

## **RAY PHIRI: HEREIN LIES A MAN WHO TRIED TO BE HUMAN**

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And so, now that Ray Chikapa Phiri is dead, what do we do? I do not know. The first challenge is that when you speak about a life committed to life, where do begin? Anyway, let me start...

As a dreamer and creator, Bra Ray committed to a lifetime 'searching for the missing chord.' His 'song, one that told a story of a lifetime'; was about the struggles and dreams of his age, his People. Through song and dance, he catalogued a lifetime of a gallant generation and triumphant struggle for freedom; indeed, a struggle to rehumanise us. And as the final curtain falls, for us who remain behind, it remains 'an unfinished story...'

The passing of Bra Ray, is yet another sombre reminder in the collective consciousness of South Africans and our individual mortal being, that we sit at the cusp an era that is nigh: an era without the golden generation.

I'm talking here about the golden era of Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Todd and John Matshikiza, Joe Mafela, Mirriam Makeba, Basil Coetzee, Kippie Moeketsi, Jonny Meko, Dolly Rathebe, Brenda Fassie, Al Jereau, Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, James Brown, Prof Mzilikazi, Thandi Klaasen and countless others.

The transition to a world without this golden generation is rather brutish and long in its undisguised quest to usher in a new generation. Oh yes, he spent his last few years working with younger talent, inducting them into the Stimela railway. This eminent golden generation transcended time, space and yes even existence itself; to overcome all boundaries. That's the definition of legacy.

Bra Ray had the creative skill of crafting the political message against Apartheid in a way that allowed the songs to evade banning. This is a skill that many revolutionary song writers and singers had to learn for the message to arrive. And more curiously, he had the ability to craft lyrics that would mean politics, love and war; all at once. In this regard, 'Look, Listen and Decide' shines the spotlight on his tactical genius.

He straddled the globe like the colossus that he was. He answered not one; but multiple calls to life and fittingly earned the title; multi-talented genius. Graciously entrapped in his roots, Ray could string together sounds of mbhaqanga, jazz, soul, reggae, funk and soul in one album; hell! even in one song with ease. And that's why the story is distorted when some among us say Paul Simon brought Ray to the world stage. Ray also brought Paul Simon to the world stage.

Bra Ray was a philosopher. When faced with life's ultimate question: what is life and why do we exist? Through the voice of Coyote the howler he responded: 'it takes a lifetime to know who you are.' That's Passion, Fire and Ecstasy!

His philosophical self was as esoteric as it was accessible. He often questioned our ways of life: a measure of a great philosopher! Some of his creative work is yet to be fully understood; something on the 'to do list' of researchers.

Bra Ray was human. What makes Bra Ray human is the fact that he spent his lifetime trying to rehumanise a People. To be human, he thought it wise that once more, through the voice of Coyote the howler, we

should 'see the world through the eyes of the child' because; the eyes of the child have no prejudice, hatred or vengeance. That's a progressive world outlook.

With a great sense of dynamism, in any room, he could strike an unassuming figure who made everyone around him comfortable next to his earthly human achievements. Whether in a suit or All Stars, tracksuits and a beanie; Bra Ray was the same narrator, the storyteller, the dreamer, the teacher, the chef; all at once.

Bra Ray was an artistic genius. He could hold a note, stroke a guitar and kill a speech to leave audiences gasping for Rays and air. He could feel the pain and pulse of the People. In his own words, he wrote 'songs for the People'. Feeling the pain of others elsewhere in the world means you have a sense of love and solidarity.

His style of dance, one shared by my late uncle at childhood, was not unique to most African dance forms. It is largely drawn from movements of animals. On stage, he could be seen making dances like movements of this or the other animal. So, through dance, he could connect and communicate the message about the oneness of people, nature and spirit. That is the definition of being grounded.

Occasionally, history has a way of birthing some among us who are endowed with the rare talent of foresight; allowing them to have their dreams and then go on to represent the dreams of tomorrow. They leave behind an enduring legacy of happiness, possibility and the 'scientific temper'. No wonder his 'song painted a picture of a dream' and 'hated to tell a lie.'

As a symbol of collective and individual genius, Bra Ray's seamless weave of thought and practice; was palatable with those who cherished the ideal of freedom and unpalatable to those whose disposition favoured unfreedom.

By now, you would have realised that all I tried to do was to interpret his works. And yet it would be a travesty of justice to dislocate Ray from the collective: Stimela. There is no Ray without Stimela but yes; there should be Stimela without Ray. 'Ningajindi majita.'

As bra Ray ascends to the other existence, we are reminded of the stark reality that our human endeavours are mere 'tributaries of the great river (of life)', of mere mortals, dreamers, drifters. That we must earn our keep by doing all we can to respond to the existential question: how best can we improve the human condition?

Suddenly the air is filled with Bra Ray's laughter; signed with a sigh of his infectious signature smile. His 'song painted a picture of a dream'...the elusive 'missing chord' resides within us all. Let us find it and complete the story of our freedom.

In the end, this is how he told the story. Is it an unfinished story? Yes. Because the road to freedom is unfinished. But his story is finished and someone must write it. Today, we no longer 'whisper in the deep.' His toils and that of his generation gave us the voice to shout and speak out: let the Stimela of freedom reign!

We thank you Timer. To the ages, you now belong. 'Herein lies a man who tried to be human', his tombstone should read. Because after all, what else can you be? I will always remember you Bra Ray, with these words, I can now 'go on and live my life.' **David Maimela called Bra Ray, Timer.**