

About Ladysmith Black Mambazo

Ladysmith Black Mambazo was created in the early 1960s by visionary singer and activist, Joseph Shabalala. The group's name comes from Shabalala's hometown of Ladysmith, near the city of Durban, South Africa. Black refers to the strongest of all farm animals, the black ox. Mambazo is the Zulu word for axe, a symbol of the group's vocal strength. The group is deeply rooted in a musical style called **isicathamiya** (is-cot-a-ME-Ya): a kind of a capella singing (using only voices with no music or instruments) featuring close harmonies and many voices blending different notes at once. This style usually includes hand movements and tight chorography, too.

A radio broadcast in 1970 opened the door to their first record contract. Their philosophy in the studio was—and continues to be—as much about preservation of musical heritage as it is about entertainment. During the 1970's and early 1980's Ladysmith Black Mambazo established themselves as the most successful singing group in South Africa. In the mid-1980s, the American singer/songwriter Paul Simon visited South Africa and incorporated the group's rich harmonies into his famous *Graceland* album, a landmark recording that was considered crucial in introducing world music to mainstream audiences.

The group is a legend in their native South Africa, and played a critical role in the international movement to end **apartheid**—the brutal system of racial segregation and minority rule that controlled South African life from 1948-1991. “Our aim from the beginning was to encourage South African people, especially the young people, that they have talent and are free to use their indigenous music and not try to be somebody else,” reported an original member of the ensemble. Their music also inspired Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison for his revolutionary anti-apartheid work. Mandela would eventually become the first democratically elected President of South Africa, and win a Nobel Peace Prize. Ladysmith Black Mambazo accompanied Mandela to Oslo for the Nobel ceremony, at his personal invitation.

The group can be heard on soundtracks of Disney's *The Lion King, Part II*, Eddie Murphy's *Coming to America*, James Earl Jones' *Cry The Beloved Country* and Clint Eastwood's *Invictus*. A documentary film called *On Tip Toe: Gentle Steps to Freedom, The Story of Ladysmith Black Mambazo*, was nominated for an Academy Award. They have appeared on Broadway, have been nominated for Tony Awards and have won a Drama Desk Award, and five Grammys.

In 2014 founder, Joseph Shabalala, retired after over fifty years of leading his group. Joseph's sons took on the role of group leaders, carrying the group's message of peace into the future for decades to come.

Where Are Ladysmith Black Mambazo From?

You can see their hometown, Ladysmith, on the map of South Africa below.



The Bigger Picture: Key Terms and Ideas

Isicathamiya Music

The word itself does not have a literal translation, but it is based on the Zulu verb *cathama*, which means walk softly, or tread carefully. Isicathamiya contrasts with an earlier name for Zulu a cappella singing, *mbube*, meaning lion. Music described as mbube is sung loudly and powerfully, while isicathamiya focuses more on achieving a harmonious blend between many different voices. The name also refers to the style's signature dance moves that keep the singers on their toes.

Isicathamiya is believed to have roots in very different cultures: Traditional music of the indigenous Zulu people of Africa, Christian choral singing, and American musicians and variety shows that toured South Africa extensively in late 1800s. By the 1920s, Zulu men were migrating from their rural homes to find work in the mines. One historian says, "Poorly housed and paid worse, [the migrant workers] would entertain themselves, after a six-day week, by singing songs into the wee hours every Sunday morning. *Cothoza Mfana* they called themselves, 'tip toe guys,' referring to the dance steps choreographed so as to not disturb the camp security guards." Isicathamiya troupes are traditionally all-male, just as the mine crews would have been. Eventually, this developed into a competitive form of entertainment.

Joseph Shabalala and Ladysmith Black Mambazo would help make Isicathamiya an iconic touchstone of South African culture. Shabalala led the creation of a South African Traditional Music Association to help reclaim isicathamiya as a form of traditional music, and used his group's global fame to address important societal issues such as violence, racism, and the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Apartheid

Apartheid was a political and social system in South Africa that enforced racial discrimination against non-whites. Racial segregation had existed in Southern Africa for centuries following European colonization, but when apartheid laws were introduced by the National Party in 1948, segregation was more strictly enforced. It remained the governing system for nearly 45 years.

Under this system, the people of South Africa were divided by race and many basic rights were denied to non-white people. Black people could not vote and had no political representation, even though they made up the majority of South Africa's population. Black people had to carry special passes or have permission to travel outside their designated area. The government separated mixed communities, and forcibly moved many black people off their land. Men were assigned to jobs far from home. As in the United States during segregation, there were white-only buses, benches, restaurants, drinking fountains, hotels, and stores. Every detail of daily life was impacted. While the US officially ended segregation in 1965, apartheid continued until 1991, despite global disapproval and mounting violence within South Africa.

