

23 Interview with Barbara Pukwana

Christian Steulet/Steff Rohrbach

In 2019, Christian Steulet visited London to interview Barbara Pukwana, the widow of the great South African saxophonist Dudu Pukwana. Steulet recorded their conversation, and the below interview is a transcription edited after his death in 2020 by Steff Rohrbach.¹ A German version of this interview was published in September 2022 in *JAZZ'N'MORE*.²

The saxophonist Mtutuzeli “Dudu” Pukwana (1938–1990) was one of the most significant South African jazz musicians to go into exile. His Jazz Giants (which included Nik Moyake, Tete Mbambisa and Makaya Ntshoko) won first prize at the Johannesburg Jazz Festival in 1962. In 1964, Pukwana travelled to the Antibes Festival in France with the Blue Notes (comprising Pukwana, Chris McGregor, Mongezi Feza, Nik Moyake, Johnny Dyani and Louis Moholo). They afterwards played at the Café Africana, the jazz club in Zurich where numerous South African exiles began their international careers. Then they moved to London. Pukwana also played with McGregor’s subsequent ensemble, the Brotherhood of Breath, and with many of the other South African musicians around Hugh Masekela and Dollar Brand/Abdullah Ibrahim. He also played with the Johnny Dyani Quartet (including the “Song for Biko” with Don Cherry and Makaya Ntshoko) and on the album *Witchdoctor’s Son* (1978) with Dyani and John Tchicai. Pukwana further played with Keith Tippett, Mike Osborne, John Surman, Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink and in the bands Spear (with John Stevens) and Zila (with Harry Beckett, Django Bates and the singer Pinise Saul).

Barbara Pukwana was born in Schaffhausen in 1942. She initially worked as a primary school teacher in Zurich while studying at the “Dolmetscherschule”, the Zurich school for interpreters. In order to complete an English diploma alongside diplomas in French and Italian, Barbara Pukwana moved to London not long after Dudu Pukwana had arrived there. He and Barbara had already met at the Café Africana in Zurich, and they now resumed their relationship, marrying several months later. They stayed in London, where Barbara worked as a translator at the Africa Centre and also taught foreign languages at a secondary school. She began working as a tour guide during the summer holidays, and later limited her teaching to the winter months. She continued working as a guide until 2020.

¹ This interview was translated by Chris Walton.

² Christian Steulet, ed. Steff Rohrbach, “Dudu’ Pukwana – Südafrikaner im Exil”, in *JAZZ'N'MORE* (September 2022), 58–60.



Figure 23.1. Barbara Pukwana in London, 2022.

Christian Steulet: *When did you discover South African jazz? Was it at the Café Africana in Zurich?*

Barbara Pukwana: Precisely that. I was teaching in Zurich at the time, and living just two houses away from the Café. An American pianist played on the afternoons, and in the evening it was Dollar Brand – who was not yet called Abdullah Ibrahim. That was my first encounter with African music, and it was absolutely great. I was dazzled by it, and often went to the Africana with my sister. We met people there – the Café was popular – and it became my second home. At some point, a new band came along and changed the whole scene. It was completely different, more turbulent: the Blue Notes from South Africa! That’s how it started, probably in 1964. I got to know the musicians, fell in love with Dudu Pukwana and immersed myself in that scene and their music. Many Swiss musicians were also fascinated by this music from South Africa.

CS: *Did you have any previous musical experience, or was this your first real encounter with music, and with jazz in particular?*

BP: I already knew some jazz, but it was more like pop music – music that was simply in fashion at the time. There was a jazz band at the institute where I was studying – Irène Schweizer was on drums. I knew her from Schaffhausen. In fact, we’d gone to the same school, and I was in the same class as her younger sister. It was with Irène that I first heard traditional jazz – on records with musicians whose names I don’t remember now. I was familiar with classical music, but seeing people play without music, and hearing them improvise: this was a different kind of music and it fascinated me, because it was created on the spot and never sounded exactly the same twice.

CS: *Did the “integration” of Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes in Zurich involve people beyond the “family” circle at the Café Africana?*

BP: They didn’t mix much with other musicians. But there were people who were interested in their music because it was something new, completely different from everything that had gone before. People in Zurich knew names like Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, but not South Africans like the Blue Notes. The invitation to the Antibes Festival had

given them the opportunity to acquire passports in South Africa and leave the country. They had to provide a surety to guarantee that they'd return, and they naturally lost that when they stayed in Europe. They got gigs here, though without being famous yet. Abdullah Ibrahim was meanwhile living in London, and arranged for them go there too. Chris McGregor's wife Maxine also worked there and had connections. The Blue Notes went to London after an invitation to Ronnie Scott's – and then they stayed.



