

I toured with Abdullah Ibrahim (A.I.) and Ekaya, playing tenor saxophone, from 2013-2025. I was always amazed at the effect Abdullah's music had on people, including myself, during every performance. It completely drew you in. Sometimes the music required you to have the patience to allow it to slowly develop, but every note and chord held the promise that something beautiful was about to happen. You were always willing to wait for it. And for those of us playing wind instruments in the band, having to hold out long notes at a super quiet dynamic over a slow tempo had us literally waiting to exhale. Surprisingly, it was physically demanding, but Abdullah insisted his music be performed this way. And for good reason because audiences were captivated. A.I.'s music is, to use Ellington's term, "beyond category." It is genre blending and he was very specific as to how his pieces were to be performed.

And yet, true to jazz tradition, each soloist was expected to bring their own voice and style to the music. And if you weren't really "bringin' it," he would definitely let you know. Performing with A.I. was always a wonderful, musically and spiritually nourishing experience.

—LANCE BRYANT
(saxophone)

I had the good fortune to work with Abdullah Ibrahim for a few years, and I have to say that my time with him was a musical experience like none other I had ever experienced. Performing with him was like being a part of a very meditative and healing experience. I was able to record with Abdullah and toured Europe and South Africa with him. One of the highlights of my musical career was performing for the 50th ANC Congress in his trio, with drummer George Gray. Nelson Mandela was in attendance and after our performance we were invited to meet Mr. Mandela. I remember speaking with him and shaking his hand. It was an experience I can't put into words, to have had the opportunity to meet someone of such great stature will be with me for the rest of my life. Thank you, Abdullah—for the opportunity to go to South Africa twice and letting me be a part of your musical journey.

—MARCUS MCLAURINE (bass)

I performed with Abdullah Ibrahim for 16 years starting in 1997. One of my main takeaways—and there were many—from working in his band was: his absolute control of dynamics, with the concept of less is more and how that was a fundamental part in how he presented his music. One time in particular this illuminated itself to me. As an acoustic trio, we were performing at the North Sea Jazz Festival (anyone who's been there knows it's an eclectic music festival), and there was a hard-hitting fusion band on before us. They finish their set and leave the stage

to rousing applause, while the stage crew changes the stage, puts the equipment in place and quickly ushers in our trio. We then have about a three or four-minute window to line check before the stage manager looks over to us and says that it's time to start. So they introduce Abdullah, but meanwhile the audience is still buzzing and talking about the band before us. I look over to him to ask what we are going to play. I'm thinking he's going to play one of his more powerful up-tempo pieces. He doesn't say anything, then starts playing the piano, going into a very soft, quiet ballad song of his called "Blue Bolero". About 30 seconds in, we start to hear people in the audience hushing others throughout the venue of about 4,500 to 5,000 people. In about two minutes you could hear a pin drop, and the audience was riveted for the entire performance. That was the power of his music. I looked over to Abdullah and he smiled. I said to myself, "OK maestro, you're the man." Thank you, Abdullah, for an amazing journey. Your music lives on.

—BELDEN BULLOCK (bass)

An enormous African "Baobab" tree has fallen in the form of Abdullah Ibrahim, a pianist of tremendous stature hailing from Capetown, South Africa. Serendipity played a huge part in my introduction to Ibrahim. During my undergraduate years at NYU, I connected with pianist and South African multi-instrumentalist Ndikho Xaba. I performed in his band The Natives, which also featured the great saxophonist Marvin Blackman. We performed opposite Hugh Masekela at Howard University, where both he and Ndikho spoke highly of Abdullah, who was living in the Chelsea Hotel on 23rd Street. Once back in NYC, Ndikho arranged a meeting and the rest is history. Abdullah invited me to perform with his band at Alice Tully Hall on Sept 17th, 1977, and we recorded the next day "Haji" for *The Journey* on Hank O'Neal's Chiaroscuro label. Maestro Ibrahim subsequently asked me to join his band for the next three years until 1980, which included my very first European tour and two more recordings: *Africa Tears and Laughter* and *South African Freedom Songs*. This was a period of fecundity for him and his demeanor was full of ebullience despite the challenges of Apartheid in his country. His band at the time was primarily myself (reeds, flute), Greg Brown (electric bass) and John Betsch (drums). While we had many special guests during this period, one concert stands out above all others: Berlin Philharmonic Hall featuring vocalist and civil rights activist Miriam Makeba. It was pure magic to watch her and Abdullah put together a program of music one hour before the concert began.