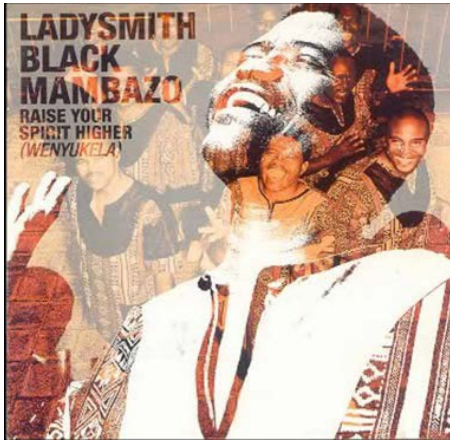
The last President who held office during the apartheid era was Frederik Willem de Klerk; he realized that apartheid could not continue. He freed Nelson Mandela, and many others, who had been sentenced to life in prison for anti-apartheid activism. Together, Mandela and de Klerk negotiated with many political groups to bring an end to apartheid and expand the right to vote to all South Africans. Mandela was later elected President of South Africa, after the first multi-racial elections were held in April 1994. He was the first black person to hold the position. Mandela and de Klerk were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts.



Public signage from apartheid-era South Africa; Protest against white-only minority rule; Iconic human rights leader and South African President, Nelson Mandela.

The Sounds of Protest:

Music in Civil Rights Movements



The music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo was not expressly rooted in protest; it was considered non-political and peaceful by the apartheid-era government. The group was given rare permission to travel and perform across South Africa more freely than most black ensembles. But, as long-time group member Albert Mazibuko says “music is always political. We politicized our music in a way that wouldn't make somebody angry but make them aware of what is wrong and what is right.” Without expressly condemning the brutal policies of apartheid, their work carried a message of universal peace, love, and shared humanity—everything that apartheid denied. Using the traditional, and distinctly black, isicathamiya style, they amplified, honored and protected black South African culture in a time when it was being suppressed.

“Ladysmith Black Mambazo music is about inspiration,” says Mazibuko. “We are encouraging people to not lose hope in anything.”

Here in the United States, music also played an important role in the fight for Civil Rights for all Americans. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was a mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination.

Protesters, some in prison, some on long protest marches, sit-ins, or boycotts, sang what became known as Freedom Songs. Much like the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Freedom Songs were rooted in the culture and experience of black people. African American spirituals, gospel, and folk music were the basis for many Freedom Songs. Religious themes of faith and hope, suffering and redemption figure prominently in the lyrics.

“We Shall Overcome” by Mahalia Jackson became the unofficial theme song for the movement. This song helped inspire people to overcome hardships and keep fighting for freedom. Other musicians such as Sam Cooke, Nina Simone and Larry Goldings used their passion, influence, and outspoken personalities to advance the cause through their music.

The movement also inspired jazz and blues songs, and music, in turn, fueled the movement. As Martin Luther King Jr said, “[These songs] take the hardest realities of life and put them into music, only to come out with some new hope or sense of triumph. This is triumphant music.” Triumph and hope—qualities found in the freedom songs of both South Africa and America.



Dig Deeper: Videos, Further Reading and Discussion Topics

Learn more about Ladysmith's founder, the late [Joseph Shabalala](#)

[Watch Ladysmith perform a live set](#) on KEXP radio in Seattle

See the group [performing a hit from *Graceland*](#) with Paul Simon in 2007

[See other Isicathamiya choirs in action](#)

Listen to this play list of [10 iconic songs from the Civil Rights Movement](#) in the US

- Are you familiar with any protest or Freedom Songs? How did you learn them?
- Do you agree that “all music is political”? Why or why not?
- Can art help us address social problems? Is it more effective than other methods of communication?
- Who are some of your favorite performers? Do they have a message or political statement to share?
- What traditional musical styles are part of your community?
- Is there a style or specific song that has a special meaning to you?



You're the Critic: Performance Review

A music critic is a journalist who reports on music and musicians, and comments on performances and recordings. Imagine you are a music critic. In 2-3 short paragraphs, review your experience of this special filmed performance. Here are some things to think about when writing your review:

- **What words would you use to describe this performance?**
- **Did you experience or learn something new?**
- **Was there a theme or idea in the work? What was it?**
- **How did the performance make you feel?**
- **What was your favorite moment? Why?**
- **This performance was meant to be experienced live, in a large theater. What do you think might have been different if you had seen it with a crowd of people?**

If you need some more help, look in the newspaper's Arts section, in print or online, for reviews or commentary on performances and art. Read a few to see how they are structured, what is included and what is not.

We'd love to hear from you—send us your reviews via email at dfs@cap.ucla.edu