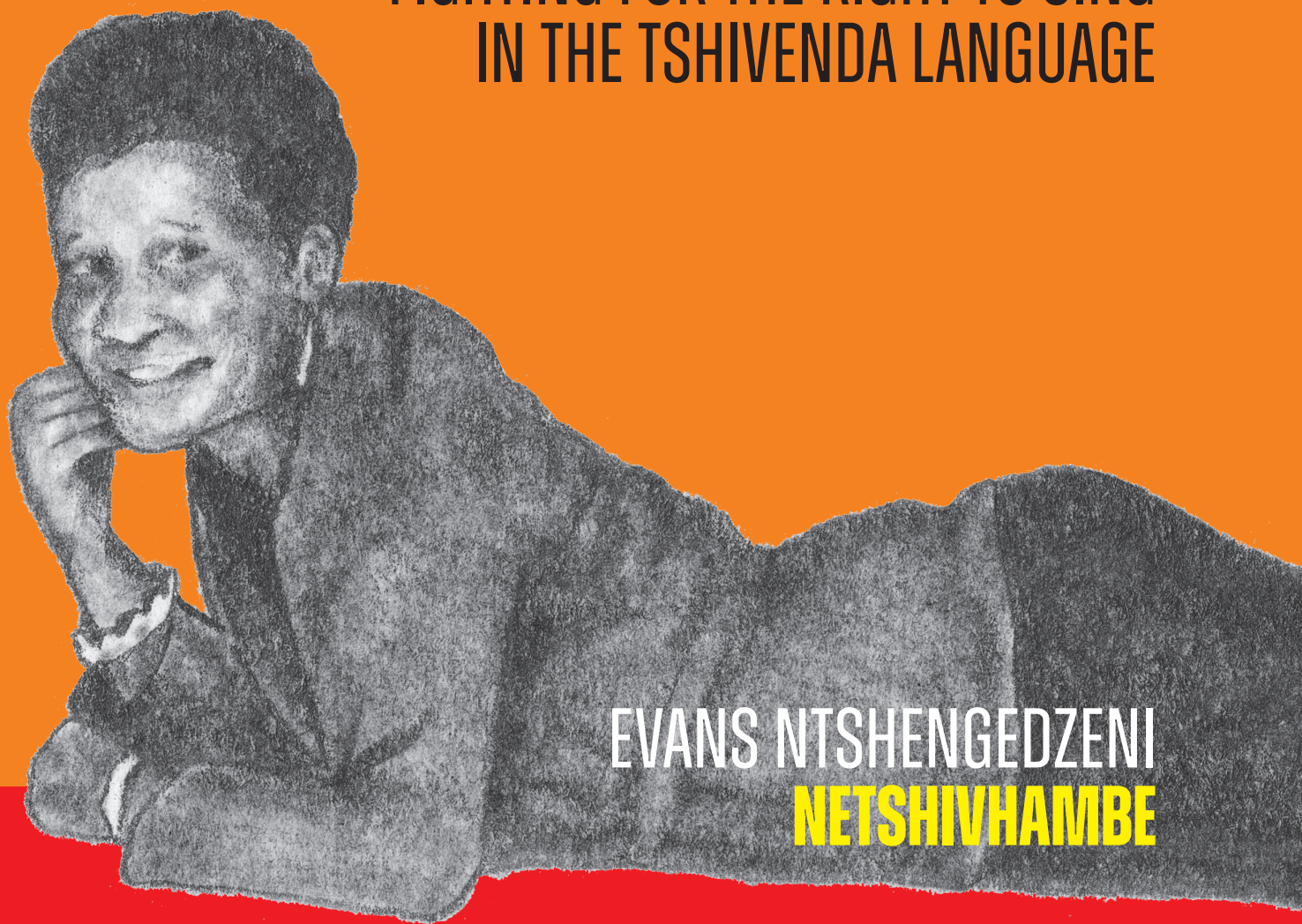


# THE MUSIC LEGACY OF IRENE MATODZI **MAWELA**

FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO SING  
IN THE TSHIVENDA LANGUAGE



EVANS NTSHENGEDZENI  
**NETSHIVHAMBE**



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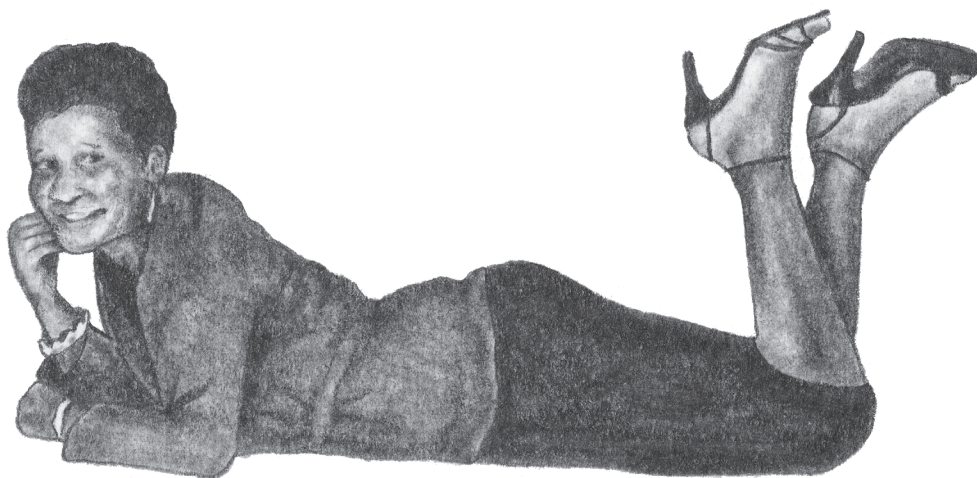
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## Preface and Acknowledgments

This book's creation was made possible through the invaluable cooperation and extensive interviews generously provided to me by Dr. Irene Mawela. These interviews granted me unrestricted access to the intricate journey of her musical career. I express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Mawela for her enthusiastic participation, which has been pivotal to the development of this book. Dr. Irene Mawela's profound dedication to her music, her deep affection for people and her visionary commitment to uplifting those who speak her native language, 'Tshivenda', bear witness to her remarkable heroism. Her journey through the world of music serves as a powerful testament to her extraordinary character.

Mawela's passion for her music transcends mere performance; it is an expression of her unwavering love for humanity. Through her songs and melodies, she becomes a voice for those who have long endured cultural, linguistic, and ethnic marginalisation in South Africa. The legacy of apartheid, with its divisive policies that categorised people based on language and culture, created deep rifts within the nation. Yet, in the face of these historical injustices, Mawela's vision shines brightly. She aspires not only to see her fellow Tshivenda-speaking people treated with equality amongst the South African people but also to witness their prosperity, particularly in various industries of the new dispensation. Her music becomes a vessel for healing and unity, bridging the divides of the past and paving the way for a more inclusive, harmonious future. In her pursuit of justice and equality, Dr. Irene Mawela emerges as a true hero, not only through the melodies and messages she creates but also through the profound impact of her advocacy. Her music becomes a beacon of hope, guiding people towards a brighter tomorrow where cultural diversity is celebrated, and every voice is heard and valued.

The inception of this book owes its existence to the generosity of numerous individuals who willingly shared their profound insights into Mawela's musical journey. These contributors include individuals who dedicated a significant portion of their lives to collaborating with her in the music industry, as well as her steadfast followers and devoted fans who have cherished her music throughout her lifetime. It is essential to recognise the unwavering support of radio stations that continued to feature Mawela's music, undeterred by the formidable obstacles she faced during

her early career. It is worth noting that, despite the challenges of not being allowed to sing in her native language from the year 1957, Mawela's musical journey endured for a substantial period. It was not until the early 1980s that she was able to shatter the linguistic barriers that had hindered her artistic expression. These collective efforts, from dedicated industry collaborators, to steadfast fans and the resilience of radio stations, have contributed significantly to the realisation of this book. Their commitment underscores the enduring impact of Mawela's music and the profound influence she has had on the cultural and musical landscape.

Amongst the people who significantly contributed to the writing of this book is Mr. Rob Allingham, whose willingness to engage in an interview played a crucial role in shaping the narrative of this book. I am genuinely appreciative of his contributions and would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to him. I would also like to acknowledge the numerous Venda radio announcers who graciously shared their experiences from the formative years of music programming for their respective stations. Their insights have enriched the pages of this book. A special word of appreciation also goes to the University of Pretoria for affording me the opportunity to profile an exceptional musician who was also bestowed with an honorary Ph.D. from the very same institution.

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I would also like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to two lifelong enthusiasts of Mawela's music, Norton Ramavhoya and Nick Lotay. Their unwavering support and willingness to share their insights through interviews have been instrumental in the creation of this book. Their invaluable contributions not only hold significant meaning for Irene Mawela but also resonate deeply with me. In recognition of their profound connection to Mawela's life and music, I have dedicated a chapter to showcase their testimonies, adding a richer dimension to the narrative.

I am indebted to Mawela's children for their instrumental role in providing valuable content, including precious photographs, that have enriched the depth of this book. I extend my heartfelt gratitude to them for their generous and invaluable contributions to this endeavour. Their willingness to invest their precious time and effort in granting me access to a wealth of content material from Mawela's residence has been instrumental in enriching the depth and authenticity of this project. Their support and cooperation have played a pivotal role in ensuring that the legacy of Dr. Irene Mawela is portrayed with the depth and reverence it truly deserves. To the many others who have contributed, whether through interviews, insights, or support in various ways, I extend my sincere thanks, even if I did not mention their names. Their collective efforts have played an integral part in bringing this book to fruition.



This book does not purport to be a conventional biographical chronicle of Dr. Irene Mawela; rather, it represents her life experiences in her own words. Dr. Mawela's significant contributions lie in her candid and unfiltered account of her remarkable musical journey. It is essential to emphasise that she has meticulously refrained from any editorialising or embellishment of any aspect of her musical odyssey. It is imperative to underscore that Dr. Mawela has expressed a deeply personal desire for this book to remain an exclusive portrayal of her musical voyage, devoid of any reference to her private life. She firmly believes that this literary work will serve as a valuable addition to the academic understanding of Venda music, particularly in the context of popular music. Notably, there exists a conspicuous dearth of literature on popular Venda music, despite the ample scholarship on traditional Venda musical traditions.

To contextualise this absence, we can reference the pioneering work of John Blacking during the late 1950s, Jaco Kruger's research in the 1980s, and Fraser McNeil's later contributions in the 1990s, which illuminated various facets of Venda music, including the emergence of popular Venda reggae. However, a comprehensive exploration of contemporary Venda popular music remains a largely untapped domain. It is within this void that Dr. Mawela's narrative assumes profound significance, offering a unique and unadulterated insight into a musical genre that has been understudied and underrepresented in scholarly discourse. This book serves as a multifaceted mirror reflecting the intricacies of Dr. Irene Mawela's life journey, offering a panoramic view of her upbringing, her evolution within the music industry, the nuances of studio life, and her enduring battle with the complexities of language, which remained a persistent challenge throughout her illustrious career. Within its pages, this narrative encapsulates both the soaring triumphs and the poignant disappointments that have punctuated Mawela's musical odyssey. These setbacks were often a direct consequence of the cultural segregation perpetuated by the apartheid regime, a dark chapter in South Africa's history that employed divisive policies to further fragment Black communities along lines of culture and language.