Figure 23.2. The Blue Notes in Zurich, mid-1960s. From left to right: Louis Moholo, Dudu Pukwana, Chris McGregor, Mongezi Feza, Johnny Dyani. Dudu Pukwana wore the same suit at his marriage to Barbara. Photo courtesy of Barbara Pukwana.

CS: *Did you follow Dudu Pukwana and the band to London?*

BP: It was weird: We had only known each other for a few months. I was at the interpreters' college in Zurich and I had to improve my English in London in preparation for my exams. I was also working as a teacher, and when the school year finished, I went off to spend a year in London with a girlfriend. We didn't have mobile phones back then, and Dudu and I had lost contact. My first job was in Sussex. One free weekend, I went to London and saw a concert advertisement for: "Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes". So I went, and my relationship with Dudu continued. After passing my English exams, I stayed in London. Because I also spoke French, I was able to find a job at the Africa Centre. I was able to see the Blue Notes wherever they played. Dudu and I got married one year after that.

CS: *And you got more and more involved in the music business, is that right?*

BP: Not right away, because Maxine McGregor and Hazel Miller organised their tours, and I'd started teaching again. When Chris McGregor moved to France, the band played less often and its musicians started forming their own bands. Johnny Dyani focused more on Sweden and Denmark, where the Blue Notes had previously had a three-month engagement. They played completely differently when they came back: totally free jazz. At first I found it terrible, but I got used to it. Dudu had also decided to form his own band, and Johnny Dyani encouraged me to start booking their gigs. Later, I organised one or two tours for the Brotherhood of Breath.

CS: *Was there a rational explanation for their shift to free jazz? Were there any signs of that development back at the Café Africana?*

BP: Their music was already very improvisational. But I suspect that it was the impact of their three months in Denmark. And they also had an audience for that music back in London.

CS: *Hazel Miller and others have emphasised the role that the Blue Notes played in revitalising the European jazz scene. Would you agree with them?*

BP: Yes. Hazel's husband, Harry Miller, was playing in different groups like they all did. Dudu, for example, also played with folk bands and other bands of all kinds, including Osibisa.³ He could play with all of them. There was a constant dialogue between different musicians with different ideas and from all manner of backgrounds. In 1965, John Jack took over Ronnie Scott's old venue on Gerrard Street when the club moved into bigger premises. After that the scene switched to the 100 Club on Oxford Street, where the Blue Notes often played, and where I booked most of their performances. The concerts there were sold out every night. The Blue Notes never played at the new Ronnie Scott's.

CS: *These were years when stylistic boundaries fell away.*

BP: When I wanted to place concert advertisements in *Melody Maker*, we had to decide whether to call the music of the Blue Notes jazz or rock. The manager at *Melody Maker* insisted on

³ An Afro-pop band formed in 1969 in London by several expatriate West African and Caribbean musicians.

“rock” because they didn’t play what was usually considered jazz. Their music was fertilised by other sources, and its musicians gradually decided to realise their own ideas and leave the band. Johnny Dyani created an important scene in Scandinavia. Dudu often went there to record, and Johnny also came to London. Abdullah Ibrahim also often recorded up there in the North, though he lived in London, Paris and the USA.

CS: And Mongezi Feza worked with Robert Wyatt, especially on that wonderful album Rock Bottom, along with Fred Frith, Gary Windo and others.

BP: That’s right. They were all invited. Louis Moholo toured the USA; they travelled a lot there and played with different artists. Dudu also often performed in Holland with Misha Mengelberg and Han Bennink.

CS: Were there any problems integrating in London? The English Musicians’ Union was very protectionist.

BP: The members of the Blue Notes had naturally been compelled to join the Union. When we wanted to work in the USA with local musicians, issues arose regarding travel and work permits. The USA has always been difficult in that respect. Dudu was invited by Abdullah Ibrahim, Jonas Gwangwa and Hugh Masekela and stayed over there for several months for recordings and concerts. It was agreed that the same number of musicians from each country would be allowed to perform in both places. You had to insist on that. I can’t remember exactly, but I’m sure that was organised through the Musicians’ Union.

CS: Did the Blue Notes acquire British nationality, or did they remain stateless?

BP: Initially, they were foreign immigrants without any documents. Later, they were given the choice of becoming British or remaining South African. Louis Moholo remained a South African, but everyone else wanted a British passport. After that it was wonderful, because they were able to travel and didn’t need any more permits.

CS: When did you become a concert promoter?

BP: We made a lot of recordings with the BBC. When Johnny Dyani came to London, I’d call the BBC. After a recording in 1980, Johnny said: “Why don’t you organise other concerts too?” After a concert that Dudu and his band gave in 1982, we decided to take their music to more festivals. So I organised one tour every year. I also got in touch with Gaby Kleinschmidt, who was willing to organise gigs. I didn’t really have time for that, as I was working as a tour guide. I had time off in the winter, but was completely booked out in the summer.