Abdullah's acumen was quite astounding as he was fluent in several languages, including Arabic. He was also quite munificent and displayed immense altruism. My life was enriched by his presence, and I stand on his shoulders. May his music and memory live onward through our collective memories.

—T.K. BLUE (saxophones, flute)

In November 1973 Matthias Winckelman of Enja Records showed up at my barely one-year-old recording studio with a busload of great musicians who were nominally led by the then legendary South African pianist, Dollar Brand. I remember this first recording session with Dollar/Abdullah very clearly...*African Space Program's* 12-piece band. I was particularly impressed with his playing, and even more impressed with his demeanor. He was as calm as the eye of a tornado, and much of the music swirling about him was pretty frantic. A couple of years later, Abdullah was back in the studio, once more for Enja, but this time, instead of his space children, he brought along the often-working duo of Cecil McBee and Roy Brooks. Abdullah was the first musician I'd ever encountered who was really drawing on an African experience, because that was his experience...Abdullah was the real thing, and it was apparent in every note he played. I don't know if this was why he was able to seemingly play without boundaries, but something made the difference. He could play Ellington, Monk, be as out there as anyone in town, swing with mainstreamers and compose beautiful melodies as well. Of course, everything he did had an edge to it, unlike anyone else, and it was an edge I liked.

In 1976, Abdullah met with Bill Gallagher and myself at Bill's office on W. 57th Street. We wanted to make a deal and we did. Bill thought Abdullah's tune "Cape Town Fringe" (also known as "Mannenberg") was the most infectious jazz melody he'd heard since Paul Desmond's "Take Five" and he wanted to license the album for release in the US. *Cape Town Fringe* became Chiaroscuro's first release that sold in excess of 20K copies, making the Billboard jazz charts. Fifty years later people still request it, though it has never been reissued as a CD.

—HANK O'NEAL (Founder, Chiaroscuro Records)

On behalf of Abdullah Ibrahim's Ekaya, I wish to express deepest condolences on the passing of our beloved musical leader. We are all deeply saddened and devastated by the loss of our mentor, teacher and guide. Every note we played with him was a gift. His music was far more than sound—it was a profound lesson in life. Through his compositions, performances and example, we learned not only about music, but also about humanity, resilience, dignity and grace throughout life's journey. His wisdom extended beyond the bandstand and touched our hearts, shaping us as musicians and as people. His mastery, vision and spirit will continue to inspire generations to come, and we will carry his legacy with us in every note we play. His touching and heartfelt music will be dearly missed by myself and the members of Ekaya, in addition to the countless people from many cultures around the world whose lives were enriched by his artistry. Though he is no longer with us, his music and teachings will remain alive in our hearts forever. With love, gratitude and deepest respect.

—CLEAVE GUYTON (alto saxophone, clarinet, flute)