Central to the narrative is the pivotal role played by Radio Venda (now called Radio Phalaphala), which emerged as a cornerstone in nurturing the careers of Venda musicians, including the indomitable Irene Mawela. The radio station's unwavering commitment to promoting the music of Venda artists played an instrumental role in their career development, serving as a beacon of hope in the face of adversity. Radio Venda emerged as a resounding voice, an unwavering source of hope, and a harbinger of the future for the vibrant quality of music sung in the Tshivenda

language. It stood tall as an indispensable pillar in the relentless promotion of Tshivenda music, its significance transcending mere broadcasting to become an enduring cultural institution. Within the airwaves of Radio Venda, the melodious strains of Tshivenda music found a home, a sanctuary where their unique rhythms and lyrical expressions could resonate freely. This radio station, with its far-reaching influence, became a catalyst for the preservation and propagation of Tshivenda musical traditions.

In the hearts and minds of musicians and listeners alike, Radio Venda symbolised more than just a platform for music; it embodied the promise of a brighter future, a space where the rich heritage of the Tshivenda language and culture found unwavering support and validation. Its broadcasts echoed the aspirations and dreams of a community, fostering a sense of unity and pride. Radio Venda's role in the promotion of Tshivenda music was not merely a function of its programming but a testament to its commitment to cultural enrichment. It amplified the voices of artists, celebrated their creativity, and served as a beacon for the preservation of a language and musical tradition that might have otherwise faded into obscurity. In this remarkable journey, Radio Venda's resonance transcended the mere broadcast of melodies; it became a vital chapter in the story of cultural preservation and artistic flourishing, firmly establishing itself as a guardian of Tshivenda music's legacy.

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Through the meticulous presentation of Mawela's accomplishments, this book illuminates her undeniable and enduring contribution to the rich history of the South African music industry. In chronicling her life and career, it underscores her resilience and artistry, transcending the barriers of culture, language, and political constraints to leave an indelible mark on the nation's musical heritage. The narrative of this book delves deep into the wellspring of Mawela's character, unveiling a mosaic of qualities that epitomise her as a beacon of resilience, patience, perseverance, and unwavering determination. These qualities, which she has harnessed throughout her journey, represent a powerful force in her quest to emancipate those who have endured historical oppression based on their culture or language. A remarkable facet of Mawela's artistry lies in her adept use of lyrical messages as a potent weapon for empowerment and education. Her lyrics serve as a clarion call, resonating with individuals from so-called 'minority' backgrounds who may have been disheartened by the injustices of the past – inequities that, regrettably, persist in today's evolving socio-political landscape.

Mawela's music, imbued with profound messages, becomes a vehicle for empowerment, a means to rekindle hope in the hearts of those who have borne the brunt of historical biases. In her melodies and verses, she crafts a narrative of reunification, a fervent *phembelani* as one of her songs ardently proclaims – a call to 'rejoice'. Through this call, she ignites a profound sense of joy in the lives of individuals who have too often felt the weight of disadvantages unfairly imposed upon them, preconceived notions rooted in the ideologies and precedents set by the apartheid regime. In this way, Mawela's music emerges as a powerful instrument of reconciliation, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Through her songs, she boldly challenges the divisive constructs of ethnicity and heritage, imparting a universal message that transcends cultural boundaries and dismantles the lingering shadows of a painful past.

The pages of this book serve as a stark reminder that the echoes of the colonial era reverberate across the African continent to this day, casting long shadows that continue to sow divisions and tribal animosities among various African ethnic groups. The colonial regimes, in their quest for dominance, employed a nefarious tactic – the creation of an insidious ethnic privilege system within Black communities, a system meticulously designed to sow discord through the manipulation of culture and language. This sinister construct, much like a pernicious virus, insinuated itself into the collective psyche of the people, fostering deeply ingrained notions that certain ethnic groups were superior or entitled to privileges denied to others. It became an indelible stain on the social fabric, engendering divisions and perpetuating injustices that persist to this day. In the face of this entrenched prejudice and adversity, Dr. Irene Mawela emerged as a resolute champion of justice and equality. Her music became a potent instrument of resistance, a defiant stand against the injustices perpetuated by the colonial legacy. For more than two decades, she steadfastly navigated the treacherous terrain of restrictions, surmounting myriad hurdles, before finally securing the freedom to sing in her native Tshivenda language. Her unwavering commitment to this cause was not merely an artistic choice but a courageous act of defiance against a system that sought to silence and marginalise her language and culture. Through her music, Mawela fought against the deep-seated prejudices and divisions that colonialism had wrought, seeking to heal the wounds inflicted upon African communities and restore a sense of unity and pride. In doing so, she not only celebrated her heritage but also became a symbol of resilience and hope for all who yearned for a more just and equitable future.

## **Special Acknowledgement**

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## Introduction

*The Music Legacy of Irene Mawela: Fighting for the Right to Sing in the Venda Language* is a literary opus that stands as a profound tribute to the indelible mark left by Irene Mawela, a mark that transcends time and continues to resonate since the inception of her musical journey in 1957. Within its pages lies a solemn commitment to preserving and meticulously documenting Mawela's extraordinary odyssey in the realm of music, with particular emphasis on her valiant struggle to secure a rightful place for popular Venda music within the annals of music history, both as a historical artefact and as a contemporary art form. This book is more than a mere homage; it is a dedicated endeavour to ensure that Mawela's musical journey, rife with its trials and triumphs, remains etched in the collective memory of generations to come. It strives to crystallise her unwavering dedication to popular Venda music's recognition and development, offering a timeless narrative that bears testament to her unyielding commitment to her craft and her people.

Moreover, *The Music Legacy of Irene Mawela* is purposefully crafted as an academic resource, meticulously curated with a discerning scholarly audience in mind. It seeks to be a wellspring of knowledge, offering a comprehensive and rigorously researched account of Mawela's musical evolution, her struggle against the odds, and her ultimate triumph in contributing to the rich history of South African music. In essence, this book transcends mere biography; it is a monument to the resilience, artistry, and cultural significance of Irene Mawela, resonating as a timeless testament to her legacy and serving as a cornerstone in the edifice of Venda music's rightful place in the global musical landscape.

Irene Mawela embarked on her remarkable musical journey at the tender age of 17 during the late 1950s, a time characterised by formidable challenges, especially for a young Black woman daring to pursue a career in music under the harsh and unfavourable conditions of the era. In a landscape where the odds were heavily stacked against her, Irene Mawela exhibited unwavering persistence and determination as she embarked on her crusade to assert her right to sing in her native language, Tshivenda. This was an era dominated by the prominence of three major languages in the South African music industry – isiZulu, isiXhosa, and Sesotho. Amid this linguistic hegemony, Irene Mawela found herself navigating treacherous waters. To survive and protect

her cultural identity as a Venda-speaking musician, she resorted to a clever and daring strategy. Employing a shroud of secrecy, she adopted several different aliases, including Sarah Ngwenya, Irene Ngwenya, and Irene Nhlapo, along with fictitious group names, under which she released her albums. These names were also imposed on her by her bosses at the time to help her navigate the unfavourable musical terrain at the time of her entering the music industry.

8 Within the challenging landscape of the music industry during her early foray into the field, Irene Mawela found herself in a unique predicament. In an effort to adapt and navigate the unforgiving terrain that awaited her, she encountered a rather unconventional practice. Her studio bosses, recognising the complexities and biases of the era, bestowed upon her a series of pseudonyms. These names, though imposed upon her, served as pragmatic tools, offering a means to negotiate the formidable challenges that defined the music industry at that time. These bestowed names were not merely labels but strategic disguises that allowed Irene Mawela to traverse a musical landscape that was often hostile to her aspirations. In this intricate dance of identity, she was compelled to embrace these aliases, a testament to her adaptability and determination in the face of adversity. These aliases became not only her shield but also her cloak, concealing her true identity while preserving the essence of her artistry. Irene Mawela's journey, marked by these imposed names, underscores the extent to which she had to navigate a complex and often prejudiced industry. Her resilience in the face of these challenges, including the adoption of these aliases, serves as a poignant reminder of the lengths to which artists had to go to pursue their passion and defy the constraints of their time.

This calculated subterfuge allowed her to shield her true identity and maintain the façade of being part of different musical ensembles, all the while safeguarding her connection to her Venda heritage. It was a bold and audacious move, a testament to her unyielding resolve in the face of adversity. Mawela's unwavering stance in her quest to sing in Tshivenda, a language that the apartheid government had unjustly relegated to the status of a 'minority' language, was nothing short of courageous. In a milieu where prevailing sentiment suggested that there was no viable market for music in the Tshivenda language, she chose to defy the status quo. Her determination to represent her culture and language through her music not only challenged entrenched prejudices but also paved the way for a more inclusive and culturally diverse musical landscape. Irene Mawela's unwavering commitment to the recognition of popular Venda music, particularly that sung in the Tshivenda language, culminated in a watershed moment that reshaped the musical

landscape. Her persistent advocacy eventually bore fruit later, notably through the pivotal role played by Radio Bantu in promoting the Venda language through the music it chose to broadcast.

Radio Bantu's visionary initiative extended beyond the confines of its studios; the station dedicated to promoting the Venda language, 'Radio Venda', embarked on journeys to remote villages, unearthing hidden talents and recording traditional songs sung in the Tshivenda language. This marked a transformative juncture in Mawela's career, a moment of profound significance when she secured her first Tshivenda record – a momentous breakthrough that was broadcast to the public in her own language. This breakthrough, serving as a musical manifesto of sorts, was nothing short of a game changer. It offered compelling proof to commercial studios that music sung in the Tshivenda language held a viable and vibrant market. Irene Mawela, with her pioneering spirit, had charted a path that resonated not only with her success but also with the broader aspirations of countless Venda musicians. She had cracked open the door to commercial studios, allowing many popular Venda artists to record their music in their native language, thus revitalising and preserving the cultural richness of the Venda heritage.

Through her tireless ambassadorial efforts and enduring dedication to her craft, Irene Mawela's influence transcended the realm of music. In recognition of her immense contributions, the University of Pretoria bestowed upon her the honour of an honorary Ph.D. in 2019 as a testament to her achievements and contribution to the music industry. She joined the distinguished ranks of the select few Venda musicians to receive such esteemed recognition, further solidifying her legacy as a trailblazer in the world of music and cultural preservation. Becoming the third Venda musician to receive an honorary Ph.D. degree after Fhatuwani Roxley Masevhe and Colbert Rudzani Mukwevho, Irene Mawela's musical journey spans an impressive 70-year career, a lifetime defined by relentless struggle and a remarkable determination to overcome the profound challenges that accompanied her status as an indigenous female musician during the apartheid era. Her path was marked not only by her artistic pursuits but also by a complex juggling act, where she shouldered multiple responsibilities in her quest for recognition and success. She aspired to be a young woman whose talent and artistry would speak for themselves, without the constant need to convince others of her inherent worth as a musician. Yet, she keenly understood that if she did not champion her rights and fight for her place in the musical landscape, there would be no one else to do it on her behalf.

Mawela's upbringing in Soweto, as a young Black South African Venda girl, exposed her to the myriad difficulties shared by her fellow Black citizens during the oppressive apartheid regime. These challenges included the compulsory requirement of carrying a pass at all times, living within restricted boundaries with tightly controlled movements, and the painful prohibition of associating with individuals from the White community. In the backdrop of her daily life, there was a constant reminder that being Black in South Africa was synonymous with a stark absence of privilege and human rights. Her remarkable journey, marked by resilience and unwavering determination, not only as an artist but as a symbol of the indomitable spirit of her people, stands as a testament to the triumph of the human spirit over the harshest of circumstances. It is a narrative that continues to inspire and resonate with the enduring quest for justice, equality, and cultural preservation.