CS: When the Blue Notes and Dudu were in exile, what was their relationship to South Africa? Were they politically active, did they want to return, or was that a closed chapter to them?

BP: The chapter wasn’t closed because they’d left their families there. Dudu’s parents, brothers, sisters and friends were still in South Africa! But he only went back once, to promote a record. They kept in contact by phone and by letter. And when South African musicians came to London, we’d meet them and invite them. I can’t say that Dudu really wanted to go back, because

he knew it wasn't right for him or for his work. But he always kept very close ties. Many South African politicians and artists came to London to visit, or for a tour or an exhibition. There were concerts to help support the ANC, and at New Year there'd be a ball with a party. The ANC itself organised an annual meeting in Amsterdam or Rotterdam and would invite exiled South African musicians and artists to attend. We'd spend a week there each time. It was wonderful to be with everyone, and there were a lot of South African musicians living in Holland. There was also an annual festival for contemporary music in Berlin where Dudu played almost every year. They'd invite a whole number of artists who'd then play in a different line-up each day, with every concert completely different from the one before.

CS: So there was a proper international network of exiles. Did any South African artists who'd come to London ever return to South Africa?



Figure 23.3. Dudu Pukwana, 1980s. Courtesy of Barbara Pukwana.

BP: Many of them just stayed. Some had arrived before the Blue Notes – such as those who came to put on the musical *King Kong*. There was a large South African community here, and London offered many opportunities. Back then, the ANC organised a lot of events and we had some very good friends among the ANC politicians. When they came, they visited Dudu. They were real friends, not just politicians who wanted to stand out from the crowd. It was a true community that really stuck together.

CS: *Are there any direct political messages in Dudu's music?*

BP: No, nothing direct. But when he talked about the topic in interviews, for example, he always pointed out the difficulties that musicians experienced in South Africa. His music itself was more an act of reflection on his actual life experiences.

CS: *Is this why he developed the way he did – because he was searching for the South African heritage that he missed in exile, and which he was trying to conjure up by looking back?*

BP: Exactly.

CS: *How long did Dudu remain active as a musician?*

BP: His last gig was at Wembley Stadium [on 16 April] 1990, for Nelson Mandela's first visit after his release from prison. After that, he went on tour to Germany with Chris McGregor. He took ill there and had to go to hospital. He came back later, but had to go to hospital several times. He died on 28 June 1990.

CS: *What changed for you when the apartheid regime ended?*

BP: Not a lot. I went to a conference in Durban of our international tour guide association and stayed almost two months in South Africa. I visited Dudu's family and also met other people who'd known him. At the start of my stay, I went travelling with Louis Moholo and his wife Mpumi. We visited the graves of various musicians and also saw Johnny Dyani's family. Dudu's brother had come to London for the funeral, and I then spent ten days in Port Elizabeth with him and his family. Well, to be precise, I stayed with a doctor because everyone said it was too dangerous to stay in the Black area. But I went to see them almost every day, and all the members of his family who lived in the city were invited too. I then went to Johannesburg to meet other members of Dudu's family, travelling there with a friend from Cape Town who was acquainted with the jazz scene there and knew Abdullah Ibrahim very well. I spoke to musicians who'd played with Dudu, and I filmed everything. When we were in Johannesburg, we stayed with Chris McGregor's brother.

CS: *Hazel Miller told me about a small tour that Harry Miller made to South Africa in the early 1970s. Did you never organise a tour there with Dudu?*

BP: Not in South Africa. I did organise a tour to several countries, visiting Mozambique for the anniversary of its independence, then travelling to Swaziland, then to Gaborone in Botswana, where Jonas Gwangwa had set up a great music scene. We stayed there for a week and also played in Francistown [in northern Botswana], returning to London via Zimbabwe. Then

Dudu, Johnny Dyani and other musicians from London played at “FESTAC ’77: The 2nd World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture” that took place in Lagos in Nigeria. The musicians there came from all over the world, and Dudu stayed for a month.

CS: So you yourself have lived in a world somewhere between worlds ...

BP: My world was the world of teaching and of tourism – with one foot in African literature and politics. At the Africa Centre, where I worked, they organised symposia that were attended by politicians, some of whom I got to know. They included the later President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe. The rebels would then present their ideas. I got an idea of what Africa was like during the wars of independence. I was there to translate, and stayed in contact with them all for a long time. But at some point, the way changed in which the centre was being used.

CS: How important were the wives of these musicians who were in exile?