When I began my journey into jazz as a student at the South African College of Music (SACM) at the University of Cape Town, I first encountered the name Abdullah Ibrahim, formerly Dollar Brand. As a newcomer to the worlds of jazz, South African jazz, and jazz piano, I was constantly discovering new sounds, artists and influences. At the time, I could not have imagined how Ibrahim's music would come to permeate my own work as a jazz pianist, composer and educator. As I explore the sounds and traditions of South African jazz in my creative practice, his influence emerges again and again—sometimes consciously, sometimes indirectly, but always profoundly. I vividly recall an occasion, during my second year of study, when he visited the South African College of Music to present a performance and workshop for students. I was fascinated by the sounds and emotions he drew from the piano, but even more striking was the fierceness with which he spoke about life, music, protest and human rights. It was one of my first encounters with the idea of music not merely as artistic expression, but as a powerful force for social justice and cultural identity. It truly strikes me, nearly 30 years on from that first encounter with Ibrahim's music and passion, how profoundly his music and unique artistic voice have shaped generations of South African musicians, myself included. He helped define the sound of South African jazz in so many ways. His music is distinctly Cape Town, weaving together the rhythms of ghoea, the melodies of the imam's call to prayer, the harmonies of church hymns and the language of American jazz into something entirely his own. Through my work as an educator and in youth development, I continue to share the legacy of Abdullah Ibrahim with the next generation of musicians, and through them, the next, and the next.

—AMANDA TIFFIN (piano, vocals)

Abdullah Ibrahim was a very special person in my life. I spent five years performing with him and learned so much. We talked about our families: he told me that his father died when he was four years old and that his mother and grandmother played piano in the church. A lot of his compositions are hymns he composed from listening to his mother and grandmother. He inspired me to compose and was a major musical mentor in my life. He also had a great sense of humor. Very few people got to see that side of him. I also remember him sitting at the grand piano and making it sound like an upright with tacks on the keys! I will miss him so much. He was one of a kind. My deepest condolences to his family. Rest in peace.

—DICK GRIFFIN (trombone)

I spent a short while with Abdullah Ibrahim's Ekaya (1990-92)—with musical director Horace Alexander Young III (alto, soprano, flute), Jimmy Cozier (baritone), Ricky Ford (tenor), Buster Williams (bass) and Ben Riley (drums)—and I played on the recording Abdullah did for Claire Denis' movie in Paris, *No Fear No Die*. I remember Abdullah doing his prayers during this recording, playing this motif he hummed out to the horns in 7/4. He also had this thing he would practice, some unique martial arts, which he would do with the cats. My first trip to Africa in 1992 with Ekaya was at the time Nelson Mandela was about to become president. I went with Abdullah to South Africa a second time as well, and we played the Cape Town Jazz Festival. We used to always talk about the parallels of the history of South Africa and the history of America. Abdullah mostly gave us the melodies, the motifs, the songs, and then let us—the American jazz cats—take it from there. I highly respected how he valued our knowledge of the music and gave us free rein to interpret his music. Good people, good roots.

—KU-UMBA FRANK LACY (trombone)

Abdullah Ibrahim was a really big influence on a lot of us because he had something different. He was the guy that put our music on the world map. I first heard him when I was a kid. I was about 12 or so and one of my uncles took me to a show at the University of Cape Town. I remember all these people jumping up and down to his music, including rich people with jewelry on also jumping—it was loud and infectious. He had one of the old Klopse (Cape Town Minstrel) legends on percussion. I first met Abdullah in 1987, when we were in Amsterdam, for the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) festival. I was there with my band the Genuines and Basil Coetzee, a lot of musicians, artists and playwrights, poets and activists. There were around 300 of us, a conference organized by the Dutch anti-Apartheid movement. I don't remember how, but we started chatting and it turned out that he knew who my dad was (musician Tony Schilder) and had great respect for him. I last saw Abdullah in 2024 at his concert at Cape Town City Hall. He was about to turn 90 and we had a nice time catching up and talking about doing something together. I must say, I've taken a chapter out of his book about not compromising and playing your own music: not compromising no matter what.

—HILTON SCHILDER (piano)

From working with Abdullah Ibrahim in the late '70s in both his large and small groups, it always impressed me how he was always able to get his sound. I saw him play the best pianos and the worst pianos, and he was always able to get his sound. That touch really allowed him to convey his voice into the piano. His detailed presentation and pacing of each set were rituals, ebbing and flowing like the ocean. He was always able to get and convey his sound to the musicians and to audiences. As his South African brothers and sisters, who grew up with him, would say: "Thank you, Dollar."

