

life

MUSIC

THE NINE LIVES OF MIRIAM MAKEBA

On the 15th anniversary of the death of 'Mama Africa', we remember her many achievements — not least of which was that she made it to the relatively ripe old age of 76 at all

Nick Dall

● "I like to sit by the window on planes. But when I look out I can see nothing but grey. The plane goes down. Whoosh! It comes back up ... This happens three or four times."

The year is 1967 and Miriam Makeba is flying over the forests of Guinea with Ahmed Sékou Touré, the recently independent West African nation's first president.

By then Makeba had already overcome the horrors of a township upbringing in the

1930s and 1940s to become a Grammy Award-winning singing sensation, with fans on all six continents.

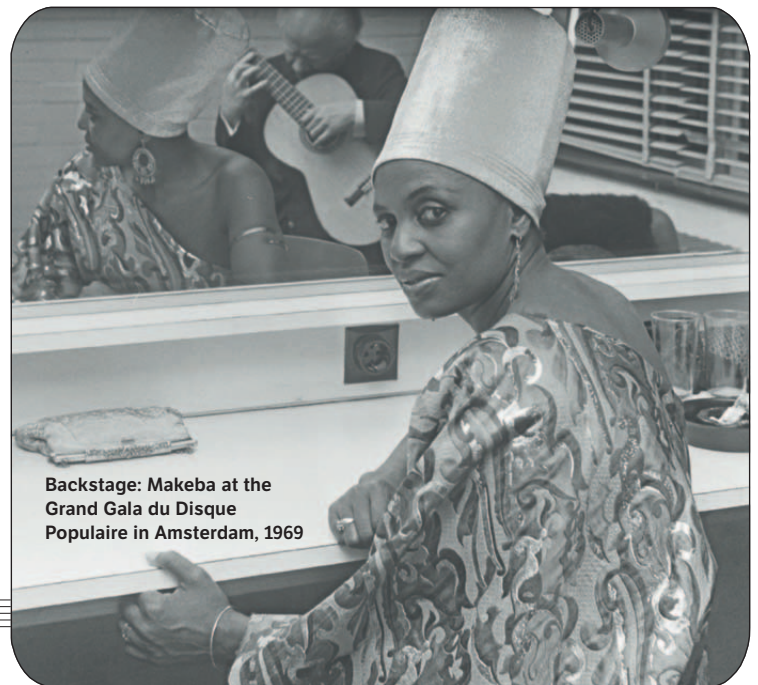
This gave her the platform she needed to tell the world about the horrors of apartheid — not just in the introductions to her songs, but also in the four separate addresses she made to the UN. By singing in African languages and refusing to bow to Western conventions such as straightening her hair she became an icon of African independence — decades ahead of her time.

Hers was a life of achievement — but perhaps her biggest was staying alive long enough to do all of this ...

"Suddenly, I see trees below. They are at a crazy angle. It does not look as if we are going down, it looks as if the trees are coming up! I crouch down and cover my face with my hands, and I wait for the boom," she says in her autobiography, *Makeba: My Story*.

The plane skids along the ground on its belly before bursting into flames. The doors jam closed but the soldiers of the presidential guard are on hand to smash the windows with their rifle butts, and help the passengers out of the tiny windows.

But Makeba, it seems, has more important things to worry



Backstage: Makeba at the Grand Gala du Disque Populaire in Amsterdam, 1969



Later years: Makeba performs at the North Sea Jazz Festival in 2002



On stage: Makeba performs with Bill Salter and Sam Brown in 1965





On the road: Makeba toured with the Manhattan Brothers, the biggest black band in South Africa

about than escaping a burning aircraft: "I am on my hands and knees looking for my hat! I know that I did not comb my hair, so I cannot get off without my hat!"

Her travelling companion has similarly skewed priorities: she's desperately trying to find her cigarettes.

Eventually they both find what they are looking for.