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Foremost among the formidable challenges Irene Mawela faced was the deeply entrenched perception that her mother tongue, the Tshivenda language, was relegated to the status of a 'minority' language – a classification that regrettably meant it was perceived as insignificant and unworthy of recognition. Mawela tenaciously waged a battle, determined to see it through to the end for the acknowledgment of her right to sing in her native language. She fearlessly confronted numerous challenges posed by studio executives, unwavering in her pursuit of justice until it was finally achieved. This designation posed a daunting hurdle for her, casting doubt on her ability to sing in her native tongue. In response to this pervasive linguistic bias, Mawela embarked on a remarkable journey of self-built resilience, a journey that would ultimately become her steadfast weapon of survival throughout her protracted struggle to sing in her cherished language. Her ability to speak multiple South African languages became not just a skill but a strategic asset, empowering her as she ingeniously navigated the labyrinthine path toward realising her ambition of singing in her mother tongue. Irene Mawela harboured an audacious dream – a dream that transcended the confines of her musical career. She aspired to etch her name in history as the first Venda woman to be recognised among the pantheon of heroes and heroines who had valiantly waged the battle against language discrimination and gender inequality, all through the powerful medium of her music.

Her vision extended far beyond the realm of mere melody; it was a clarion call for change and a passionate advocacy for the rights and recognition of women, particularly those from marginalised linguistic backgrounds. Through her artistry, Mawela sought to shatter the shackles of linguistic



bias and gender-based disparities, using her music as a potent tool for social transformation. In her quest, she became a trailblazer, an emblem of strength and resilience, and an inspiration for generations to come. Irene Mawela's legacy is a testament to the transformative potential of music, where the artist becomes not just an entertainer but a catalyst for change, challenging the status quo and paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive world.

To overcome the formidable obstacles that stood in her way, Mawela adopted a creative strategy. She donned a series of pseudonyms, each serving as a discreet identity under which she could perform and record her songs. This shrewd manoeuvre afforded her the precious opportunity to produce a more extensive body of work than might have been inconceivable under her true identity. Her pseudonymous alter egos became conduits of her artistry, granting her the liberty to explore and express the full spectrum of her talent without the hindrance of linguistic prejudice. Through her resourcefulness and unwavering determination, Irene Mawela not only defied the odds but also paved the way for the enduring celebration of her mother tongue and the cultural heritage it represents. Her journey remains an inspiration, a testament to the power of resilience and the triumph of artistic spirit over adversity.

Irene Mawela's entry into the music industry coincided with a period of profound economic and industrial transformation. This era was marked by significant population migrations to urban centres in search of improved opportunities, mirroring a global trend that was ushering in the dawn of the Industrial Revolution in many African countries (Kubik 1981: 87). Within this dynamic backdrop, the music industry itself was undergoing a metamorphosis, embracing a climate of change and experimentation with newfound musical genres. This evolution included a willingness to explore and embrace what were once considered 'unsellable' musical styles. Although the industry exhibited an inherent rigidity, there were subtle yet noteworthy shifts occurring – incipient changes that functioned as experimental test cases to gauge the market's appetite for novel musical forms within the evolving economic landscape.

In essence, Irene Mawela's foray into music was not just a personal journey but a reflection of the broader socio-economic and cultural shifts unfolding during that era. It was a time when established norms were being challenged, and the music industry, albeit cautiously, was inching toward the acceptance of innovation and the diversification of musical genres. Mawela's career embodies this spirit of exploration and adaptation, as she navigated the currents of change within

the South African music industry in her distinctive way. Consequently, the South African music industry began to pivot, gradually warming up to recording Black music styles like *mbube* and *isicathamiya*, which originated from male singing groups in the mining sector during the 1940s. This marked a pivotal moment, with these genres serving as conduits to introduce the music of Black artists into the public domain. It was a transformative development that kindled interest among other Black groups eager to pursue musical careers.

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# Chapter 1

## The place and time of Irene Mawela's birth and upbringing

Irene Matodzi Mawela's birth on March 3, 1940, in Alexandra, Gauteng, South Africa, occurred against the backdrop of a world in turmoil due to the raging World War II. During this era, the war had reached its zenith, and it unfolded in tandem with a pivotal moment in African history – the burgeoning movement towards independence from colonial rule. Born eight years prior to the ascent of the Afrikaner apartheid regime to power in 1948, she entered a period that marked a detrimental shift for Black people in South Africa. Across the African continent, colonisers were vehemently striving to maintain their grip on power, even as nations yearned for freedom. In this turbulent landscape, Alexandra, affectionately known as Alex or Gomora, stood as one of South Africa's oldest townships, a resilient community that weathered the storm of apartheid. This township, nestled within the heart of South Africa, served as the birthplace for numerous political giants, celebrities, and musical icons, many of whom achieved remarkable success and widespread recognition throughout the nation of which Mawela is one. Amidst the global conflict, where bombs and gunfire filled the skies in battles for territorial dominance, nations turned to the power of music to forge a sense of unity and hope. Composers and musicians alike employed the language of music to communicate messages of solidarity and optimism, whether on the frontlines of war or from distant lands.

European classical composers, in particular, seized the opportunity presented by the war to assert a distinct musical identity through their compositions. In contrast, the post-war musical resurgence in the African continent was characterised by a prominence of popular music taking centre stage (Kubik 1981; Coplan 1985; Ballantine 1989; Jarocinski 1965; Goléa and Brockway 1965). The war represented yet another tragic setback for the long-suffering Black population of the African continent. As the world's attention turned towards the brutal physical battles of the global conflict, the oppressed Black communities of Africa found themselves engaged in an entirely different war – the relentless struggle against the yoke of colonial oppression. This oppressive burden, firmly clung to by their colonial overlords, showed no signs of loosening its grip. While the world was engulfed in the chaos of combat, with nations fighting for territorial dominance,

the Black people of Africa were still locked in a protracted battle for their basic rights, dignity, and freedom. They continued to face the harsh realities of exploitation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement, even as the world grappled with the horrors of war. In this tumultuous era, as the globe was reshaped by the events of World War II, the Black population of Africa remained steadfast in their fight against colonial oppression, demonstrating remarkable resilience and determination in the face of adversity. Their struggle persisted, a testament to the enduring human spirit that refused to be subdued even in the midst of the most significant global conflict in history.

14 The relentless echoes of bombs and the deafening roar of guns defined an era, especially in regions where the intensity of World War II was most acutely felt. The music composed during and in the aftermath of this tumultuous conflict mirrored these ominous sounds of battle, serving as distressing symbols of the discomfort and life-threatening circumstances that engulfed people worldwide (Arnold 1991). In a continental context where only Liberia and Ethiopia<sup>1</sup> remained outside the clutches of colonial rule, all other African nations were ensnared to varying degrees by the grip of foreign colonisers. In a show of solidarity with the Allied forces, these African countries contributed their own troops, marking a significant moment in history when they recognised the importance of their alliance. Yet, against the sweeping backdrop of this world war, the majority of Black Africans were acutely aware of their ongoing oppression and the pervasive inequality they faced on all fronts. Amidst the looming spectre of a post-war reality, many Africans harboured deep concerns about the prospects of their colonial overlords retaining power, which would inevitably perpetuate their own subjugation. Nevertheless, it was also a time when Africa was cautiously venturing into the realms of industrialisation and urbanisation, presenting an intriguing contrast to the backdrop of wartime turmoil. As the world grappled with conflict, Africa was at a crossroads, exploring the potential pathways toward modernisation while simultaneously confronting the enduring spectre of colonial domination.

Concurrently, during this time frame, the establishment of radio broadcasting corporations emerged strongly on the scene, with its roots tracing back to 1923 in South Africa with new music styles (Coplan 1985; Hamm 1991; Lekgoathi 2009). These radio networks assumed a pivotal role in facilitating improved communication between the South African government and its populace. However, a stark divide marred this communication landscape, as access to such communication

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that Ethiopia successfully avoided colonisation, except for a brief period in 1935 when Mussolini's invasion attempted, but ultimately failed, to establish it as a colony.

devices was primarily tailored for those who possessed the financial means – predominantly the White population. In the post-World War II era, radio took on an increasingly central role in disseminating messages to diverse communities through the medium of musical programming. Radio and recording studios emerged as increasingly pivotal agencies facilitating communication and musical expression that celebrated the post-war atmosphere. It was at this juncture that the apartheid government in South Africa stepped in, intervening in order to exert control over the messaging embedded within the music that resonated over the airwaves (Cloonan 2006). The government's primary objective was to ensure that the music's messaging underwent a meticulous filtering process within a framework of political monitoring. This intervention was designed to enable the government to effectively manage and pre-empt any potential subversive behaviour that might arise from the mobilisation of messages through music. Thus, it served as a mechanism through which the government could curtail any hint of treasonous sentiment that music might inadvertently convey.

The time and place of Irene Matodzi Mawela's birth hold profound significance in the trajectory of her musical career. The context of her birthplace and the era in which she entered the world deeply influenced the path she would embark upon. It's worth noting that her birthplace stands in contrast to the origins of many popular Venda musicians, who hailed from their respective hometowns in various provinces before making the migration to Johannesburg in search of better opportunities (Coplan 2001, Kubik 1981). This distinction is pivotal, as it underscores the crucial role of cross-cultural influences and exposure to the vibrant sound world of township life. Those who, like Mawela, were born in the melting pot of Gauteng, experienced the rich amalgamation of diverse cultures and lifestyles inherent to the township milieu. This exposure offered a unique perspective, characterised by the harmonious blend of traditions and practices from various backgrounds, in stark contrast to the 'singular notes' of musicians born and raised in their respective homelands, where such cross-cultural interactions were limited.

As Coplan (1985) astutely observes, the musical positioning of many artists was profoundly shaped by the environments in which they spent the formative years of their childhood and adulthood. Those raised in regions marked by conflict or areas where the constant friction between cultures prevailed were more inclined to produce music that reflected the contentious nature of their surroundings. For example, individuals growing up in rural homelands often created music infused with themes of poverty and the fervent desire to journey to the other side of the province, where

abundant job opportunities beckoned (Kruger 2007). Individuals hailing from hometown villages often aspire to carve out a better life in larger cities, and their musical identities are intricately shaped by the rich experiences of their traditional practices. In essence, the birthplace of a musician like Mawela serves as a crucial cornerstone in understanding the cultural genesis that weaves through their artistic expression.

At the precise moment of Mawela's birth, the world was gripped by the palpable tension of a global conflict that cast its ominous shadow over all corners of the Earth. A mere eight years later, closer to her home in South Africa, a seismic political shift occurred when the National Party ascended to power in 1948. With this change in leadership came the implementation of a regime that bore down even harder on the Black population, armed with a battery of new policies designed for separate development. These policies established a self-governing state that served as a façade, masking the harsh ideologies underpinning them. The primary objective of these policies was to systematically segregate Black people from mineral-rich lands, reserving exclusive rights to these territories for White individuals (Wuriga 2005; Meintjes 2003; Muller 1963). These policies, rather than fostering progress, were calculated to further control and constrict the lives of Black individuals (Hamm 1991).

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Nine years into the National Party's rule, Mawela embarked on her nascent journey into the realm of professional music. It was an era where the prospects for success for a Black person in South Africa were, at best, a distant dream. For a Black woman like Mawela, the challenges were exponentially more formidable. Opportunities for women within the urban landscape were severely limited, often constrained to roles as kitchen workers or cleaners, providing scant means to make ends meet (Allen 2003; Meintjes 2003). The 1950s witnessed the implementation of separate development policies and the establishment of separate states. Simultaneously, this era marked a musical evolution with the emergence of styles like African jive or *mbaqanga*. These musical expressions were influenced by the imperative to assert an African identity, countering the dominance of American music, particularly jazz, which was favoured by radio stations as the prevailing popular music of the time (Ballantine 1989; Allen 2003; Coplan 1985; Ansell 2004; Meintjes 2003). According to Knight (1989), the widespread popularity of American and European music in other countries can be attributed, in part, to the emergence of radio. As countries began to adopt radio broadcasting, there was a dearth of local music content, leading to the reliance on American and European musical exports from the 1920s to the 1950s. During this period, the

music transmitted from these Western sources became commercially viable, fostering the notion of popular music emulating Western styles and establishing them as dominant influences in global music trends (Ballantine 1999).

