

On following an unconventional path



South African singer-songwriter Bongiwe Mabandla on being pigeonholed, making time for both your work and yourself, and defining success on your own terms.

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As told to Lior Phillips, 2385 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Time management](#), [Beginnings](#), [Success](#).

What is one piece of advice that you wish someone had offered you before you started making music?

I got into music just because I really liked it. I liked following musicians throughout high school. I was just fascinated by it, but I never really thought that I could do it myself. I was more of a fan. So I wish growing up somebody would've said, "You know, you *could* be a singer!" I didn't have the most conventional voice, so I don't think a lot of people saw me as a singer, even to the point where I didn't see *myself* as one.

What specifically do you mean by not being conventional? I know that you grew up singing in church choirs, and your music has this clarion, soulful feeling. Was it just that you weren't angled toward pop?

Especially growing up in the Eastern Cape [South Africa], people really *sing*. In black South African cultures and homes, there's this natural way that people learn how to harmonize. This is done at church, at school. So I just didn't have that technique and that sharpness. I grew up with that church music society, and at the same time we were very much fascinated with voices like Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey—very smooth voices, and I was definitely not like that. And then going to white schools also brought in certain influences.

When did the moment arrive when you realized you would become an artist?

I was always going to become an artist. I was very deep into a lot of art mediums. For a long time throughout high school I was a very serious painter and I thought that I would finish school and go study painting. Sometimes I think I probably should have. That really was my first gift growing up, drawing and painting, and I might get into it a little bit more now. But also I was very serious about becoming an actor. That's actually how I came to Johannesburg. When I got here, I got bored and ended up changing to music. But I was on [South African soap opera] *Generations*. I did a movie called *A Million Colours*.

You were on *Generations*? That's a huge deal!

Yeah. I had a small role, but I was on *Generations*. [*laughs*] I definitely think there's beauty in portraying a character, and I find I'm comfortable writing them now. From character complexities and their own shades of dark and the light, I draw a lot from understanding stories and being involved in that world.

Do you consider your performative self a character, or is that very much still you?

When I write I'm writing for myself and writing about me. Maybe I could be a little bit more comfortable

displaying different emotions. I think that's where the theatrics side of it comes in, but it's definitely not a *performance*. And that's what acting is: making truth of a situation and bringing real emotions into it.

As a fellow South African, it's always bothered me that musicians from our country are always lumped in under the term "world music." Do you feel like that labeling harms your ability to convey a certain story? Does getting put into a box in that way even enter into your practice?

It does. I remember at first when people called my music "world music," I was excited. Like, "world music's such a beautiful term!" But it's so problematic, because it's really boxing things that are "foreign" as one big thing. I could be put next to James Blake. It's similar music. Just because it's in a different language doesn't automatically make it, like, jungle music.

World music as a term is used to label African music, music from South America, music from India. Is it just a label to say that those places outside the United States and the UK don't need a more specific understanding? A lazy blanket term for deep, and complex art. How did you manage to create your own path in your ecosystem that felt a little bit more outside the system?

I've suffered for it, trying to do something so different. Other people look at you like, "Yo, man, why are you playing live with a real guitar when you could just mime it?" Or, "You should do a house track with a DJ." I think it comes down to trying to do something that is more art-based. That's also influenced by my background of doing art at school, doing things that are for high art standards and for art's sake. When we did my album, [*iimini*], I wanted to do things that were unconventional, but artistically-based. Like, "We're going to make art first and that's what should follow."

Why did people specifically push you to do a house track? Is it just because that's what's dominant on the radio in South Africa or because they thought you suited that?

Yeah. It's for that. I think because I've done things that are not mainstream. People always put that pressure, like, "You could blow up so much bigger. You should be so much more of a bigger artist."

My sense is that language can completely devalue your creativity. Like, "Well, if I am not good enough for what I'm doing now? What am I good enough for?"

Yeah. That's a hard thing. I've had to develop a tough skin because I've had to understand success looks very different to many people. Sometimes people look at you and think, "Oh, you're not on the charts. You must be so sad about that." But I'm grateful for what I have. I've managed to achieve what I've always wanted to do. I really just wanted to be a singer. I feel a great deal of accomplishment for starting my career in such a hard way and being able to make a living out of it. It's something I really don't take for granted. But at the same time, I do have days when I feel like I wish more people knew who I was.

After listening to *iimini* it's hard to believe that they don't. They will come! A lot of your audience doesn't speak the same language that you sing in. Do you keep that concept of language in mind when you're writing, or is it just that that's how you express yourself in the most honest way?

It's weird: I grew up in a very English way. I went to boarding school very early. I spoke English from an early age. So for a long time I wasn't really in touch with my culture, or where I came from. But I started to see its true art and I started learning about South African artists and their contribution to the world. And I started to see it's really important if you are an artist that you have site-specific art. When you listen to country music, you can feel where it comes from. I got really influenced by that. Loving my language started from that.

It's like when you see a picture on a postcard or something: it can take you back or it can take you somewhere else. When you listen to music it can sometimes form these pictures in your head and take you to a place. That's what I feel about Busi Mhlongo's music, for example. When you listen to it, you can tell where it comes from.

