

## **I Sing with a Sword in my Hand**

*Ndicula ndiphethe ikrele esandleni.*

An obituary sums up a person's life in a few hundred words, states their achievements, contextualizes their work in terms of broader currents and, at best, attempts to convey how much they will be missed and how things will never be the same again. But from the moment I heard the voice of Zim Nggawana's lifelong companion and sometimes manager Zaide Harneker sobbing on the phone, "My friend has gone, my friend has gone..." I could not help feeling that here was one individual whose life was not going to fit into an obituary.

It's true that Bra' Zim recorded ten albums (of which at least 5 are masterpieces), and it's true that he was mentored by the "greats" of Afro-American improvised music (Archie Shepp and Yusuf Lateef) and it's also true that he went on to mentor an entire generation of extraordinary young South African talents (most notably piano virtuosos Kyle Shepherd and the bass phenomenon Shane Cooper), but actually his greatest achievements were on the level of the everyday. Zim was a man whose immense quality of spiritual Being simply altered the lives of all those who came into contact with him. He was an alchemist, a transformer of energies, and, most importantly and in the deepest sense of the word, a Spiritual Healer. Music was not an end result for Bra' Zim, it was the means to provide healing.

Healing was paramount to Zim, a man acutely aware of the wounded condition of his people, of his country, of his times. On a trip to meet the legendary novelist and academic Eския Mphahlele Bra' Zim questioned the

sage about the naming of not only this country as "South Africa" but indeed the name of the continent itself "Africa". "Where does this word Africa come from?" Zim asked the venerable old sage who was forced to admit that it was given to the continent by Roman colonizers. Zim recounted his memory of his grandfather telling him that the continent was called Quntu. "I reject this thing called African if Africa is a name given by the white man. How is it useful to be African?" Zim retorted. Eskia went silent. There was nothing to say.

Zim's political acumen was unparalleled, certainly more rigorous and critical than any of the so-called "politicians" that strut the stage in this country. Paradoxically he entirely rejected politics and had no interest in the machinations of the power cliques that run the world, and the world of culture. There will be hypocritical paeans to his genius from all the government departments and from all the jazz promoters but the truth is that Zim could hardly get a gig in this country, his huge reputation notwithstanding. The Department of Arts and Culture did nothing to help restore his Zimology Institute when it was vandalized in 2009 and he was forced to sell the farm that the Institute was built on. Promoters and audiences were shy of the increasingly experimental tendency in Zim's music and he spent the last few years of his life peering into the abyss of financial ruin. Those same jazz promoters that avoided him will now rush to organize sanitized Zim Memorial Concerts that will capitalize on his death and soothe their venal consciences.

Zim Ngqawana was on a spiritual journey. He had given up his attachment to his physical body many years ago and was living life with only one goal - to experience total freedom. He explained it like this "When you

improvise, especially within the avant garde genre, that is when you experience total freedom. Because that is bordering on the unknown, which is based through inspiration and spontaneity. No fear. It comes from that centre of humility, and a willingness to go beyond yourself and to selflessness."

Bra' Zim performed on flute, soprano sax, alto sax, tenor sax and piano with complete abandonment. He played with the understanding of a man who was already dead. When his life's work, the Zimology Institute was vandalized he told me "I have learned from this that nothing is permanent in this world." Then he broke out into song, "*Ndacula ndiphethe ikrele esandleni.*" "I sing with a sword in my hand."

Hamba kahle Bra' Zim.

Aryan Kaganof

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### **On Zimasile's Going**

"There's something blowing a bubble in the gutter. A rock of awareness. Something like that. Tell it to the kids. They'll know what it means."

It's Zimasile's voice, he's whispering. Zaide wipes the tears, spreading mascara all across her cheeks. She looks like she's on fire because of the crater that's been taken out of her soul. A big huge hole where Zimasile used to nap when he was tired of the sounds that all of those wives made.

And the world. The world of noise. Zimasile keeps on whispering, his voice raspy and almost indecipherable were it not for the obtuse fact of her lifetime's deciphering his rasping.

"You have to live close to death, it's the only way. Sleep with death. Wake with death. Inhale death. Exhale death. Death colours life. Flavours life."

Zaide doesn't want to hear this. She wants her friend to come back from death. To chant with her, his large lumbering body familiar and comforting. Body like a mountain. Huge body. Body of love.

Andile's crying too but there's no mascara. Black cheeks covered in tears. "I'm going crazy man. only a pretty white woman could rescue me from my blackness."

I miss you Black man. I wish we had a chance to really sit down and talk. Zim's going is a real disaster for this place. Try to stay alive blak.

"miss u too. Also want tym out wt u. Wadada wants a memorial in jozi. He is devastated."

Democracy has trivialized life and living. I long for the sword.

"Sword!"

Right now all I have is tears. I feel weak and disgusting. Zim was a possibility that has now been erased. I used to believe in you but you can't

sing, you can't dance. Blackness is a void. Even my white zombie world has more chance.

"Lol! Will turn to the coldness of steel. Zim gave us all he could."

I have realized that this aluta is futile. All is lost. Only death wins.

"We must go to death with energy. Said our master."

Black death. white death. Maybe death is more fair than this White life?  
Fuck you Andile, you are still too kind.

"I'm tired ak."

Boss I felt you last night. It reminded me of how we met on June 16 in that Newtown restaurant. My tragedy is to make these documentaries about heroes that refuse to live forever. Your tragedy is to understand your people's ongoing defeat. For this reason we can never be friends: I will always capitalize on the friendship. To be true to the friendship you have to scorn me. Until then you always lose. And when you scorn me we both lose. The truth is that blackness always loses even when it wins. That is what Zim understood.

Andile straightens up and his grin shines with the gleaming patina of mau mau and his eyes burn with the searing intensity of poqo: "The black tragedy is that we have no option but to enter this lost battle with the determination of winners."

Comrade Athi joins us in the heaven of black winners: "Brotha K, we b  
strng we stand tall our chins strait - evry soul is destined 2 liv, let alone  
leavin wen the stink of tym stil reeks. This is tym 2 blow horns n make ear  
piercin noise. Tho in sad hearts we stretch our lips n smile 4 he left a life.  
an existence. he left a note. so we make noise. N fuck god!"

Then Brother Kyle started the wailing and the hammering on the piano  
and sister Zai added her chanting and I was unable to control my howl  
that came from a place way before the beginning and deep down below  
the bottom. You might have called that place despair if you hadn't ever  
heard Zimasile play the soprano sax. But those of us who were privileged  
to hear the soprano in that man's hands understand that this pain we're  
feeling is the definition of a place called hope. It's telling us we're still alive.  
And so is he.

Aryan Kaganof

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