The advent of the Nationalist Party marked a dark chapter in South African history, as it ushered in a regime that systematically devised and executed policies that imposed the heavy yoke of oppression and discrimination squarely on the shoulders of the Black population. Discrimination, in all its insidious forms, lay at the very heart of these policies. Under the leadership of the Nationalist Party, the South African government embarked on a relentless campaign to impose a web of restrictions that effectively stripped Black people of the fundamental human rights that should rightfully be claimed as a birth right of their humanity. Black people were only needed in the city surroundings for hard human labour as mine workers, domestic workers and garden cleaners and yet not wanted as citizens in the urban dwelling spaces (Wuriga 2005). These policies not only curtailed individual freedoms but also served to institutionalise and perpetuate a deeply entrenched system of racial discrimination that was brutally enforced through legal frameworks and state apparatus. In this bleak era, the very essence of human dignity and equality was denied to a significant portion of South Africa's population, casting a long, dark shadow over the nation's conscience (Coundouriotis 2006).

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In the year 1957, against the backdrop of adversity and societal constraints, Mawela displayed unwavering courage and determination by taking a leap of faith. She ventured into the world of music recording, choosing EMI Records as her creative platform. EMI Records, initially established as a distribution house for American music publishers, had evolved into the formidable musical powerhouse known as the Gallo Record Company, leaving an indelible mark on the South African music industry (Allen 2003; Coplan 1985). In this pursuit, Mawela's indomitable spirit and her commitment to her craft shone brightly, transcending the formidable barriers of her time.

The arrival of Gallo Records in the 1920s marked a transformative epoch in the music industry, bringing with it the dawning of a new musical era. American recordings, in all their rhythmic glory, began to find their way across the Atlantic to the shores of Africa. This influx of American musical genres, such as rhythm and blues, jazz, and rock 'n roll, initiated a profound and enduring influence that would shape the musical landscape of the African continent (Mbembe 2005; Dorsch 2010; Knight 1989). Some scholars have aptly dubbed this period the 'Americanisation of music', a time

when the airwaves reverberated with the captivating sounds of American artists and a significant number of musicians sought to align their own musical styles with the vibrant and evolving genres that were enjoying immense popularity across the Atlantic (Ballantine 1999; Dorsch 2010). Radio stations played a pivotal role in this transformation, acting as the conduits through which the infectious rhythms of American music flowed into the ears and hearts of African audiences.

Radio stations, in their capacity not only as broadcasters but as tastemakers, held the power to mould listeners' musical preferences. They wielded the influence to shape the musical landscape by promoting specific styles, particularly those that resonated with the youth, who were often at the forefront of embracing new musical trends. Radio stations played a pivotal role in shaping trends and influencing popular tastes, thereby giving rise to a prevailing popular culture ideology. This, in turn, became the framework that recording studios and musicians adopted for positioning and selling various music styles (Frith 2004; George 1986; Coplan 1979). This dual role of radio stations, as both tastemakers and trendsetters, steered the direction of local music styles, ultimately facilitating a rich and dynamic musical fusion that continues to thrive in Africa to this day (Kubik 1981). South Africa, much like numerous other African nations, finds itself immersed in a pool of international musical influences, with a particular emphasis on music emanating from overseas, notably America and Europe (Ballantine 1989; Coplan 1985). This pervasive international presence in the music industry can inadvertently overshadow and diminish the appreciation of locally rooted music. This effect is particularly pronounced for music that intimately connects with the cultural and ethnic identities of specific communities, often residing outside the limelight of urban spaces.

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These various influences played a significant role in shaping how Mawela approached her musical style within the prevailing cultural context when she entered the music industry. During her time, *mbaqanga* emerged as the dominant and commercially successful music style, contributing to higher sales margins for recording studios with each *mbaqanga* album release (Martin 2013; Ballantine 2012). Consequently, Mawela aligned herself with the *mbaqanga* genre, not only due to its popularity but also because studio executives dictated what music was sold at the time. Mawela faced a certain compromise, as studio bosses wielded considerable influence in determining the musical direction of artists. In an industry where staying afloat necessitated producing commercially viable music, artists were often compelled to adhere to the preferences set by studio executives. This was particularly true for Mawela, as many young musicians faced



similar constraints. Studios commonly employed in-house bands to accompany lead singers who lacked their own musical ensembles. The familiarity of these in-house bands with the *mbaqanga* style further solidified its prevalence, influencing the musical direction whenever they played, and subsequently shaping Mawela's musical trajectory within the industry. (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

In this intricate musical mosaic, there exist genres and artists who consciously diverge from the American musical influence. Instead, they harness American music styles as a creative medium to articulate the profound local struggles experienced by Africans in the crucible of colonialism (Coplan 1985; Ballantine 1989, 1999). These musicians employ their craft to weave narratives that are deeply entrenched in the lived experiences, hopes, and aspirations of their communities, serving as powerful voices of resistance and resilience in the face of historical oppression. This nuanced approach to music not only preserves the authenticity of local traditions but also utilises the global language of music to convey the unique stories and challenges faced by African societies throughout their complex histories. Mawela grappled with a poignant dilemma in her career as a musician, particularly concerning the use of her own language in her songs. Many of her employers and studio bosses insisted that she sing in languages other than her own, deeming her native language as less marketable due to its association with a minority ethnic group.

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This presented Mawela with the challenging choice of conforming to industry expectations or asserting her cultural identity through her music (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019; Wa Thiong'o 1986). As rightfully said by Mlambo and Masuku (2023: 130), 'minority ethnic groups do not yield considerable power or influence in society; hence, they are often overlooked in developmental matters.'

The utilisation of one's language holds paramount significance in crafting a distinct musical identity for any artist. However, Mawela faced a formidable obstacle in her pursuit of this right, encountering opposition from her studio bosses. This resistance posed a formidable challenge, making her musical journey a painful and arduous endeavour to endure. Language is a testament to the enduring power of music as a vehicle for cultural expression, social commentary, and the assertion of identity in a world increasingly interconnected yet diverse (Wa Thiong'o 1986).

During this pivotal period of the 1950s with various music styles and an increased booming of recording studios, Gerhard Kubik's (1981) observations shed light on a significant upsurge in political songs bearing a fervent nationalist message. These anthems resonated and reverberated across radio waves in various African nations since many African countries were under the colonial yoke, Ghana serving as a compelling example. In this context, music emerged as a potent tool for depoliticising the treatment of Black populations by colonial powers, of which music also played a significant role in many African countries obtaining their freedom from their colonies (Nkoala 2013; Lebaka 2018; le Roux-Kemp 2014). The strategic use of music allowed for the articulation of a unified African identity and a rallying cry for independence and self-determination. The exigencies of World War II imposed an unmistakable urgency on African countries, compelling them to invest in radio transmissions. This investment was driven by the dual imperative of remaining well-informed about global developments and establishing effective channels of communication with Black communities residing within their borders (Hamm 1991). This pivotal move not only facilitated the deployment of radio networks throughout the African continent but also precipitated the burgeoning demand for recording studios to document local content. These recordings, in turn, became the lifeblood of radio stations, serving as a means to not only inform but also to celebrate and promote regional music, thus nurturing a burgeoning musical landscape that was both richly diverse and intrinsically connected to the socio-political currents of the era.

The establishment of local radio stations in South Africa and recording studios during this era was fundamentally rooted in the concept of control (Ballantine 1993, Meintjes 2003). Governing authorities recognised the critical importance of managing the narratives conveyed through these mediums, as they served as powerful conduits for shaping public perception. This control extended not only to the content of radio broadcasts but also to the musical compositions themselves, which were expected to align seamlessly with the prevailing colonial policies or the ideology of the supreme popular culture (Martin 2013). South Africa, in particular, stands out as a vivid example of how censorship in music lyrics was meticulously orchestrated and executed as a well-managed project (Drewett 2003, 2004, 2007). Within this intricate system, all approved radio stations catering to vernacular languages were mandated to have language specialists who were White people specialising in vernacular languages for them to have a better understanding of what the people were hearing from a particular radio station. These specialists played a pivotal role in regulating and supervising every facet of content that reached the public domain, both through the discourse of the radio presenters seated behind the broadcasting desks and through the lyrical content of the music itself (personal communications, Irene Mawela 2019, Munaka Ramunenyiwa

2021, Manavhela, 2021 and Benjamin Bezuidenhout 2021). These language overseers, typically identified as White individuals, were often farm Afrikaner children who grew up near Black South Africans. The Black people frequently resided near the farms of White landowners to facilitate easier access to employment opportunities; sometimes the farm owners would build compounds for these people to stay in the farm. The offspring of prominent White families often played with the children of the Black employees, swiftly acquired the language and customs. In addition, they were actively encouraged to learn more from the Black community, positioning them as linguistic intermediaries who could relay any potentially suspicious information they heard from the Black population to their White farmers (personal communications, Munaka Ramunenyiwa 2021 and Benjamin Bezuidenhout 2021). As these children matured, their proficiency in local languages became highly valued. They often ascended to influential positions where they wielded control or management authority, especially in areas where Black individuals were employed, such as radio stations. Bantustan radio stations, in adherence to policy requirements, sought individuals who would actively promote their own languages. Despite the preference for educated teachers and principals in selecting Black radio announcers, as they were considered the most educated individuals at the time and perceived as well-cultured and manageable, these individuals from the White Afrikaner community also played pivotal roles in language-related decision-making (personal communications, Benjamin Bezuidenhout 2021 and Lekgoathi 2009).

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The watchful gaze of these language specialists ensured that every utterance and musical composition adhered to the prescribed guidelines and maintained alignment with the government's narrative (personal communications, Irene Mawela 2019, Munaka Ramunenyiwa 2021 and Mpho Nefale 2021). This system of control was far-reaching, acting as a formidable mechanism to safeguard the colonial status quo, while at the same time underscoring the power of music and radio as instruments that could be harnessed to shape and manipulate public perception and sentiment. Music, with its profound ability to transcend borders and cultures, emerged as a potent instrument in the arsenal of those advocating for global awareness and intervention in the longstanding colonial struggles of Black communities. These struggles had long been a vocal point of contention, as Black individuals sought to inform the international community about the injustices and oppression they faced. Mawela recalls with clarity the intricate process her music had to undergo before receiving airtime on Radio Venda. Before being broadcast, her Tshivenda recorded music had to navigate scrutiny from the White person who was responsible as a language ombudsman, underscoring the pervasive influence and control exerted over linguistic and cultural content in the broadcasting sphere.

However, the apartheid regime in South Africa, recognising the immense potential of music as a catalyst for international solidarity, developed a shrewd strategy to stifle or curtail the dissemination of any negative messages to the global community through musical expressions. This strategy was designed to silence the voices that dared to speak out against the status quo, ensuring that the world's attention remained at bay or was skilfully diverted away from the harsh realities experienced by Black individuals under apartheid. Mawela deliberately steered clear of politically charged messages in her songs, opting instead to channel her artistic expression towards themes of love, peace, nature and her passion for education through music. This deliberate choice reflected her deep longing to sing in her native language, as it allowed her to convey heartfelt messages directly to the Venda people, to whom she felt a strong connection. She recognised that singing in other languages would create a barrier, preventing her people from fully understanding the profound messages woven into her music. In this intricate dance between the power of music as a global advocate for change and the apartheid regime's efforts to subdue dissent, the battle for narrative control played out on a global stage, with music as both a weapon and a shield. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), under state control, held a central position of influence, and recording studios mirrored this control structure by aligning their practices with the prevalent music styles favoured by the state, notably genres like *mbaqanga* (Ballantine 1993; Hamm 1991). The apartheid regime's tactics sought to suppress the truth and maintain a veneer of stability while the voices of resistance, conveyed through the medium of music, continued to strive for international recognition and support in the fight against colonial oppression.

