

A MUSICAL HERITAGE CELEBRATION IN LENZ THROUGH THE LENS OF GUS POONAN - AN ACTIVE PROFESSIONAL MUSICIAN

A musical heritage celebration is an event or series of events dedicated to honouring and showcasing the rich and diverse musical traditions, genres and practices that have been passed down through generations within a community, nation or even globally. It's a way to acknowledge and appreciate the music that reflects the cultural identity, history and experiences of a people.



I write as a musician born in Lenasia in 1958 and would like to share my lived experience with playing in and interacting with most bands in Lenz, through being mentored and doing the mentoring, hoping to achieve a balanced and historical factual account of events in this way. I offer a breakdown of what a musical heritage celebration typically involves, which would be inclusive of all who participated in any way or form in Lenz.

It is necessary to distinguish between active musicians/professional/tutors and mentors and acknowledge their contributions as well as to pay homage to the deceased from the melting pot of musicians from Lenz. The contributions, successes and achievements of those of us who participated in the professional mainstream musical space in South Africa through performances and collaborations outside of Lenz and competing in professional music club circuits, to playing in and recording studios as session musicians need special mention and listing those achievements would be in order.

Despite the challenges we faced in the form of marginalisation in the arts under the apartheid system, the Group Areas Act and the State of Emergency (traveling in and out of Lenz was a curse), and the lack of resources in terms of instrumentation, the resilience to achieve equality and success for a small community such as ours was worth the risk and should be applauded.

- **Preservation of Traditional Forms:** A core aspect is the performance of traditional musical forms, which includes the various Indian Music collective. This was covered in a previous article from a personal perspective of Robert Abrahams, that includes folk songs, classical compositions, chants or ceremonial music. Bollywood hits, Chutney, Classical Hindi, Tamil and Qawali were developed and maintained over time.
- **Showcasing Diverse Genres:** Celebrations often highlight a wide array of musical genres that have emerged from a particular heritage. With regards to the Western Music Collective, these will include everything from Jazz, Progressive Jazz, Gospel, Pop, R&B, Classical and more contemporary styles that have evolved from those roots.
- **Honouring Artists and Icons:** It's essential to pay tribute to legendary musicians, composers and performers who have significantly contributed to the musical heritage.
- **Celebratory Concert:** A musical concert is planned that will include the various genres, that is, the Eastern Music collective as well as the Western Music collective.
- The tentative date mooted to host the concert is on Heritage Day – this may change but will go ahead in the early summer. A timely alert will be put out.

I will start by providing a chronology in terms of the inception of the first bands and the evolution of the music; its mentors, influencers and the progression to where we find ourselves today. At this point, it is important to note that the formation of bands in Lenz comprised largely of family members.

THE 1970s

Insanity Plea – a band led by Anant Kalan, now residing in London, became the protest band on his return from exile. In the 1970s, fellow members were the late Perry Padayachee on guitar, Ses Lalloo on drums and Manhar Lalloo on vocals. They played at the famous Apsara Music Battle of the Bands and music shows that featured the Echoes, The Strangers, The Exciters, amongst others.

Sludge - a band led by Ashendra Latchman recruited me as a guitarist (when Perry had left). At the same time Robert Abrahams and Sikky were part of the band

together with Mina and Vivek Ram (brothers to Deepak Ram). We played a few gigs together and disbanded soon after. It is noteworthy and a highlight to remember that the late great Kippie Moeketsi and the late Mike Makgamelamela jammed with this band.

The Hi-Lights – a band started by Jiven Ramjee. I was recruited to play bass guitar but that did not work out as it was a different genre for me.

Next up would be the Williams family bands - Edcent Williams, the leader, started The Echoes. He was also the bassist and mentor of many of the band members. He was joined by Ronnie Williams on keyboards, a formidable musician and band leader in his own right. The Echoes catered for dance hall music, R&B, Pop & Rock music that included our very famous Ivan Ross (Rasool) on vocals and one of Lenz's favorite sons. A superb smooth voice who went on to become one of the first recording artistes from Lenz with his hit song "Mr Lonely" (<https://youtu.be/w3QNjWYTxBk?si=1H7giV0Q2Fbd56cW>)

Simultaneously, the younger members of the Williams family started their own band called Shade, and comprised of Rowie Williams on bass, Ritchie Williams on guitar, Ivan Spider on drums, Geoffrey Moodley on guitar, Joey Aaron on vocals and Tony Lazarus on vocals. This band rocked the local clubs such as Spiders Web and Tigers Eye and were the youngest band at the time. Shade and The Echoes operated independently but supported each other musically.

