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Charges of racism as town fathers moot St Lucia Ltd

INGRID SALGADO

TOWN councillors have backed down from a plan to privatise St Lucia Village in what appears to have been a move to keep blacks out of the northern KwaZulu-Natal town.

Some of St Lucia's 400 residents were in a fury this week after news of the scheme was accidentally divulged during a recent meeting with the ratepayers' association.

Arrie Viviers, mayor of the town for 18 years, said the issue cropped up at a meeting attended by town councillors about three weeks ago.

"If we did discuss it, we did. Some of the guys said it would be nice to become a private township. There would be no more problems in the future."

But many of the town's residents have branded the idea far-fetched.

"The whole thing is completely loony," said Robin Gunter, the town's architect and an executive member of the ratepayers' association. "The majority of people would be dead against any attempt at privatisation. We would rather build St Lucia into a mega tourism destination."

A resident who asked not to be named for fear of recrimination said the "harebrained" scheme was a racist ploy to keep St Lucia white.

There are regular allegations of racism in the picturesque 400ha town, where the property owners are all white.

Last year, the wife of the Dutch ambassador to South Africa was refused accommodation because she is black. And the people of nearby Khula Village are irked by a boom gate at the entrance to St Lucia manned by khaki-uniformed guards.

The boom was erected allegedly to halt criminal activity, but is viewed as an unwelcome sign to blacks.

The privatisation scheme is believed to have been hatched in a last-ditch attempt to fight the Municipal Demarcation Board's proposed inclusion of St Lucia into the nearby town of Mtubatuba, where 80 percent of the council is black.

It remains unclear how the councillors planned to privatise St Lucia but they are believed to have investigated the possibility of making its residents shareholders of a "St Lucia resort".

Viviers said there were "many advantages to becoming a private town. You don't have to



WHO GOES THERE? The boom gate at the entrance

share your tax base, you can look after your own property and you keep your independence."

But he angrily denied that the plans were an attempt to keep blacks in Khula Village — otherwise known as Dukuduku North — from sharing the town's wealth, generated chiefly from tourism.

"Is that a racism horse you're getting on? I'm not going to answer these political questions," he fumed.

SHABALALA'S MOTTO: 'MINE IS A GOD-GIVEN TALENT. I WORSHIP GOD, NOT FAME'

JOSEPH Shabalala is talking on a tiny, silver cellphone (state-of-the-art - if you did not keep a firm grip on it, it would probably disappear down your ear).

We are in the middle of an interview about Ladysmith Black Mambazo's (LBM) latest album, *In Harmony*, a mix of those magnificent vocal harmonies which the 10 members of this hugely-successful gospel group seem to produce so effortlessly, and some "cross-over" tracks, with overseas pop stars such as Des'ree and the Lighthouse Family.

The big commercial radio play is a re-jig of Bill Withers's soul classic, *Ain't No Sunshine*, a collaboration with the sultry Des'ree and worth buying the CD for on its own, if you enjoy a bluesy shuffle around the kitchen - pure gold.

Then there is a rocking version of the Staple Singers' *I'll Take You There* - Ray Phiri on vocals, LBM on soft shoe shuffle and harmonies - and the track, *Hello My Baby*, which had Michael Jackson himself waxing lyrical when he and LBM met up in the States.

So many great tracks, from traditional LBM *isicathamiya* through to soft rock - well, listen out for it.

But, back to the interview, which Shabalala has politely interrupted, because he does not want to lose track of a young singer who caught his eye, or rather his ear, at a special peace concert laid on by the British Broadcasting Corporation in Durban recently.

He has finally managed to track down Brandon Motso (nine), a pupil at Collingwood Primary School in Wentworth, and Brandon's school head has happily given the go-ahead for her pupil to hoof it, with chaperone, down to Independent Newspapers to meet up with Shabalala.

The genial super-star is determined to help this youngster on the right road to a career in music.

In Harmony was released in the UK in October and clocked up 42 000 sales in just over a month. Released in South Africa earlier this month, the album sold 10 000 copies in a week.

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of the SOUL

In Harmony, Ladysmith Black Mambazo's 39th album, has just been released here and sold 10 000 copies in a week. Sally Scott spoke to Joseph Shabalala, lead vocalist and founder-member of the internationally-acclaimed isicathamiya group, who have almost single-handedly put South Africa on the world music map.

around, even though the group had already made positive moves overseas.

In 1981, the year of LBM's first trip overseas at the invitation of a German television station, they were such a hit that the few copies of their album which they took with them were sold immediately.

Fame at last, overseas, but at home it took Simon to discover the group for most white South African music-lovers and a mass of new fans around the world.

On Simon's *Graceland* album, Shabalala wrote two of the tracks and the group played on nine. The rest is history.

Interviewed at his Clermont home, Shabalala casually mentioned that, while in America, the group had met up with the gloved-one himself.

Jackson had been in an audience at one of their shows and had returned the next night, with his mum in tow, to meet the band. The result was the inclusion of three of Ladysmith Black Mambazo's songs in Jackson's *Moonwalk* video. The big times just kept getting bigger.

Even though there were still problems when the group appeared on home ground (a concert with Stimela, at King's Park Stadium in 1987, drew a mere 900 fans, due to lack of publicity, political in-fighting and the "high ticket price" - R10), internationally the group could do no wrong.



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This dream has been uppermost in Shabalala's thoughts for a good 15 years and, at last, it looks as though the Ladysmith Black Mambazo Academy of South African Music and Culture might become a reality, which will be something of a miracle as far as Shabalala is concerned.