The apex of the apartheid control system was marked by a stringent and meticulous censorship of lyrics and musical messages. The language overseers at the radio stations coined a term for music deemed unsuitable for public consumption, referring to it as '*Kanselleer*,' an Afrikaans word signifying cancellation. This involved physically scratching the LP to render it unusable, and these censored copies were subsequently archived within the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) (Lambrechts 2012; personal communication, Mpho Nefale 2021). Afrikaans emerged as the predominant medium of instruction among Black staff members, driven by the preference of their White Afrikaner superiors for this language. Even though it was not used to broadcast, it was the linguistic preference that was extended to various aspects of the workplace, including official communications and even news delivery, which originated in the head office in Afrikaans and necessitated translation into the vernacular language for broader dissemination. Furthermore, the prevalence of Afrikaans in the workplace was not solely linguistic but also extended to

the selection criteria for staff. Employed teachers were favoured not only for their educational qualifications but also because it was assumed that their academic background made them well-suited for this language-centric environment (personal communications, Mpho Nefale 2021 and Lekgoathi 2009). This linguistic hierarchy not only reflected the socio-political dynamics of the time but also influenced the daily operations and communication practices within the workplace.

Another manifestation of censorship, as described by McNeil (2012), is the denial of opportunities to perform at radio or government-organised local events. Simultaneously, recording studios operated under a cloud of caution, deliberately avoiding the production of music with negative messaging. The reason behind this caution was twofold: on one hand, such music was highly likely to be barred from airing on local radio stations, and on the other hand, it would consequently lead to financial losses for the artists and the studios themselves. This conundrum inherently transformed the recording process into a self-censoring environment, primarily driven by the music industry's inherent profit-making motives. In this landscape, the industry had a limited appetite for the politicisation of musical messages. The imperative to generate revenue took precedence over the desire to engage in politically charged expressions (Drewett 2003).

Consequently, artists and recording studios found themselves navigating a treacherous path, attempting to strike a delicate balance between creative expression and commercial viability. This delicate dance exemplified the intricate interplay between artistic freedom and economic pragmatism within an environment marked by strict censorship and an industry motivated by profit, further underscoring the multifaceted challenges faced by musicians during the apartheid era. Musicians hailing from minority Black groups often faced censorship through restrictions on recording, with the rationale that their music lacked a market. Mawela found herself in this category as a Venda musician, subject to the limitations imposed on recording opportunities due to perceptions of a limited audience for her music. This situation underscored the government's enduring control over the flow of information through radio stations, granting them the power to carefully curate what reached the public's ears. Music, in this context, assumed a pivotal role as a potent tool for fostering solidarity among diverse communities and mobilising them to forge a united front against the pervasive forces of oppression. Born in Gauteng and raised in townships like Alexandra and Soweto, Mawela had the advantage of being exposed to a diverse array of local languages. This exposure provided her with the versatility to sing in any language preferred by radio stations and recording studios (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

Political and struggle songs, in particular, emerged as a formidable means of galvanising individuals and groups, giving rise to a shared voice against the oppressive status quo. However, the very resilience and unwavering messaging embedded within these songs rendered them susceptible to the constant threat of censorship and suppression by colonial powers (Nkoala 2013; Pollard 1999; le Roux-Kemp 2014). These songs, with their touching messages of resistance and defiance, posed a direct challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the ruling regime, thereby making them a prime target for suppression. The continual risk of these songs being banned underscored their potency as catalysts for change and their capacity to rally the masses against the forces of tyranny. In this high-stakes environment, music not only served as a cultural expression but also as a rallying cry for justice, a testament to the enduring human spirit's quest for freedom and equality in the face of formidable adversity. Mawela's endeavour to sing in her native language was a silent struggle, one that found expression in her personal communications with her superiors, rather than being vocalised within her music.

24 In a climate where censorship loomed ominously, musicians were compelled to tread cautiously, avoiding the creation of music that directly criticised the government. However, as the international community and numerous African nations increased their collective pressure on colonial governments to grant freedom to African populations, music and song emerged as potent tools for voicing this demand. The power of music to transcend borders and connect disparate communities became increasingly evident. The resonance of music and song, echoing themes of unity, resistance, and the fervent desire for liberation, gained momentum. Colonial governments found themselves unable to staunch the tide of solidarity that welled up through music and song, as these creative expressions catalysed a growing sense of camaraderie and shared purpose among African countries. The momentum was palpable, and the voices demanding African liberation grew louder and more resonant (le Roux-Kemp 2014).

In this evolving landscape, music and song ceased to be mere artistic forms of expression; they evolved into powerful agents of change, compelling colonial governments to confront the undeniable swell of international and intercontinental solidarity that reverberated through the medium of music. The message was clear: the African continent was rising, and its call for liberation could no longer be stifled or ignored. Irene Mawela occupies a pivotal place in the unfolding narrative of an emerging industry, a role defined by a shifting cultural landscape that necessitated fresh symbols of indigenous identity, particularly in urban settings. This transformation was

instigated by the increasing migration of people from the homelands into the bustling cities, where the dynamic urban environment demanded a redefinition of their identity and culture (Coplan 1985; Kruger 2006).

Beginning in the early 1900s and continuing through the 1950s and beyond, a significant exodus of Black individuals from the homelands to the more developed cities in search of employment opportunities reshaped the social and cultural fabric of urban spaces. The 1950s ushered in an era where White Afrikaner individuals sought to enforce policies requiring Black people to return to their homelands or obtain permits to reside in cities. It was during this period that Irene Mawela found herself immersed in the vibrant soundscape of Johannesburg and its surrounding townships. The city's new sonic sound became the canvas upon which her musical style transformed, as she and other musicians contributed to the forging of a novel cultural homogeneity in these urban environs (Coplan 1985). This era witnessed the fusion and evolution of various musical styles, including *marabi*, *kwela*, jive, pennywhistle, and *mbaqanga* music. It's noteworthy that styles like *mbaqanga* had already begun to take root as early as World War I (Ballantine 1989: 307) but surged in prominence during this period, exerting a profound influence on numerous musicians. Coplan posits that *mbaqanga*, in particular, resonated deeply with the populace, serving as a direct response to the harsh realities of apartheid, which systematically curtailed Black individuals' ability to establish permanent residency in the city (Coplan 2001: 109).

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In this evolving musical landscape, Mawela emerged as an artist who not only adapted to the changing times but also actively contributed to the creation of a new sonic sound world, one that served as both a reflection of the challenges of apartheid and a celebration of the resilience and cultural diversity of those who sought a better life in the city. Musicians of the time found a compelling outlet for traditional expression in the urban environment where they toiled, often as labourers in the mines and various other settings (Kubik 1981; Coplan 2001). Within this context, *mbaqanga* music assumed a significant role, helping musicians forge a sense of traditional relevance in the bustling cityscapes they now called home. As Letcher highlights, Ballantine's exploration of *mbaqanga* reveals its evolution – from its early reference as urban African jazz to its later incarnation as music infused with the resonant sounds of *maskandi* guitar music (Letcher 2009: 28).

This trajectory illuminates the intricate layers of *mbaqanga's* development, where it drew inspiration not only from the emerging South African jazz scene but also from the influences of American music. Over time, *mbaqanga* asserted its distinct identity, yearning to be recognised as a quintessentially South African genre. It sought this distinction through the distinctive tuning which later evolved into the *maskandi* guitar, thereby weaving a unique sonic sound world that celebrated the spirit of South African heritage and culture, however, this was mainly music that celebrated the Zulu identity-oriented music (Mlambo and Masuku 2023). For Mawela, her journey into the world of music experienced a baptism by fire through the medium of *mbaqanga*. The studio where she embarked on her recording career often featured session musicians who were well-versed in the nuances of this music style. Consequently, when Mawela composed lyrics that required musical accompaniment, the musicians naturally gravitated towards the *mbaqanga* playing style and chord progressions. Over time, this fusion of influences became Mawela's signature musical style, a vibrant testament to the dynamic interplay between tradition, innovation, and personal expression in the world of South African music (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

26 Amidst the backdrop of Mawela's entry into the music scene, *mbaqanga* music emerged as a quintessential South African genre that stood as a resilient counterpoint to the overwhelming dominance of American music styles. The 1960s marked a heightened period of political tensions between the White regime and Black communities, leading to a significant exodus of musicians from the country. Many of these artists sought refuge in other nations, where they continued to actively promote South African music on the international stage (Meintjes 2003). Mawela was instinctively drawn to the magnetic allure of *mbaqanga* music, and within its resounding popularity, she discovered her musical sanctuary and creative foothold. In an environment that was previously dominated by American music, which epitomised popular music style with genres like jazz, held sway over the airwaves and was considered the benchmark for urban musical expression, local musicians found themselves grappling with the formidable challenge of establishing their unique musical identities. American music, notably jazz, commanded the spotlight on radio stations, embodying the very essence of what urban music should be (Ballantine 1999: 3). Consequently, South African musicians were compelled to navigate their musical journeys within the formidable shadow of American musical influence. Amidst this creative ferment, a new form of musical styles began to flourish in townships and similar locales, including the likes of bubblegum, disco, jazz, bebop, *marabi*, and *kwela*, each leaving an indelible mark on the evolving musical landscape (Devroop and Walton 2007; Coplan 1985).



*Mbaqanga*, in particular, emerged as a homegrown South African genre that resisted the tidal wave of American musical influence. It stood as a symbol of resilience, embodying the spirit of cultural authenticity and a fervent determination to carve out a distinct sonic identity amid the global musical zeitgeist. Numerous musicians recognised *mbaqanga* as a powerful and influential force, considering it a musical style through which they could assert and solidify their musical identity. Mawela's musical journey became intricately intertwined with *mbaqanga*'s ascendancy, and her work became synonymous with the genre, both because of the era in which she gained prominence and her collaborations with *mbaqanga* bands. Mawela's immersion in the *mbaqanga* milieu was further deepened by her role as a backing vocalist for numerous *mbaqanga* musicians with whom she collaborated. Through these experiences, she not only absorbed the distinctive vocal and compositional elements of *mbaqanga* but also embraced its unique stylistic nuances. The profound impact of American musical styles, coupled with her personal connection to *mbaqanga*, profoundly shaped Mawela's musical inclinations.

While many Venda musicians who ventured into the realm of popular music felt compelled to carve out a unique musical identity, one that resonated with their ethnic roots, it's noteworthy that Mawela's foray into the music scene transpired during a period when this distinctive style had yet to fully crystallise. As Kruger (2006) elucidates, this identity eventually manifested as a musical genre known as *muzika wa sialala*, a term that translates to 'traditional music or 'music inspired by traditional ethos'. What's particularly intriguing is that when Mawela embarked on her musical journey, such a well-defined and popular style amongst early popular Venda musicians was yet to take shape. It was only in the early 1980s that this distinctive musical genre began to emerge, as musicians from the Venda community started experimenting with homemade guitars in an earnest effort to craft a brand of popular music uniquely their own (Kruger 1993). This creative spark was ignited by their exposure to mainstream popular music through radio broadcasts, sparking a desire to infuse their distinct cultural heritage and musical sensibilities into this newfound genre. Mawela's entry into the music industry thus occurred during a transitional period, when the blueprint for a genre like *muzika wa sialala* amongst Venda musicians was still taking form. Her contribution to this evolving musical landscape would go on to shape and enrich this burgeoning genre, further highlighting the dynamic interplay between tradition, innovation, and artistic expression within the Venda musical tradition (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

Irene Mawela's journey into the world of music commenced at a young age, and her burgeoning interest in the art form became unmistakable when she was just 17 years old, marking the inception of her professional music career. Mawela's unwavering passion for music led her to seize every available opportunity to perform, whether it was at church events or various party venues. Born into a humble Catholic family, Mawela's upbringing in a church-cantered environment played a pivotal role in honing her vocal talents, eventually propelling her into the spotlight as a distinguished singer (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019). Her involvement in her church choir provided her with invaluable voice training, nurturing her vocal prowess and facilitating her emergence as a notable musical talent. It is worth noting that the church has historically served as a fertile ground for aspiring musicians, not only for its role in vocal development but also as a platform that often catapults exceptional talent into the limelight, affording them a well-deserved place of prominence within the musical landscape (Olwage 2003; Mbembe 2005; Agawu and Amu 1987).