"I am in such a dizzy state that when I find my hat, I put it on even though it is wet and ruined. Juice, milk and coffee have spilt all over it. The milk and juice drip down over my face and dress. Now I can leave the burning plane!"

Living on the edge

Surviving a plane crash would probably be the defining moment in most people's lives. But for Makeba it was just another time she dodged death.

It started from the earliest of times: when she was born, she was so sick that her father spent the first two days of her life praying for her to die. No sooner had she recovered than her mother was imprisoned for brewing traditional beer: Makeba spent the first six months of her life in prison.

Then, when she was just seven or eight, Makeba and two of her classmates were walking the 8km home from



Voice for the downtrodden: Makeba performs at Unesco House in Paris

school when one of the girls was struck by lightning. "We see orange flames on the ground. A black thing is burning. The remains of my friend's clothes are afire on a body that has been charred black. Her eyes are empty sockets and her tongue sticks grotesquely out of her mouth."

As a 20-something singer touring with the Manhattan Brothers, the biggest black band in South Africa, she was involved in a crash — one of 11 in her lifetime.

The collision with a white family's car left the husband and one of his children dead. The whites were bundled into an ambulance and Makeba and her party were left to die, 30km outside Volksrust. The white hospital there refused to treat them and Victor Mkhize (a much-loved comedian travelling with the Mannhattans) died an entirely preventable death when

he finally reached Baragwanath two days later.

In 1959, while Makeba was starring in *King Kong*, the biggest musical in South African history and the first time white audiences heard her sing, she collapsed while walking past Joburg General Hospital. In true apartheid style, she was driven 20km to Noku-phila, a black township hospital, where she spent two days in a coma. When she woke up, the doctors told her she'd had an ectopic pregnancy and was lucky to be alive.

And in 1963, by which time she was a household name in the US, she collapsed on stage during a concert in Los Angeles. She was diagnosed with advanced cervical cancer and given a 50/50 chance of survival. Luckily, she listened to her friend and one-time husband Hugh Masekela, who telegraphed her to say: "If

Makeba at the UN

● When she first arrived in New York in 1959, Miriam Makeba became friendly with many of the African delegates at the UN.

On July 16 1963 she addressed the UN special committee on the policies of apartheid. "My country has been turned by the [Hendrik] Verwoerd government into a huge prison," she said. "The time has come for the

whole of humanity to shout 'halt' and to act with firmness to stop these crazy rulers from dragging our country into a horrifying disaster."

She would go on to address the UN about the horrors of apartheid another three times — once more in the 1960s, and twice after the Soweto Uprising in 1976.

In 1986 she angered many of her friends at the UN by

participating in Paul Simon's *Graceland* tour. (They felt Simon had broken the cultural boycott by recording *Grace-*

land in South Africa.) When the tour reached New York, Makeba had it out with her UN friends. She was furious: "I

said to them: 'I have never sold my country and I never will!'," she told Nomsa Mwamuka in *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*. "They were trying to tell me how I must be South African. I said: 'No!'"

Things came full circle in April 1994,



Shining a light: Makeba at the UN, 1963



Power pair: Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela 1980s

you dare die. If you dare die, I will come and beat you out of the grave."

Lady Luck?

