

The music mixer

A New Jersey rocker's chance meeting with South African jazz legend Pops Mohamed in a Joburg record shop 20 years ago resulted in a musical odyssey that has brought him full-circle.

By Donald Paul

Rock guitarists always have that skinny salvaged look to them, even when they're tee-totalling non-smokers who've been married to the same woman for more than 30 years. Ema is no exception—and no, Ema is not a girl. The name, he says, is a New Yorkese shortening of his initials MA.

Anyway, Ema was in South Africa to release his latest album, *Ownership*, which he says could be described as African rock fusion, but he prefers “world rock”. It's the accumulation and accretion of a more than 20-year love affair with *maskanda* music—“kind of like a collection of all the markers and my cache of memories,” he says.

The best way to describe *maskanda* is “Zulu blues”, and Ema's first experience of it was an Aaron Mbambo song, *S'lishone elanga*. “It's about a family's car breaking down in the middle of the night and I thought this was so incredible. It was so emotionally huge but it's such an everyday event and to create a song out of that was just magical to me.”

And that's kind of what started him on his journey.

“Ain't it funny how we make defining moments out of the stream of life,” he says as he sips his coffee. “I became so enamoured with South African music—I have always been enamoured with traditional music—to the point where

I wanted to understand the cultural context and found myself a tutor to teach me Zulu—she was a linguist at Howard University—when I was living in Washington DC. I immersed myself as much as I could. After about a year she said, you know, you need to go to South Africa. I went home and told my wife that I was going.

“This was in the late '80s, so the country was fairly hectic. I'd come over here with a list of people and contacts and none of them pitched up. I was sitting in a Holiday Inn in Joburg thinking this isn't exactly what I had planned.”

After a few days of pointless waiting, Ema wandered the streets and ended up walking into Kohinoor Records on Kort Street. “In those days there weren't too many Americans coming over to SA, so, when I walked in they assumed I was a European tourist, and I walked up to Pops Mohamed—I had no idea who he was—behind the counter and asked: ‘Do you have any cassettes by Aaron Mbambo?’ First, he was shocked by the American accent and secondly, he was like: ‘How do you know Aaron Mbambo?’ After that we got chatting and he said he was producing a Zulu songwriter in Soweto that afternoon and invited me to go with him. I ended up staying with him and we became friends. He



was my gatekeeper.” Ema and Pops later co-produced and collaborated on an album called *Ancestral Healing*.

The album *Ownership* is his first collection of his own songs. “Its South African sensibilities of style are foremost in the Africanism because that's been my milieu for 20 years but, nevertheless, my roots are still rock and jazz. I grew up listening to everyone from John Lennon to Frank Zappa.”

Most of the musicians are South Africans—Ian Herman on drums Bakithi Khumalo on bass to name a few—and it was back-up singers Faith Kekana and Stella Khumalo who gave him his Zulu name: *Mtagathi*.

“It came about when we were recording the first track on the album, called ‘Interim man’, and I heard Faith say, ‘Eish, *mtagathi!*’ I wasn't familiar with the term, so I said what's the deal here?”

And Faith said: ‘There are three kinds of healers: the *sangoma* (diviner), the *nyanga* (healer) and the *mtagathi*: he is the *nyanga* who mixes the things he shouldn't mix.’ And the name sort of stuck.”

The wizardry, very apparent on this album, proves it's been a worthwhile journey.

[*Ownership* is available from African Music Store in Cape Town and Kalkbay Books in Kalk Bay.]