28 As a dedicated member of the church choir, Mawela had the opportunity to hone her musical talents in a variety of settings, including joyous occasions like weddings. Despite her growing prominence within the choir, Mawela remained steadfastly humble and committed to prioritising her family and cultural values above her own musical aspirations. To her, music was never merely a personal pursuit; it served as a powerful medium for imparting essential life values and wisdom to her audience. Throughout her musical journey, Mawela's compositions have traversed a diverse spectrum of messages, all with a shared aim of enhancing the quality of people's lives and fostering a better existence, particularly for the younger generation. Her songs and lyrics are a vehicle for shedding light on prevalent social issues and everyday challenges that people encounter. Through her music, Mawela endeavours to redirect sorrow towards solace and to provide enlightenment about her unique perspective on life.

Central to her mission is the passionate desire to educate the younger generation about life, education, marriage and responsibility, bridging the gap between their experiences and the traditions of older generations, and fostering an understanding of the harmonious ways in which they once lived. While addressing various societal problems in her music, Mawela consciously avoids politically charged messages as alluded to earlier, to prevent being on the wrong side of the law. She aspires for her music to serve as a compelling role model, showcasing to the younger generation what it means to lead an honourable musician's life. Her intent is to provide an example

of a successful and respectable career, free from legal issues, involvement in drugs, or any form of substance abuse. Her objective was not to engage in political battles but rather to assert her right to sing in her native language and contribute positively to the lives of her listeners, ultimately leaving a legacy of cultural preservation and societal betterment through the power of music (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

Mawela's battle against inequality and language discrimination was not waged directly against the government but rather directed towards the studio managers who resisted her efforts to record music in her native language. While the impact of such a battle could have had far-reaching implications for her music had it been directed at the government, Mawela's approach was marked by subtlety and tact. Her messages were delivered with finesse, devoid of overt complaints, and she displayed a willingness to comply with her superiors by singing in other languages while biding her time for the right moment to assert her cultural identity. Mawela chose her battle very carefully and decided not to express her dissatisfaction through her lyrics but rather conveyed through verbal conversations with her bosses, a strategy that enabled her to wage a silent yet determined campaign for the recognition of her music in her native tongue. This astute approach allowed her to position herself as a formidable advocate for the legitimacy of her language within the music industry, ultimately paving the way for the inclusion of her cultural heritage in her musical expressions, a testament to her tenacity and commitment to preserving her linguistic and cultural identity through the medium of music.

While Mawela was raised in Gauteng and hailed from the Venda ethnic group, a distinct cultural background marked by its own traditions and language, she embarked on a lifelong journey to use her music as a powerful means to cement her cultural identity. Mawela's roots trace back to Venda, as her parents hailed from this region from a place called Muraleni. Despite dedicating many decades of her music career to the Gauteng province, she eventually moved back to Venda, reaffirming her deep connection to this place. Being a representative of a linguistic minority, she occupied a unique position. On one hand, she held the distinction of being among the first to achieve popularity by singing in her native tongue, setting her apart without any direct competition. Yet, on the other hand, this advantage was countered by the challenge of attracting a limited audience, as individuals from so-called minority backgrounds often encountered difficulties in garnering widespread support for their music. Even though her music was played by other stations such as Radio Lebowa (which is now Thobela FM) earlier before the Radio Venda

station was established, her music enjoyed a greater publicity while singing in other languages (personal communications, Irene Mawela 2019 and Lokgoathi 2009).

30 The conundrum of singing in other languages posed a formidable obstacle for Mawela, one that mirrored the struggles faced by many Venda musicians who, like her, sought to align their music with their cultural heritage in the cosmopolitan landscape of Gauteng. It became an enduring battle for countless Venda musicians striving for recognition and success in a context where the dominance of mainstream culture often overshadowed South Africa's other diverse ethnic identities. The struggle to maintain one's cultural authenticity and identity through music was an ongoing narrative shared by many, a testament to the resilience and determination of artists like Mawela to celebrate and preserve their heritage in the face of formidable odds (Mlambo and Masuku 2023). Wa Thiong'o (1986) identifies a challenge rooted in what he terms a capitalist mentality, a mindset that seeks to dominate the cultural presence of others while reaping its successes from the exploited labour of these individuals. In the context of Venda musicians, this translated into an expectation that they divorce themselves from their native language, recording music in languages unfamiliar to them, solely for the benefit and profit of capitalists exploiting their talent by capitalising on language exploitation. This exploitative practice resulted in Venda musicians using languages foreign to them, often resulting in broken expressions. Additionally, they had to rely on translations from others to conform their lyrics to the favoured narrative, further distancing them from their authentic expression. This forced linguistic detachment subjected them to a form of language embarrassment, where the impact of their music was diminished as their tongues were not naturally attuned to the languages they were compelled to use. The tonal and accent expression in their music suffered, as it was evident that these were not the tones of first-language speakers. This linguistic incongruence set them up for potential failure, as those fluent in the languages could discern that the musicians were not authentic speakers. Ultimately, this practice denied Venda musicians their fundamental human right to speak, sing, and express themselves in their own language, perpetuating a cultural disconnection that extended beyond mere artistic expression (Wa Thiong'o 1986). This intricate situation inevitably forced Mawela into a series of challenging compromises, a situation that left her feeling as though she had to adopt a persona that did not entirely align with her true self. The catalyst for these compromises lay in the draconian apartheid policies that rigidly segregated South Africans along ethnic lines, while using language and culture, Black minority and majority paradox to separate people, creating a climate in which individuals from minority groups faced considerable obstacles in their quest for widespread recognition and success. A persistent dichotomy continues to shape the decision-

making processes at the SABC, particularly concerning radio and television programming. This divide influences various aspects, ranging from music promotion and marketing strategies to budget allocations, and it remains prevalent even in the contemporary landscape (Alexander 2001).

Within this landscape, Mawela was determined to challenge the prevailing perception that certain ethnic groups were inherently less valuable than the dominant, usually majority, ethnic groups. Throughout her extensive career, she waged a tireless battle for musical equality, endeavouring to bridge the divide between different ethnic groups in South Africa's musical landscape. The tensions that already existed between these various ethnic groups were further exacerbated by the apartheid laws, which systematically privileged certain ethnic groups while simultaneously undermining others (Mlambo and Masuku 2023; Baloyi 2018). This divisive narrative served to bolster the apartheid regime's policy of separate development, a strategy aimed at fostering divisions among South African ethnic groups (Hamm 1991).

In this intricate web of social, political, and cultural dynamics, Mawela found herself caught between conflicting forces, striving to defend her musical identity while grappling with the societal expectation to mask her true self for the sake of achieving success in the music industry. Through her enduring strength and resilience, she cultivated a robust character that played a crucial role in propelling her forward in her pursuits, undeterred by the challenges that stood in her way. Her journey epitomised the complex struggle to reconcile personal authenticity with the demands of a society fractured by apartheid's divisive policies. In a society that mandated the marginalisation of specific ethnic groups, perpetuating the belief that individuals from Black minority groups were inherently deserving of less recognition, respect or dignity, a perplexing and troubling concept emerged. This mindset, rooted in the legacy of apartheid, continues to exert influence even in the post-apartheid era, shaping the treatment of these so-called minority ethnic groups within the framework of South African democracy (Mlambo and Masuku 2023). According to researchers like Mlambo and Masuku (2023), the ideologies of ethnic superiority and cultural dominance, ingrained in historical biases, persist and contribute to more profound divisions than even the policies of separate development themselves. This paradoxical situation suggests that the origins of the problem may be more comprehensible than the issues it subsequently caused. The ethnic tensions, though initially instigated by the separate development policies, now seem to have taken on a life of their own, perpetuating divisive narratives within the South African democratic context.

When Mawela joined the music industry in 1957 such prevailing ethnicisation was at the centre of music programming and studio recording. In fact, the only ethnic groups that had the privilege of radio programming before 1960 were Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho (Hamm 1991). The others, particularly the so-called minority ethnic Black groups, only started to enjoy radio programming in their languages and music promotion after 1965 (Hamm 1991; Lekgoathi 2009). Embarking on her music career at the young age of 17, Mawela entered a world that demanded her to navigate the intricate landscape of a musician with a mixed identity. When her parents relocated to the township of Soweto, she was a young and innocent girl with grand ambitions and dreams. Little did she imagine that her aspirations of singing her own music, true to her vision, would be abruptly halted by the political policies of the time. Even from infancy, her innate fascination with music became apparent, nurtured and encouraged by her mother. In those earliest moments of life, Irene could already hum along to the lullabies her mother sang, a bonding experience that left an indelible imprint on her musical soul. Many renowned Venda musicians employ a creative technique known as *mafhuwe*, which essentially translates to humming. This approach serves as a guiding mechanism for them to craft melodic and rhythmic phrases with a distinct and artistic touch (Netshivhambe 2019). Among these cherished lullabies was a Venda song known as *Ndi ala*, a traditional melody often crooned by Venda mothers to lull their children into peaceful slumber. Remarkably, Mawela would later incorporate this humming technique in her compositional style and particularly the very song that her mother used to hum to get her to sleep into one of her album collections, underscoring the enduring influence of her childhood melodies on her musical journey (personal conversation, Irene Mawela 2019).

This early humming, a manifestation of her deep-rooted connection to music, formed the foundational bedrock upon which her illustrious career would be built. Growing up in the vibrant city of Johannesburg afforded Mawela a unique advantage over many Venda musicians who later migrated to the urban landscape (Kruger 1991). Her upbringing was imbued with multilingualism, a valuable asset that would prove advantageous in her future musical endeavours, allowing her to seamlessly navigate the diverse linguistic environment of South Africa's music scene. During her school years, Mawela not only mastered fluency in Sotho but also seized the opportunity to acquire proficiency and familiarity with a diverse array of South African languages. Her educational journey exposed her to the rich languages of the region, encompassing languages such as Xhosa, Pedi, Zulu and Shangaan. Embracing this linguistic diversity not only broadened her communication skills but also cultivated a deep appreciation for the cultural nuances embedded within each language. Mawela's educational experience thus became a journey

of linguistic exploration, enabling her to connect with the cultural mosaic of South Africa in a multifaceted manner. Emerging from the so-called minority community and inspired by an unwavering passion to champion her own minority language, Mawela harboured a profound ambition: to dismantle the prevailing mindset that hindered the appreciation of music in South Africa. She wielded her mother tongue, Tshivenda, as a potent instrument of empowerment, striving to elevate and celebrate the often overlooked and marginalised languages within the evolving landscape of South Africa.