—CRAIG HARRIS (trombone)

I played, toured and recorded with Abdullah Ibrahim as well as his then wife, Sathima Bea Benjamin. With Sathima, I wrote a song ("Winnie Mandela - Beloved Heroine") for Nelson Mandela's wife. I recall Abdullah as a very sensitive player. What I really enjoyed about playing and working with him was the fact that he was always in the moment, even in the recording studio. He would have each of the musicians come up with something on the spot—and it would always come out very interesting. I had such great admiration for him, the way he trusted his musicians and the way he trusted his own ability to really create in the moment. He was also quite the gentleman.

—BUSTER WILLIAMS (bass)

I will forever remember Abdullah Ibrahim's distinct explorations of triadal colors, blended with a unique determination rhythmically to explore more complex harmonies, which excited that unique South African flavor that was unlike any other concept of sound. The voices and sounds of his origin and nature were really special to be a part of.

—CECIL MCBEE (bass)

In 1967 or '68 my father brought home the vinyl recording of "Mannenberg", played by the then Dollar Brand, on an upright piano with a drawing pin sunk into the felt of the striking point of each hammerhead (this I discovered to be the case years later), which delivered that unique sound. It was a fantastic song, masterfully performed and totally iconic. Later around 1991—in The Monument Theatre, at the top of the hill overlooking Grahamstown in South Africa—I saw such great players as alto saxophonist Robbie Jansen and tenor saxophonist Bêr Basil "Mannenberg" Coetzee shuffling, even scuttling, onto the stage, guesting with the great Abdullah Ibrahim. Literally crouched, with left hands grasping their right forearm, both arms behind the back, of course—it was like chain-gang members on a brief respite, perhaps to slake their thirst with brackish water from a tin mug. It was not nice to witness. But listening to songs such as "Mannenberg" and "The Wedding", I realized what a truly great composer-pianist he was. When I listen to his recordings, I hear nobody else but him. He delivered a rendering of the musical soul of Capetown, such as no other pianist has ever done, nor will ever do. A true blessing. May he rest in peace.

—PAUL HANMER (piano)

Abdullah Ibrahim stands tall as a guiding light in sonic expression. His music is imbued with the spirit of his homeland and is foundational in the tradition of South African music. His music is an inspiration to all of us who have come after him and I am grateful for his life and his contribution.

—BOKANI DYER (piano)

I first encountered Dollar (Abdullah Ibrahim) back in 1962, nearly 65 years ago, at a well-known Cape Town jazz club, now a forgotten relic. We were performing with the Four Yanks, my vocal group from East London, which included the talented young Johnny Dyani. I was on lead vocals and piano. During the break, Dollar, along with Chris McGregor, came backstage. They expressed their excitement about my playing. It was our first meeting, and they encouraged me to focus on my piano playing. In 1963, we played at the Castle Lager Jazz Festival at Jabavu Stadium in Soweto, where I had the honor of winning the best piano player award, competing against remarkable talents such as Dollar, Chris, Pat Matshikiza and Shakes Mgudlwa. Fast forward to 1968, when a band from Port Elizabeth sought Dollar's guidance for their recording. Due to his hectic schedule and invitations from Europe, he recommended me to the band, known as the Soul Jazzmen, led by tenor saxophonist Duke Makasi. Thanks to Dollar, I joined them, and in 1969, we released *Inhlupheko Distress*.

I cherish my memories with Dollar, who played a significant role in promoting abroad our musical culture. I admire his bravery, dating back to his days with the Jazz Epistles. We shared a deep love for music and the piano, using our artistry to express the struggles we faced during apartheid times. Dollar's music is deeply rooted in Africanness, and his songs—such as "Ntintinyana", "Pula" and "Bra Timing from Phomolong"—reflect his affection for township culture and the essence of home. May his great soul rest in peace.

—TETE MBAMBISA (piano)

ABDULLAH IBRAHIM
1934-2026