BP: I don’t know a single musician who could exist without his wife. Musicians need people who believe in them and who can support them. There are only a few big stars, and the others have a very irregular income. But they need a stable basis in life – that’s important. I have both feet on the ground, but artists have everything in their head, and their head is in the clouds. I paid for things when we had a gap in our finances, and I helped to support the tours when they otherwise wouldn’t have got off the ground. And the same was true of Hazel Miller and Maxine McGregor.

STEPHANUS MULLER AND CHRIS WALTON (EDS)

**Cultural Relations between Switzerland
and Apartheid South Africa**

Basler Afrika Bibliographien 2025

The open access version of this book has been published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.



Hochschule der Künste Bern
Haute école des arts de Berne
Bern Academy of the Arts

2025

Published by

Basler Afrika Bibliographien

Namibia Resource Centre & Southern Africa Library

Klosterberg 23

PO Box

4010 Basel

Switzerland

www.baslerafrika.ch



The Basler Afrika Bibliographien is part of the Carl Schlettwein Foundation

Text © The authors 2025

Cover image: Niklaus Troxler's 1994 poster for the Willisau Jazz Festival. Courtesy of Niklaus Troxler

Cover design: Candice Turvey, Spiritlevel

ISBN 978-3-906927-74-9

eISBN 978-3-906927-75-6

<https://doi.org/10.53202/LHFY9620>



This work is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Contents

The Authors	ix
--------------------------	----

Introduction

<i>Chris Walton & Stephanus Muller</i>	xiii
--	------

Part I: Historical Foundations and Early Encounters 1

1 Tracing the Paths of Culture between Switzerland and South Africa <i>Chris Walton</i>	4
2 A Nineteenth-Century Swiss Missionary Encounter with Sesotho Orthography <i>Lineo Segoete</i>	32
3 Vignettes from the Travels of Things: A Cultural Biography of Objects in the Hans Adler Collection <i>Annemie Stimie Behr</i>	44
4 Compact Urbanity in Contrast: Revisiting Civic Centres Designed by the Kirchhofer Office in Apartheid-Era South Africa <i>Thomas Chapman</i>	61

Part II: Music, Theatre and Performance as Cultural Exchange 77

5 Deon van der Walt (1958–2005), a South African Tenor in Zurich <i>Hilde Roos</i>	80
6 South African Youth Orchestras in Switzerland <i>Chris Walton</i>	88
7 Listening to South African Apartheid on Swiss Radio: Athol Fugard's <i>The Blood Knot</i> and the Translation of Passing <i>Franziska Burger</i>	102
8 A Theatre Scandal in the Swiss Provinces: Fugard's <i>Statements</i> in St. Gallen <i>Franziska Burger</i>	115

Part III: Literature, Exile, and Intellectual Dialogues 129

9 Peter Sulzer and the Conservative Representation of South African Literature
to a German-Speaking Readership, 1948–1994
Jasper Walgrave 133

10 Swiss Literature in Afrikaans between 1948 and 1994: An Overview
Paula Fourie 153

11 Lewis Nkosi and Switzerland: Provincialising the Global North
Astrid Starck-Adler & Dag Henrichsen 165

12 “Coloured nature... isn’t that easy to shake off”: Gordon Jephthas in Switzerland
Féroll-Jon Davids 174

13 Shalati Khosa’s Swiss Sojourn
Chatradari Devroop 183

14 Singing Cowboys and Alpine Goat Herds: The Passaggio of Culture to Nature in
Afrikaans Yodelling
Willemien Froneman & Stephanus Muller 191

Part IV: Jazz 205

15 When South African Jazz Came to Switzerland: Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand),
Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes, Joe Malinga and other South African Jazz
Musicians, the Anti-Apartheid Movement and “AfriKaribik” in St. Gallen
Richard Butz 209

16 Dollar Brand in Zurich – Taking Notes
Bruno Spoerri 230

17 Harmonies of Foreign Climes
Steff Rohrbach 238

18 Abdullah Ibrahim in Ichertswil: An Interview with Six Trutt
Christian Steulet/Steff Rohrbach 243

19 Interview with Rose Ntshoko
Steff Rohrbach 254

20	Interview with Bob Degen	
	<i>Steff Rohrbach</i>	263
21	Interview with Stephan Kurmann	
	<i>Steff Rohrbach</i>	269
22	“Jazz against Apartheid”: An Interview with Jürgen Leinhos	
	<i>Steff Rohrbach</i>	278
23	Interview with Barbara Pukwana	
	<i>Christian Steulet/Steff Rohrbach</i>	290
24	Interview with John Wolf Brennan	
	<i>Christian Steulet, ed. Steff Rohrbach</i>	298
25	Interview with Niklaus Troxler	
	<i>Steff Rohrbach</i>	305
	Sources	317
	Archives Consulted	318
	Bibliography	319
	Index of Names and Places	339