Mawela served as a beacon of hope for countless popular Venda musicians who yearned to record their music in their native tongue but were constrained by discriminatory forces. Her pioneering efforts transcended music; they symbolised a seismic shift in the cultural paradigm, where linguistic diversity was embraced rather than marginalised. Growing up in the bustling township environment of her era, as a young and ambitious musician already acclimated to the vibrant township lifestyle, Mawela understood that navigating the formidable music industry on behalf of a marginalised language necessitated adaptability. She recognised the practicality of incorporating more widely spoken languages to broaden her appeal, all while steadfastly preserving the essence of Tshivenda. As highlighted by Vokwana (2007), during the post-apartheid era, the genesis of popular culture in music production can be traced back to the vibrant lifestyles of the townships. This cultural movement not only influenced the contemporary music landscape but also laid the foundation for subsequent styles like *kwaito*, hip-hop, and afrosoul music. It stands as a testament to the idea that being raised in a township environment provides aspiring musicians with a locally infused and informed perspective that shapes the trends in popular culture.

In this ever-evolving musical landscape, Mawela not only adapted but also actively embraced the changing and emerging lifestyles embodied by popular music genres like *mbaqanga*. Her journey was characterised by a dynamic interplay between preserving linguistic heritage, adapting to contemporary trends, and carving out a unique space in the multifaceted environment of South African music, which is how many musicians within the urban spaces shaped their music identity (Coplan 1985, 2001). While her heart yearned to express this musical style in her native language, various constraints of the time prevented her from doing so. Radio, as a powerful cultural influencer, played a significant role in marginalising music performed in languages considered to belong to of the minority Black groups, further complicating Mawela's quest to bring her unique linguistic and musical heritage to the forefront.

Radio played a crucial role in either propelling musicians from linguistic minority backgrounds to success or relegating them to obscurity. For those lacking access to a diverse range of radio stations willing to broadcast their music, success became intricately tied to the language in which they sang. Navigating this landscape required a shrewd approach as musicians sought to survive the challenges posed by the South African music industry, whether their choice to sing in a marginalised language was intentional or circumstantial. Their musical destinies were inextricably tied to their local radio stations, which served as their lifelines in the struggle to promote their unique musical identities. Consequently, their popular musical styles struggled to capture the market of commercial urban radio stations that predominantly featured a range of urban-selling music styles, irrespective of language. The specific genres associated with certain ethnic Black groups also played a role in categorically isolating them, preventing these groups from securing a sizable listenership audience from commercial urban studios.

34 In this landscape, Mawela, too, found her sanctuary within the realm of Radio Venda, particularly when it was officially established with the primary mission of championing and disseminating the Tshivenda language. Commercial radio stations consistently focus their attention on the youth as their primary target market. They actively promote their stations' popularity during urban university events, including orientation weeks, bashes, and various student activities that endorse a popular ideology. This strategic approach allows them to garner more listeners, with students representing a significant portion of the urban commercial radio station audience. For artists like Mawela, Radio Venda represented not only a platform for showcasing their talents but also a vital conduit through which their cultural and linguistic heritage could thrive and resonate with their dedicated audience. It was within the nurturing embrace of Radio Venda that Mawela and her fellow musicians from linguistic minority backgrounds could find a home and a voice to share their stories and music with the world.

### **The role played by the radio at the early establishment of Radio Bantu as a political propaganda**

Radio emerged as an extraordinarily potent medium for propagating the apartheid regime's propaganda, seamlessly aligning with the overarching agenda of separate development, a policy that systematically marginalised Black communities, particularly those labelled as minority groups relegated to the lower rungs of society (Hamm 1991). In this context, the introduction of



radio stations in South Africa served as a catalyst for the flourishing of recording studios, sparking a burgeoning demand for music production that would be broadcast on the growing number of emerging stations across the continent. Yet, this demand faced obstacles due to prevailing policies that viewed music from minority ethnic Black groups as unprofitable in popular music. In response, Radio Venda initiated an initiative to record popular Venda musicians, establishing an archive and collection of music. Simultaneously, this effort aimed to encourage Venda musicians to step out from their hidden spaces, demonstrating that the radio station had created a platform for them to promote their languages through music (personal communication, Munaka Ramunenyiwa 2021).

The SABC's initiative to document the indigenous music of the Bantu people dates back to the 1930s and 1940s, spearheaded by the efforts of Hugh Tracey. His early recordings of Bantu music led to his recruitment by the SABC to expand this endeavour, with a particular focus on Zulu traditional music. Subsequently, Yvonne Huskisson continued this project, concentrating on profiling Black choral composers. Her extensive work resulted in the compilation of a book titled *The Music of the Bantu Composers*. The impetus for the Venda radio station to actively engage in this archival project gained momentum during the station's relocation from Johannesburg to Polokwane in 1976. Recognising the importance of preserving and promoting the musical heritage of Venda and other Bantu communities, the station prioritised its commitment to recording and archiving indigenous music, aligning with the broader SABC initiative-initiated decades earlier (personal communications, Manavhela 2021 and Munaka Ramunenyiwa 2021).

While the South African government could not exert direct control over every nascent studio, they deftly wielded radio stations as a strategic filter, meticulously screening and censoring music to ensure conformity with the prevailing separate development policies. Thus, each and every song faced scrutiny to ascertain its compliance with the stringent Radio Bantu policies governing the acceptability of songs for programming. This stringent control extended even to the airwaves, where music became a vehicle for promoting and perpetuating the regime's divisive ideology, underscoring the pervasive reach and influence of radio as a tool of propaganda during this tumultuous period. Musicians who dared to deviate from these stringent policies faced severe consequences, including the outright banning of their music. This punitive measure not only cast a shadow over their artistic endeavours but also sullied their personal image and reputation, resulting in significant financial losses. Countless songs languished in obscurity, forever consigned to the shadows of silence, deemed unsuitable and incongruent with the endorsed policies of the

time and, in turn, recording companies followed suit in choosing who they record.

36 It's noteworthy that Bantu radio stations were predominantly overseen by White individuals, further underscoring the pervasive control exerted by the authorities. As mentioned earlier, a White individual, proficient in the promoted vernacular language, often assumed the role of gatekeeper, meticulously scrutinising all lyrics and messages intended for public consumption. These White language overseers held positions on the linguistic boards, contributing to the formulation of a language considered neutral and free from political nuances. The language board, tasked with establishing linguistic standards, also played a pivotal role in introducing new words that would be widely adopted and formalised as the sanctioned language, even influencing the language choices of musicians (personal communication, Benjamin Bezuidenhout 2021). This meticulous filtration process ensured that only content aligned with the prevailing policies found its way onto the airwaves, further cementing the government's stranglehold on the narrative and the dissemination of information during this era of censorship and control. The shortage of White individuals proficient in languages classified as minorities had profound implications for the control policies governing music censorship in vernacular languages. This scenario often resulted in certain White language managers overseeing two stations simultaneously, exemplified by the case of Radio Venda and Radio Tsonga from 1965 to 1976. During this period, the two stations initially shared broadcasting facilities before eventually establishing separate studios. A White vernacular language specialist proficient in Sesotho, Edward August Language, served as the manager for both stations until 1976, overseeing their operations (personal communication, Benjamin Bezuidenhout 2021). As per Bezuidenhout, the sequence of White managers at the radio station included Martinus Jan Du Plessis, followed by Edward August Language and subsequently, Benjamin Bezuidenhout, with the last one being Louise Siegers. During these managerial transitions, Bezuidenhout was already employed at the radio station, eventually assuming the role of language specialist. Later on, Louise Siegers succeeded him when the radio station relocated to Thohoyandou (personal communication, Benjamin Bezuidenhout 2021). The reason for the apartheid government devising a strategic approach that involved appointing White language managers, ideally individuals who possessed fluency or at least a comprehensive understanding of the targeted vernacular languages, was to maintain strong control over the Black people. This selection process underscored the government's determination to maintain a stranglehold on the media industry, extending its dominion across all platforms.

However, the prioritisation of languages classified as ethnic Black minority was conspicuously absent from the government's agenda. Instead, the prevailing strategy perpetuated a system where languages and cultures considered to be outside the mainstream were systematically marginalised and excluded from the urban narrative. This deliberate omission reflected the apartheid regime's overarching aim to exert control and influence across the entire media spectrum, ensuring that minority ethnic languages remained firmly on the periphery of the cultural landscape.

In the orchestration of music programming across a myriad of radio stations during that period, songs performed in majority ethnic languages invariably enjoyed a distinct advantage over their minority counterparts. As a proactive response to these evolving influences, the government was resolute in its pursuit of regulating the lyrical content of songs, a measure designed to ensure that musical compositions did not carry subtle insinuations contrary to the government's agenda, but instead faithfully adhered to its prescribed narrative. The apartheid government showed less concern towards regional radio stations in comparison to urban ones, recognising that the latter held more significant influence, even attracting tourists. Urban stations also boasted a larger listenership in the cities, posing a potential risk of events spiralling out of control. This rigorous control and shaping of radio content cast a shadow over Mawela's prospects, placing her at a disadvantage, however, she sang her music in other languages to overcome this hurdle. Any endeavour on her part to sing in Tshivenda, her native language, would inevitably result in minimal exposure, as it was classified as a minority ethnic language, consigning her artistic expression to the margins of the broader musical landscape.

The government employed an array of strategies to assert its control, with language and communication serving as a pivotal arena of influence. These measures were meticulously orchestrated to ensure that all forms of expression, including music, aligned seamlessly with the propaganda propagated by the ruling party. The SABC board consistently devised policies with a stringent approach, aiming to close any potential loopholes that might lead to the exposure of their actions (Hamm 1991). This manipulation of language manifested in stark contrast, as certain African languages like Sesotho, Xhosa, and Zulu were permitted for use on radio stations and various media platforms, in addition to the officially endorsed Afrikaans and English. This calculated approach reflected the government's commitment to co-opting linguistic diversity and harnessing it as a tool to further its agenda, reinforcing the overarching control exerted over the nation's discourse and cultural expression (Hamm 1991).

These selected languages, notably Sotho, Xhosa, and Zulu, constituted the predominant African languages in South Africa. While this decision seemingly facilitated the conveyance of 'official' messages to the majority of Black South Africans in their mother tongues, it inadvertently marginalised those who spoke the minority South African languages. Consequently, this linguistic landscape dictated that the realm of music, both in terms of its creation and promotion, had to conform to the stringent restrictions and regulations imposed by the government. Recording studios, cognisant of the economic imperatives at play, found themselves compelled to align with the prescribed norms, focusing their promotional efforts on music that adhered to the government-sanctioned guidelines. The imperative for profit became a driving force, shaping the music industry's landscape and prioritising music that conformed to the government's narrative, thereby perpetuating the existing status quo (Martin 2013; Coplan 1985).

38 The paradox confronting minority Black languages in this landscape was stark and disheartening. Music performed in these minority languages seldom found favour within the recording industry, mainly because it failed to garner the wide exposure and expansive following enjoyed by music performed in majority languages. This precarious situation created a self-perpetuating cycle: recording studios were reluctant to invest in music in these minority Black languages due to the anticipated lack of broad appeal, while the scarcity of such music in the public sphere hindered the growth of a substantial audience. Opting to sing in English initially seemed like a viable choice for some musicians, but they soon realised that it adversely impacted the sales of their music. This dilemma left them caught between a rock and a hard place – using English proved to be disadvantageous, yet resorting to another language posed challenges. Even embracing their own mother tongue proved to be difficult due to restrictions that prohibited such usage. For the few studios daring enough to record music in minority Black languages, the prospect was fraught with risks, including the potential for adverse impacts on their profits and overall business viability. It was within this glaring inequity that Mawela found herself, acutely aware of the broadcasting institution's inclination to sideline her mother tongue (Hamm 1991).

