers a message of hope



The Liberation Orchestra performing at Johannesburg Theatre on Africa Day.
Picture: CLIVE HASSALL



The Liberation Project brings the protest music of Cuba, Italy and SA together in an eclectic world music mix, now available on an album titled *Songs That Made Us Free*.

The seed for the project was planted by Dan Chiorboli who was born in Ferrara in Italy. He grew up in Durban and began his professional career as a percussionist with singer/songwriter Neill Solomon and the Uptown Rhythm Dogs. He founded the Awesome Africa world music festival in 1999, a pioneering event that took him back to Italy to rediscover his partisan roots.

Chiorboli's interest in Italian music was first sparked by Roger Lucey, or Ruggero Lucia as he is affectionately called in Italy. Lucey's first two albums, though critically acclaimed, were banned by the apartheid government, stifling his music career. He then became involved in theatre and trained as a cameraman for television.

"I introduced Dan to a very Celtic sounding song from the Modena City Ramblers. Dan flipped and by pure coincidence met up with the band a short while later," Lucey says.

"That's how he got them to come and play at Awesome Africa. It was the beginning of what has become wonderful and enduring friendships. These guys are all serious activists and lefties."

Lucey's composition *Thabane* features on the Liberation Project album.

The ongoing South African and Italian collaborations led Ferrara deputy mayor Massimo Maisto to honour Chiorboli for his role in heritage and history, inspiring him to continue the collaboration.

Ferrara is a renaissance city with a focus on music and the arts. It is a left-leaning social democratic town with a history of partisan resistance, which gave it a natural link to the struggle against apartheid in SA.

Drawing on a lifetime of musical adventures, Chiorboli formed an international network of friends and collaborators with strong beliefs in human rights, liberation, freedom and equality.

His high school friend and co-producer Solomon and Roxy Music lead guitarist Phil Manzanera conceived a collaborative band and studio recording project. The live shows they produced included a once-off performance at the Joburg Theatre on Africa Day featuring Vusi Mahlasela, and a sneak preview at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival featuring Siphó “Hotstix” Mabuse.

In the studio, musicians Tony Cedras (trumpet), Tebogo Sedumedi (bass), Massimo Giuntini (vocalist), Keeran Eshwarlal (Sufi singer and harmonium player) and N’Faly Kouyate (Guinean griot and kora player) were all given an opportunity to shine.

Solomon’s Passage One Studios in Norwood was set up as mission control room for the The Liberation Project album. The team assembled a selection of 34 songs with three bonus tracks — all with a unique story and identity to expose the hope — introspection and celebration of liberation.

The compositions were collated in Norwood and sent to producer Manzanera in London and 17 studios around the world, where musicians overdubbed their parts.

The end product features 142 musicians from 18 countries and crosses a variety of musical genres.

“The most important factor was that each song had to resonate with what South Africans have been through as a country and people — and from there to understand and share with Italians who fought in the Partisan Resistance and the Cubans during Castro’s revolution,” says Chiorboli.

“We have tried to create an uplifting musical soundtrack to what has moved us emotionally in our lifetimes. Our aim is to leave a message of hope so that we can get back to the euphoria of the [Nelson] Mandela days. SA still has a major role to play internationally from a cultural perspective. It is still a miracle nation which avoided a civil war in 1994.”



The Liberation Orchestra performing at Johannesburg Theatre on Africa Day. Picture: STRUAN DOUGLAS

The 1942 composition *Riconquistare La Liberta* by Fernando Bruni, the antifascist who died in detention in the dungeon of Castello Estense in Ferrara, provides a new introduction to *Biko*, Peter Gabriel's composition about the arrest, brutal interrogation and death of Steve Biko.

Bella Ciao, the partisan hymn of freedom and resistance sung during the Italian civil war is heard alongside *Songs of the Great Liberations*, a composition drawing on the melody of an anthem from the partisan movement, *Fischia il Venti*, to highlight the project's multiculturalism.

Solomons rescored his soundtracks to the documentary *If This Be Treason*, about Helen Joseph and made by Cedric Sundstrom; and for John Kani's film *Nothing But the Truth* for the album.

He also added new compositions including *I Can Hear My Papa Calling*, dedicated to young Italian activist Karim Franceschi who volunteered to fight in the Syrian civil war. His father had fought for the Italian partisans in the mountains of Tuscany.

"The era of protest added a creative energy as we were packaging serious content into a popular art form," says Solomon.

Manzanera and Juan de Marcos, of the the Buena Vista Social Club and Afro-Cuban All Stars, grew up in Havana and add the Cuban flavour to *Songs That Made Us Free*. Manzanera's *Raya de Bala* recalls the armed revolution; guerrillas roaming the streets, mothers screaming and children crying.

De Marcos paints an ancestral link between Nigeria and Cuba. His compositions tell the stories of how the Abakuá rhythm from the Kalabari Coast of Nigeria came to Cuba, and of the beautiful and brave Yoruba goddess and Afro-Cuban Aphrodite Oshún, who fought against the slavers in Nigeria and Cuba.

Christine Salem from the Reunion Islands brings the islanders' political resistance on to the album with the traditional rhythmic Maloya style of music.

Classic protest songs including Johnny Clegg's *Asimbonanga*, written while Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island; *Free Nelson Mandela*, the clarion call by British musician Jerry Dammers; *Shosholoz*, the traditional folk song that originated in Zimbabwe; and Hugh Masekela's *Soweto Blues* remembering the Soweto uprising of 1976 are on the album.

The Liberation Project is planning a Friendship and Solidarity Tour to Europe, Cuba, Reunion and Mauritius in 201. to spread the proudly South African message of hope.