Shade disbanded and was reformed with Rowie Williams leading the band, Tony (Hawkie) Williams on keyboards, Ivan Spider on drums, Nolan Narasoo on vocals and myself, Gus Poonan on guitar. I was still at high school at the time. One of the highlights of playing with Shade 2 was performing for the Lenz High Matric Ball held at the Lenz Civic, playing mostly Rock covers and R&B.

Shade then became August Formation with Ronnie Williams as band leader and keyboard player with the same compliment of band players. At this point, it is worth noting that this band had won a Battle of The Bands competition in Lenz, featuring many other bands. The most impressionable feature of their win was how they segued (in musical terms, one song leading into the next without any break in between songs) their repertoire.

The Echoes started recruiting younger players when August Formation disbanded and got Geoffrey Moodley on board, Gerald Aaron on Keyboard, Raymond Morgan on drums, Xervy Aaron on vocals, Doray Morgan on Saxophone and Sandra Willams on trumpet. Edcent Williams, a schoolteacher, convinced my dad that I would be in

good hands when he recruited me to team up with Geoff on guitar forming a formidable guitar duo. We played for several years together in clubs, house parties, weddings, dances and fund raisers.

Edcent Williams, a mentor and disciplinarian, got transferred to Durban as a teacher and the result was the disbandment of The Echoes. Geoff and I together with Ivan Spider, convinced Edcent to allow us to use the instruments while he was away and successfully formed Gifted Faith with Nolan Narasoo and later had recruited Mervyn Reddy and mentored a very young Gregory Moonsammy. We were successfully managed by Peter Gondi and played at Club Magesh, Fun Valley, parties and fund raisers.

In the early 1970s, there was the surge of bands from Greyville and Thomsville, commonly called the "Two Rooms". This area produced Sathasivan (Sathi) Lionel, a highly talented left handed guitarist and he played for The Founders comprising of Sathi, BJ, Collin Kandier, Raymond Morgan Aubrey (Mojo) Lazarus, Silvin & Bobby Naidoo. Sathi's signature songs were Samba Pati and Oye Como Va played with gusto. I must add that listening to Sathi was an inspiration to me and I am grateful for that. (I may have left out some members – but that can be corrected by an alert at the end of the article that gives artistes and the family members the opportunity to interact and include all those that are not mentioned here.) The Founders morphed into Voodoo Children and was equally successful playing the genres of Rock, R&B, Soul, Pop and Dance Hall music.

Next up would be The Jackson family, comprising of brothers Gordon, Neville and Brian Jackson. Their account is covered extensively in the article penned by Robert Abrahams.

The Poonan family - The late Anand Poonan started a band with Osman (Ossie) Kader, the son of The Great Magician Khardani (and yes, they did make magic). The band was called Rugged Wheel and had a phenomenal guitarist called Baboo Khan, who went on to play at parties and fundraisers. Their repertoire comprised of Rock, Pop and R&B and their repertoire included songs by Santana, 10 Years After, Deep Purple and the current pop hits of the time.

Vasa Poonan, the youngest in the family, started tailing me and developed into a seriously talented guitar player. He formed his own bands and played at the opening of Trendz, a club in the Lenz shopping mall. The various bands he formed are Blues Calypso with the late David Naidoo on bass, Marky Martin on drums, the late Andre (Owlie) Moodley on vocals and Vincent Paul on guitar. Next was The Magnetics with Alan Nundoo on drums, Nolan Narasoo and Donovan Paul on vocals. Vasa also

played with August Formation with band leader Ronnie Williams on Keys, David Naidoo on bass, Glen Naidoo on drums, the famous Mark & Alex Rantselli (from the hit Quick Quick fame) on vocals, and Rowie Williams on vocals and Desmond Morgan on guitar. Vasa went on to form Street Level with Vasa Poonan on lead guitar, David Naidoo on bass guitar, Morgan Govender on drums, Rudie Manual on vocals, Vincent Paul on keys and Vikash Maharagh on keyboards.