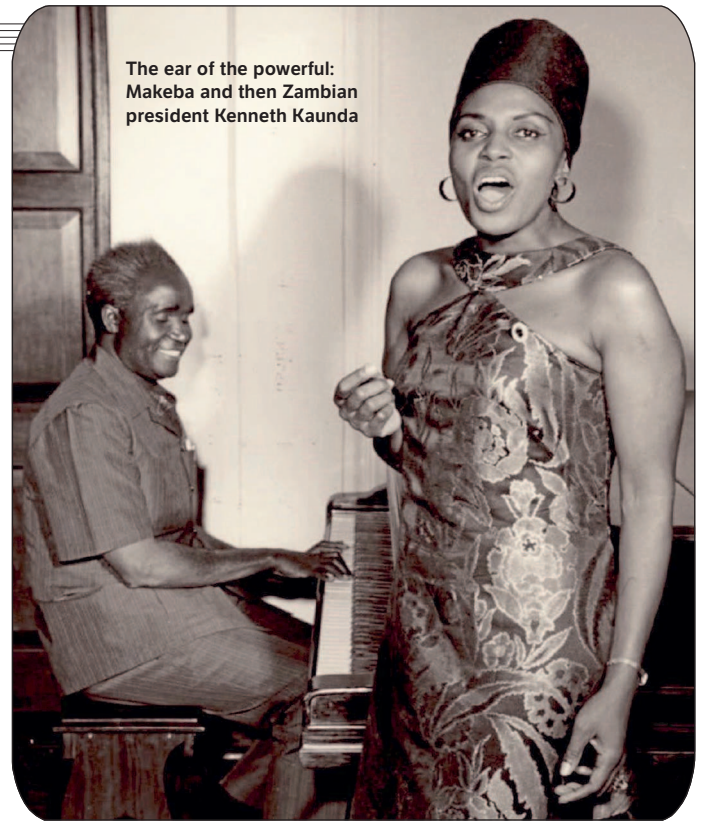
Reading all of this it's tempting to think Makeba led a charmed life. It is true that her musical gift enabled her to overcome the many obstacles of being a poor, black woman in apartheid South Africa to achieve a level of international fame — she was buddies with people such as actors Sydney Poitier and Marlon Brando, and singer Nina Simone — as well as reverence and clout that few people even dream of. As *The New York Times* noted after one of her first performances in the US: "There are few cases in show business where a performer's life has changed more suddenly, more dramatically, and with so much promise."

But the fairytale overlooks the many hardships she had

endured. The harsh treatment of white "madams" when she was a domestic worker in Joburg. The abuse and infidelities of her first husband. The murder of two of her uncles in the Sharpeville Massacre. Watching on, helpless, as first her grandson, Themba, and then her only daughter, Bongie, died far too young. The pain of being "cancelled" in the US after marrying Black Power leader Stokely Carmichael.

Makeba hardly ever felt sorry for herself: "If given a choice I would have certainly selected to be what I am: one of the oppressed instead of one of the oppressors ... In a sad world where so many are victims, I can take pride that I am also a fighter." And she credited her remarkable success to three qualities: "Hope, determination and song."

Makeba dealt with adversity by the bucketload — but her



The ear of the powerful: Makeba and then-Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda

deepest and most enduring pain was being exiled from the land of her birth for 31 years. While she had chosen to move to the US, she was denied the option to go home after her mother's death when the South African embassy declared her passport "INVALID".

After being caught in a coup in Guinea (another time she dodged death: her car was pockmarked with bullet holes) she reflected on her pain: "Guinea will not be invaded every day, but this scare has shown me that it is an illusion to think I can find true peace here ... True peace can only be found at home. My home is South Africa. And so I have to ask myself a terrible question: Will I ever find peace in my lifetime? Will I ever go home?"

Thanks in no small part to her efforts to make the international community aware of the horrors of apartheid, Makeba did eventually make it home. After navigating the adoring crowds at what was then Jan Smuts airport, she went straight to Nancefield Cemetery in Soweto.

"I sat on my mother's grave and cried. I was like a baby sitting on my mother's lap asking for forgiveness," she told



Nomsa Mwamuka in *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story*. "I said: 'Sorry, Mama. I was not able to see you when they took you to your final resting place. I am sorry I did not see you when you died. But now Mama I am here. I am home.'"

She then tried to find the graves of her grandmother and her sister, but both cemeteries had been built over during apartheid.✕

Makeba's is one of 12 remarkable lives featured in *Legends: People Who Changed South Africa for the Better* by Nick Dall and Matthew Blackman



Breaking the boycott: Makeba drew criticism for joining Paul Simon's *Graceland* tour

however. She was touring in the US at the time of South Africa's first democratic elec-

tions, and she cast her first-ever vote at the UN buildings in New York. ✕