

Amazons

By Benson Idonije

The success of Miriam Makeba on the international pop scene provoked an unprecedented resurgence of female musicianship all over Africa - in the seventies. Nigeria obviously had her fair share, but apart from Angelique Kidjo who is currently making it big and a couple of musicians from South Africa, none has made it to the top and remained there.

Names such as Margaret Singana and Letta Mbulu emerged in the seventies to give the African female music scene a boost. Singana thrived on the hard, strong pop while Mbulu embraced both the energetic and soft approaches singing within the context of well-orchestrated musical sessions which included such notable instrumentalists as Dudu Pukwana on alto saxophone and Caiphus Semenya on trombone.

Two women who came to the fore in the eighties perhaps did more than any other South African artiste to reap the rewards of international success. Yet the music which made Yvonne Chaka Chaka and Brenda Fassie rich and famous was just too commercial for many listeners who realised that the Mbaganga traditional rhythm had been westernised and smoothed out of recognition. This was straight pop music perceived, albeit with a thumping township bass and back beat no better than Bubble gum music. It was directed at young audiences who liked it enough to buy the records.

Brenda Fassie for her part sang a mix of sanitised Mbaganga and soulful country ballads which sounded neither rootsy nor radical. But she turned out to be a powerful singer and genuine pop star of international acclaim.

From Sierra Leone, Miatta Fambelle emerged with a style that was thoroughly influenced by Miriam Makeba. Even though