Gavin Gus Poonan - Started playing at the age of 8 years old and played in his first band, Sludge. A self-taught musician who went on to play for Shade, The Echoes whilst still at High School. I later joined August Formation with Geoffrey Moodley and Mervyn Reddy and myself on guitar – a Crosby Stills & Nash combination – a truly enjoyable experience with stunning guitars and vocal harmonies that were superb. We went on to play at the Himalaya Hotel in Durban.

Lenz musicians spread their wings

Turning my attention to playing out of Lenz when bands were starting to disband, clubs were closing and the live music scene was slowing down in Lenz, I started to play with a band called Mahogany in Fordsburg at the famous club formally known as the Chez Gaye, run by the Sarlie brothers. I played with the legendary Barney Rachabane on saxophone and flute and backing the famous Neville Nash, for a year. Next, we expanded the band and added in Sephiri Mashishi on saxophones and flute, Greg Francis on drums, Attie Noble on second guitar, Dino Domingo on keys, Lionel Brinkhuis on vocals and Ian Brady on bass.

The band changed its name to Mirage and played festivals and did the club circuit in The Joburg CBD and Hillbrow. The Maxime Hotel was a residency for the band. At the same time members started to leave and one by one I started replacing members. First up was Gordon Jackson as drummer, when the keyboard player left and I replaced that position with Andrew Francis - the remaining members of Mirage were myself, Ian Brady bass player and Sephiri Mashishi.

An already existing band with a full repertoire moved to Lenz to form the band D-FUSION with myself as the leader. A full-on repertoire had to be learnt in record time by the new members as there were gigs waiting for us. The members did so with great enthusiasm and aplomb! After playing a few gigs, Ian, our bassist decided to step out and Andrew, Gordon and I decided to add Gregory Moonsammy as the new bassist - incidentally it was a toss up between Kani Naidoo and Gregory and Greg was chosen. At that point Gordon was doing the vocals and we decided to add the talented Joey Aaron to the team and the rest is history. The repertoire included songs by Stevie Wonder's Hotter Than July, Lee Ritenour, Mr Magic, Grover Washington and

of course, Shakatak that took this band to another level with more challenging material. It went on to win an original music competition hosted by Bernie Millar from the super band, Trapeze. Amongst the competing bands was the current professor of the music faculty at Wits University, Professor Carlo Mombelli, and his band.

Some examples of the gigs we played at were clubs, music festivals such as the Wits Free Peoples, Concert at Numsa rally and protest rallies, Robert & Claire benefit concert, the Cerebral Palsy Association, Jiswa and at many Bluebells United FC fundraisers. Upon my departure the band recruited Thabo Mashishi and carried on successfully for a while before disbanding.

The late Andrew Francis was leader of the dance band, Desifinado, comprising of Ashwan Reggie on guitar, Craig Sunker on keyboards, Xervy Aaron on vocals, Alan Pillay on drums, Jeffrey Jack on percussion and of course Andrew on saxophone. This band played successfully from 1988 to 1991 and was an in-demand band for dance and pop music.

A new challenge beckoned, and I co-founded an Afro Fusion Band called Ozila with Kenny Mathaba and Greg Francis and went on to record the hit, Lifesaver I'm Suffering, which had a very distinct handclap that identified with the anti-apartheid movement (<https://youtu.be/ZrXJlc05wL8?si=PLNpTuh5Vq5oitm7>). This hand clap would reverberate in clubs and festivals country wide. There were two follow up albums, WOLA WOLA and SOS, which were equally successful (<https://music.youtube.com/watch?v=GSa69cGAWZ4&si=5VVxScY18ZkH4uq1>). The band made a few TV appearances on the programmes such as Diarora and Lapologa on SABC TV. This was a shot in the arm for the band, and we started touring the country and the region which included Swaziland (The Why Not Club) and venues in Namibia.

A health scare while on tour in Durban effectively ended my participation in the band. It was nevertheless a profound experience being co-leader of this band. It has always been the goal to realise my full potential as a musician and this I achieved through recording albums Gallo studios, performing at big, national festivals and famous night clubs, and finally being recognised as a professional musician.

Returning to Lenz, I met Alvin Fredericks, a sumptuous jazz piano player that settled here. Together with Ian Brady from Eldorado Park and trusty Sephiri Mashishi, the band, Round Midnight, was born with Gordon Jackson as band leader, and Sephiri and myself as musical directors. Vikash Maharagh, one of the young lions and one

of Andrew Francis earlier students, developed into a big player in real time - he replaced Alvin Fredericks as our keyboard player.