It's so important to talk about one's culture and heritage, because you are a storyteller and you can become this ambassador for a music community and a language. Does the pull from your heritage, or your language, ever feel daunting?

Oh, yeah. Sometimes when people meet me, they assume I'm very traditional and address me very seriously, and I'm like, "Hey, what's up?" [Laughs] When I came to Johannesburg, it was very important to claim identity as a Black person. People were growing their hair into dreadlocks, wearing their hair natural for the first time. That's also why I've used my name, Bongeziwe Mabandla. In high school I used to have such a problem with this long African name, so I used to be called Bonge. But now I use my full name. This is who I am. This is where I come from. It's definitely an element of reclaiming all that has been lost.

I was watching the story of [the singer] Solomon Linda and how his song ["Mbube"] is one of the most re-recorded songs in the world. Pete Seeger was experimenting with stuff, and he wanted some stuff from Africa. One of the songs he found was "Mbube", which he changed to "Wimoweh". Since then there have been many versions and other people have gotten those royalties [instead of Linda's] family. There was a time where Black artists didn't have these chances, because this style, this language, this expression almost got wiped out and disregarded as unimportant. So to make it now feels like standing up for those kinds of stories and those kinds of artists.

The pressure and stress of that history must require quite a bit of creative energy. How do you make sure that your creativity is nourished when you aren't working and writing songs?

It seems like all I do is work. I think about how fast my 20s flew by because I was trying to hustle. Sometimes as your career gets bigger, it actually demands so much more of you. But when I'm not working, I like to watch movies and I'm going to start drawing. Plus I take guitar classes once a week and practice every day. Then I take singing classes once a week too and practice that every day. It gets crazy.

How did you figure out the business side of your career? Did you have a guide in that part of the process or did you tackle that yourself?

I sort of figured it out as I got along. I remember when I first signed my first deal, it was so funny. I was very young, 26. I had a very serious sense of myself, and I thought it was really important to be staunch about who you are. I was like, "I don't want anybody changing my music," and, "I don't ever want an alcohol brand to be placed with my music. I don't want to play for alcohol brands."

That's so funny, because that's all South African alcohol brands do. Their entire marketing plan is to advertise with musicians.

Yeah. That's the only way you win. Now I'm like, "Where are the alcohol brands at?!" [Laughs]

When you get into the creative mode and you're writing songs, do you need to be in a certain type of environment or do you need certain things to make you as comfortable, creative, or inspired as possible?

I have a looper, so I can loop ideas and get them going. I usually just buy one notebook for each album. I used to just use loose paper and I would lose it. Then I would be like, "Has anybody seen my paper? It's a white paper." [Laughs]

"It's got writing on it."

"Don't tell me it's in the bin." I also do eat a lot, unfortunately. I eat a lot of apples. When I record, I eat bags and bags of apples.

That is a brilliant and unexpected specific from your creativity diary. Why apples?

I just love apples. They're a nice thing especially when you're stressed. Just go crunching on them.

So what about sharing? Do you need to work alone or do you need to share your ideas?

I think not having distraction is a real luxury, actually. Before I left for my tour, I was trying to write, and I had some family around and it was very hard to write. So it's nice that I'm back now and I'm totally alone. It's a bit tricky. Making art takes a bit of hiding sometimes, telling people you're doing something else more urgent so they don't bother you. And I've also decided if somebody knocks I'm just going to keep quiet—be good and just pretend I'm not there.

Is there a habit that you find you have to embrace when you're writing or creating?

I understand now how precious time is. I understand where these songs were three weeks ago and how they're developing now into these things that I really like. Sometimes draft eight looks so different from draft one. It can only happen like that if it's revisited and changed, and sometimes the weirdest things can change a whole song. I'm working on my new EP, but I've had to create it really fast. So I've got to watch myself. Five songs is very demanding.

But at the same time, it's also important to do other things. Yesterday, I went to hang out with some friends, just sitting together and having conversations. I can't just create, create, create, create. I also need to receive something beautiful, or have a thought, or have a conversation, that can make me say, "Hey, actually this conversation was so impactful to me, and I think that lyric, instead of it saying, 'Give your heart to me,' I think it must be, 'Give your whole heart to me.'" It's inspiring. That's what growing songs is actually all about. I've never written a book, but I imagine the characters are like that: they keep revealing themselves more and more as you go.

Bongeziwe Mabandla Recommends:

Blick Bassy: Obsessed with this singer. I opened up for him in France and just fell in love with his music.

Shea butter: I've been trying to grow my hair natural and it's been real hard until I started using shea butter.

Mpepo soap: Sold by my friend who owns the store called the Sangoma Shop [in Pretoria]. I love the design and just the uniqueness of the product.

Imprint clothing brand: I have been wearing their clothes and just love what they represent.

Simon and Mary hats: I have so many of these but still can't get enough of their beautiful designs.

Name

Bongeziwe Mabandla

Vocation

Musician

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Justice Mukheli