He has been talking about establishing the academy to many people over the years, including the likes of *Inkosi* Mangosuthu Buthelezi and Prince Charles and he is now impatient for results.

SHABALALA'S good friend Paul Simon, the American singer and composer who, in the mid-1980s, helped put Ladysmith Black Mambazo on the international music map when he asked for their collaboration on his album *Graceland*, has been "very encouraging" since he heard about Shabalala's dream.

"I told Paul that in South Africa traditional music was not really taught. I told him our people were taught Euro-centric music only and there was no place where one could really learn and polish one's skills.

"He told me to go for it. In 1991 he even sent a representative down to inspect the initial plans for the project, when it seemed that things would be going ahead in Colenso."

As it happened, things did not go ahead in Colenso, but this time around Shabalala has a "good feeling" and lives in hope.

"I feel we are finally getting somewhere at last," he says, recalling the many "beautiful promises" which were made at the peace concert, which was attended by various big-time movers and shakers, including Buthelezi.

"I had made a speech saying that I thought this was the right time to start building this academy, for our kids ...

"People came forward and gave their cards. Now it's a matter of following up on those promises. That's the hard part of course."

As a committed Christian, Shabalala has come up against a lot of "hard parts" in life, but somehow he has managed to come up smiling every time.

Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s LBM was a household name in the townships and by the 1980s this gospel outfit was outselling every group in the country.

That should have meant that the name Ladysmith Black Mambazo would be riding high on the local radio charts but, politics being what they were, it was no-show all

German television station, they were such a hit that the few copies of their album which they took with them were sold immediately.

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JOSEPH SHABALALA, founder Ladysmith Black Mambazo

In the same year, they became the first South African band to be recorded on CD and the first South African band to win the Oscar of the music world, a highly-coveted Grammy Award.

The winning album, *Shaka Zulu*, had been recorded in London by Simon.

The kudos and money were flowing but, as Shabalala says, "making millions" has never been part of his grand scheme of things.

"Our songs are traditional and I want to share them with the world. Sharing our songs means more to me than a million rands and material things mean very little to me."

Nowadays, he could probably buy King's Park Stadium, but, as he puts it, "mine is a God-given talent. I worship God, not fame."

By the end of the 1980s, the group had become the first South African musicians to tour Russia and had also enjoyed further international musical success when one of their songs, *Rain, Rain Beautiful Rain*, had been used for a soft drink advertisement in America and United Kingdom.

At around the same time, Ladysmith Black Mambazo's music was featuring in the Eddie Murphy comedy *Coming to America*; at a concert in Spain they had joined 1960s folk icon Joan Baez in *Amazing Grace*; released *Journey of Dreams* and they were finally getting the attention they really deserved from fans, old and new, back home in South Africa.

A tour of Japan was coming up and another new album, their

when asked why he was recording in Durban when the world's top studios were open to the group.

World record sales were in the millions, platinum, gold and double gold discs were the order of the day and their third Grammy nomination had just been announced.

It was December 1991 and Shabalala had just finished mixing *Stars*, the group's latest album.

At the end of November, there had been a Children of Africa concert in Nigeria and preparations were under way for a tour of South Africa, in the new year.

But, one of those "hard parts in life" was just about to crop up.

On December 10 news filtered through that Headman Shabalala, Joseph's younger brother and co-founder of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, had been shot while driving home to Clermont.

The incident, involved a security guard, Mr Sean Nicholas of Springbok Patrols, who said he had picked up Shabalala because he was "swerving" on the road.

The death and the fact that Nicholas was not a member of the police force and, therefore, had no official reason to interfere with a member of the public, caused a huge furore, both here and abroad.

The trial, which ended in a verdict of culpable homicide and a three-year sentence, was closely followed by Simon.

Grief-stricken, Shabalala spoke of the law of the jungle which had killed his younger brother.

'MY BROTHER was killed because he was black," he said. "From now there will only be nine of us on stage. We miss one. We felt each other and we had one spirit."

Three months later Shabalala, who is an intensely religious man, spoke of forgiveness and the hope that his music would encourage people – both black and white – to work together and "kick the apartheid out".

Explaining how he chose the name of the group, Shabalala translates the Zulu words as "The Ladysmith Black Axe".

"Ladysmith was my home town, black was the colour of the oxen I drove and 'Mambazo' means 'axe', which is a tool of power."

Power is not the word which comes to mind when one looks at this gentle man. But there is an inner core of steel here which has served LBM well since Shabalala first started hearing songs sung to him "by children" in his dreams.

Shabalala may describe himself as a "simple man", but unlike many other black musicians who, in the "old days", ended up with raw monetary deals from their record companies, Ladysmith Black Mambazo were on the straight and narrow from the word go.

Shabalala was "about 28" when Gallo Records first signed up the group. "I was an ex-farm boy and ex-textile worker. I loved football and that was about it."

"We had no manager. We were just singers. I was stupid, but I knew that I wanted things just to go straight. I didn't want to owe money to anyone."

"There were flat rates or royalties. I just said to the company, when we earn the money you must pay us. It seems to have worked", comments Shabalala, with typical understatement.

Nowadays, of course, there are managers, accountants, jet planes (instead of walking to concerts, "yes, we did that in the early days"), but the essence of the men and their music remains pretty much the same.

Talking about all the overseas touring, Shabalala admits that he "gets sick of all these burgers. I just want something normal, I actually long for *phuthu*."

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