This project reached dizzying heights for me as guitarist and playing the music I love. This project produced the hardest work with stunning results, spending countless hours working on the breakdown of the songs as the music sheets we not available for the type of songs we decided to play. The repertoire consisted of original songs and high energy Jazz Fusion.

In 2016, I recorded my solo album, My African Heartbeat, which includes some of the finest in-session musicians playing on the album. This album received wide coverage and some superb reviews and continues to be played on Jazz programmes on dedicated radio shows.

Kani Naidoo, a talented musician that grew into a professional musician, needs to be acknowledged more for his own talents but also notably for providing gigs for fellow musicians. Kanie recorded several albums and continues to play at live music venues to this day. Kani was the band leader of a band called, Rezonance, with the late Hari Moorgas on bass, Krish Naidoo on drums, Mervyn Naidoo on rhythm guitar, Vincent Paul on keyboards, Silvin Naidoo on vocals and Kani Naidoo on lead guitar. I had the pleasure of recording a song, Take It Slow, which I had put together during the Covid-19 lockdown period. Kani added spice and variety to it and gave it so much presence with his sultry saxophone playing and mixed it down as well.

Geoffrey Moodley, my fellow band member and son of the late Sambo Moodley (a clarinet player of note, is a musician in his own right. He formed his own bands namely, Breeze, featuring Matthews Morgan on drums, Kani Naidoo on bass, Bennie on guitar, Tony Lazarus on vocals, Nithia Singarum and Jainub on vocals and the late Iqbal Momoniat on drums. Geoffrey is the most active of all, playing almost every weekend and deserves some applause for his dedication and contribution to the current music scene.

Gregory Moonsammy, a graduate from the school of D-FUSION, heads up his own band, Jazz Expressions, playing his original music and jazz standards. He also played in a band, Bejazzled, that I was leader of a few years back. This band featured a giant of a keyboard player, namely, Avzal Ishmael, and the talented vocalist and wood winds specialist, Cecil Mitch.

Ridwan Dawood needs a special mention as one of Lenz's favourite sons with a powerful vibrato. Winning the Tamil Eisteddfod is a huge achievement considering that Tamil is not his home language nor spoken in general. He took his father, Soppie's, legacy to the next level. Ridwan was a key member of the band Avikar led by Vikash Maharagh. Together, they took Indian fusion music to great heights with the recording of their album, Limitless. I am proud to say that I played as session musician on this album, which was recorded at the stunning Bop Studios in Bophuthatwana, the same studio where Paul Simon recorded the Graceland album.

The Bright Stars was an Indian band that was well known and covered different music styles in the various Indian genres.

Hemlee Chibba remains a powerful singer and has recently recorded a fabulous song with the very talented recording engineer and sound stylist, Ravesh Surjoo, who played drums for Avikar and is proficient on piano as well. Ravesh is the proud owner of his own studio, is highly proficient in sound engineering and does the sound engineering at most of the Barnyard Theatres and Casinos when he is not recording artistes.

Lata Modi, a songstress now relocated abroad, is another superb vocalist that has famously wowed crowds with her distinctive Bollywood style.

Vikash Maharagh another highly talented keyboard player and band leader at Avikar replaced Alvin Fredericks at Round Midnight and filled in the gap seamlessly. I am proud to say that my mentoring paid off handsomely. He is a natural hard worker that will deliver what is required when asked to do so.

Although formal music training is extremely important to understand the magic that happens in deciphering the music of musical greats, recording artistes, etc. and the thinking and application thereof, it is important to note that most of the musicians mentioned herein do not have formal musical training but possess musical knowledge that stood them in good stead. A harmonic ear, a sense of rhythm and an understanding of the natural progressions cannot be taught but felt as a sixth sense. Legends such as Wes Montgomery and Robbie Jansen come to mind, neither had formal training and as in Wes's case, he influenced Bepop and Hard bop styles. A combination of both formal and the natural instinctive feel is a great combination though.

In essence, this musical heritage celebration must be a dynamic and vibrant expression of cultural identity, designed to recognize the past, celebrate the present and inspire the future of the community's unique diversity. I end my reminiscing with a quote by the late music lover and great footballer, Professor Louis Jeevanantham, "Being certificated does not necessarily mean you're educated".