This disheartening reality underscored the uphill battle faced by artists like Mawela, who were determined to preserve and promote their linguistic and cultural heritage despite the formidable obstacles posed by the prevailing socio-political climate. Mawela's proficiency in multiple languages emerged as her lifeline, allowing her to navigate the challenging terrain of the music industry. Initially, she strategically embraced the majority Black languages as her medium of

expression. However, it wasn't until she had successfully amassed a substantial following and convincingly demonstrated her artistic prowess to recording studio managers that she earned the privilege to sing in her cherished native language, Tshivenda. This linguistic journey underscored her unwavering commitment to her heritage and her persistent pursuit of the artistic freedom she longed for.

Mawela ingeniously concealed her true identity by employing various stage names and singing in the sanctioned languages of the time. Encouraged by recording studio managers to obscure her Venda background, she deftly manoeuvred the complex music industry landscape. Mawela's pioneering approach set a precedent for subsequent Venda musicians, who, facing similar challenges, adopted her tactics and leveraged their multilingual abilities to navigate the daunting industry while masking their ethnic identity. Furthermore, the limitations imposed on recording artists which restricted them to producing only one album annually, presented an additional hurdle for Mawela. Her fabricated aliases proved invaluable, enabling her to discreetly release multiple albums. Given her multifaceted roles in the music production process, including composer, backing vocalist, arranger, and singer on numerous albums, her concealed identities assumed even greater significance in her quest to surmount the industry's obstacles. Her multilingual abilities also made her the backing vocal musician of choice when various musicians come to the studio to record their albums (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

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Mawela's remarkable versatility, whether as a backup singer or a lead performer, not only enabled her to sustain a consistent livelihood in music but also provided her with a bargaining chip to assert her right to sing in her cherished native language. Her indispensability to multiple music groups within the Gallo studios, IMI, Mvuthela, Troubadour and many others where she was honing her skills under the guidance of her mentors, rendered her an invaluable asset. Mawela's exceptional talents set her apart, as she possessed the unique ability to sing proficiently in various South African languages, and her unwavering willingness to support artists across genres made her the busiest among her peers within the studio's ranks. Mawela's exceptional capabilities naturally stirred envy among her peers, who were not receiving as many opportunities to participate as backing vocalists. Yet, Mawela, ever gracious and diplomatic, would explain that her prolific involvement stemmed from her innate talent to effortlessly sing in any language and her unwavering enthusiasm to contribute to any recording project. She astutely leveraged this demand for her talents to convey her aspirations to her superiors, subtly making the case that the

high demand to collaborate with her underscored her remarkable talent. This strategic approach allowed her to advocate for the chance to record her own album in her beloved native language, effectively advancing her agenda (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

Mawela's unwavering resolve reflected her determination to assert her autonomy as a performer, even if it meant risking her hard-earned fame. She was steadfast in her commitment to convey a powerful message to her fellow Venda people: that the struggle for equal rights and the fight against ethnic discrimination need not be fraught with turmoil but could be advanced through art and expression. Even if it meant dedicating a decade to battling challenges in one's music career, the ultimate price for this pursuit would still be deemed worthwhile. Her deep yearning to sing in her beloved native language propelled her into the role of an ambassador for the Venda community, championing their cause and identity on the national stage. Mawela's tireless efforts led her to become one of the pioneering popular Venda musicians to secure a commercial recording deal. This experience provided her with a profound understanding of the challenges that Venda-speaking musicians would encounter while attempting to secure such deals. Driven by her determination to spare future generations of artists the humiliation and hardships she herself had endured, Mawela was resolute in her mission.

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Despite having the opportunity to record at prestigious commercial studios like Gallo, EMI, Sony, Teal, Troubadour and other industry giants that could have significantly boosted her chances of promoting her music, Mawela was willing to forgo these personal opportunities for the sake of a more authentic artistic path – singing her music in her cherished native language. As early as 1959, Mawela was already contemplating leaving EMI in pursuit of any studio willing to take a chance on recording her music in her mother tongue. Unfortunately, during that era, most recording companies were unwilling to embrace the risk of venturing into uncharted territory, and they remained hesitant to compromise in an uncertain market.

Later in her career, Irene Mawela discovered a sanctuary in the form of the Bantu Radio station Radio Venda, which was also in need of a wider Venda music collection sung in Tshivenda language. Through the initiated programme designed to unearth fresh talent and identify songs that could be recorded in the local language to enrich their traditional and indigenous song programming, many popular Venda musicians found a refuge in the SABC radio recording studio to start their careers in their language including Mawela. When she started to record her music in

the Tshivenda language the reception was nothing short of ecstatic, as the public enthusiastically embraced her music. The establishment of a dedicated radio station focussed on Venda music elevated the commercial profile of Venda musicians, stimulating a wave of artistic activity. This radio initiative served as a catalyst, inspiring numerous Venda musicians to embark on their recording journeys, while also preserving and promoting their rich tradition of indigenous music (personal communication, Munaka Ramunenyiwa 2019). Mawela's initial Tshivenda recordings began to garner significant attention, capturing the interest of major recording studios. They recognised the growing demand for music recorded in Tshivenda and Tsonga. It's worth noting that Mawela had already departed from EMI by this point and had moved to Troubadour. As her indigenous music gained momentum, former colleagues from EMI, who were well aware of her remarkable talent, made concerted efforts to track her down.

Mawela cleverly leveraged her initial Tshivenda recording with Radio Venda as an opportunity to finally record her music according to her long-held vision and she used this as proof that this music is marketable and has followers. Despite major music labels expressing renewed interest in her work, one thing remained unchanged: the need to align the music with the ideology of the nationalist government. Among the pseudonyms she adopted to conceal her true identity were Irene Nhlapo, Irene Ngwenya, and Sarah Ngwenya. However, when the opportunity presented itself Mawela eventually started using her real name as Irene Mawela. She chose to retire these 'personas' and instead committed herself to the struggle of promoting her authentic identity within the music industry.

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## Conclusion

Mawela's unique upbringing and life experiences clearly set her apart from many other musicians of her time who aspired to represent the Venda community through music but faced daunting obstacles. Growing up in Gauteng provided her with the advantage of being multilingual, enabling her to navigate the complexities of the music industry, which often favoured more widely spoken languages. Her exposure to various musical styles contributed significantly to her musical development and allowed her to evolve her own distinctive voice. The emergence of Radio Bantu as a platform to promote vernacular languages was a significant milestone, although it was not immune to the political complexities and bureaucracy imposed by the separate development policies of the era. Mawela's journey was marked by numerous challenges, yet her unwavering

resilience and determination ultimately prevailed, underscoring her commitment to singing in her own language and promoting the cultural heritage of her community. Mawela's career serves as a poignant reminder that the journey for Venda musicians in the bustling metropolis of Johannesburg, Gauteng, has been an arduous one. Many aspiring musicians from the Venda community faced insurmountable challenges, leading some to abandon their dreams and others tragically lose their lives in the pursuit of a music career. Mawela, however, defied the odds and not only carved a path for herself but also extended a helping hand to fellow Venda musicians who followed in her footsteps. Her generosity and mentorship extended to becoming a backing vocalist for numerous emerging Venda musicians who ventured to Gauteng to record their music. Having already blazed a trail by recording an album in the Tshivenda language, Mawela provided vital support and guidance to those who sought to follow her lead, ensuring that their musical aspirations had a fighting chance in the competitive world of South African music.

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## Chapter 2

### The impact of Mawela's music on her followers

Within the community of devoted Mawela enthusiasts, a tight-knit circle of fans has forged strong bonds with the artist, not merely by being ardent collectors of her records, but by actively championing her music wherever they tread. Among this fervent following, two names that stand out as paramount pillars of Mawela's fan base are Norton Ramavhoya and Nick Lotay who will form the basis of this chapter as testimonials of the impact of her music on people's lives. Though by no means the exclusive devotees, the extent of their adoration for Mawela's musical artistry warrants special acknowledgment within the pages of this book, given their exceptional contributions to her rise to national and global stardom. Norton Ramavhoya, driven by an unshakable love for Mawela's music, emerged as a pivotal figure in orchestrating her ascendancy by willingly stepping into the role of a voluntary public relations manager for her musical endeavours. In his view, he considers himself a self-made public relations practitioner and IT consultant, and it is with this self-assured expertise that he undertook this crucial mission (personal communication, Norton Ramavhoya 2022). He tirelessly organised numerous media interviews, public discussions, and ensured his unwavering presence at every one of Mawela's esteemed public appearances. His involvement transcended mere dedication; he also claims that he played a pivotal part in uniting Nick Lotay with the artist when he discovered Lotay's profound admiration for Mawela's musical prowess all the way from the United Kingdom. Furthermore, Ramavhoya's influence extended to the creation of the initial draft document encapsulating Mawela's outstanding accomplishments, a document that would subsequently play a pivotal role in her receiving an honorary Ph.D. This moving narrative of Ramavhoya's journey into Mawela's world of music finds its origins in his youth. In his own words, he shares,

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The story of my affinity for Mawela's music began during my formative years. It all began during those moments of togetherness when my family would gather around to savour our favourite daily Pedi drama on Thobela FM, back when it was known as Radio Lesotho. In those precious hours, a palpable joy would infuse the room, but one day, something extraordinary happened. Mawela's enchanting melody, *Hao Nkarabe* graced the airwaves just after the drama concluded. As the melodious notes filled our

space, my mother and the others in the room erupted in euphoria. They couldn't help but praise the song, and in that moment, my mother gestured towards the east, proudly proclaiming her connection to the very place Mawela sang about – Muraleni. It was the fusion of the song's heartfelt lyrics and the resonating hum of an airplane in the background that etched this memory into my heart, uniting my family in a harmonious celebration. Back then, my understanding of Sesotho was limited, and I could only hum along to the tune. It wasn't until many years later that the full depth of the song's meaning truly resonated with me (personal communication, Norton Ramavhoya 2022).

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It is abundantly clear that whenever the melodious tunes of Mawela graced the airwaves, a wave of joy swept through the hearts of many Venda-speaking individuals. Even though at the time she would be singing in other languages other than her own. Muraleni is a place where Mawela's parents come from. Prior to Mawela's birth, her parents had relocated from Muraleni village in Venda to Gauteng in pursuit of employment opportunities. Unfortunately, the prevailing tumultuous political conditions of the era compelled the family to conceal their true Venda identity beyond the confines of their home. The socio-political climate at the time rendered it challenging for them to openly acknowledge and express their cultural heritage, leading to a situation where their roots had to be safeguarded within the sanctuary of their household. This concealment was not merely a matter of personal choice but a response to the adversarial external circumstances that restricted the open celebration of their Venda heritage.

Norton Ramavhoya and Nick Lotay, like countless others, were magnetically drawn to Mawela's songs and her captivating vocal timbre including her innate ability to craft exquisite melodies. During his formative years, Ramavhoya found himself at a loss for words when attempting to articulate the enchantment he felt in Mawela's music. But there was one recurring sentiment that etched itself into his consciousness – a phrase that encapsulated the essence of her artistry. In the Venda language, he often found himself describing her voice as having *nuñu-nuñu*<sup>2</sup>, a term signifying the sheer beauty and tonal richness that permeated her vocal delivery. Mawela's music possessed an indescribable quality that resonated deeply within the souls of her listeners, and *nuñu-nuñu* became a symbolic representation of the enchantment she wove through her songs.

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2 See glossary for the full explanation of this word.

Mawela's music possessed an irresistible allure that captivated a wide audience, and at the heart of this magnetic pull was her exceptional and singular voice. That is also one of the reasons why many musicians preferred to have her as their backing vocalist regardless of her ability to speak many South African languages fluently. Her melodic tones had a way of permeating the very essence of the listener, leaving behind an indelible impression of pure beauty. For many within the Venda-speaking community, Mawela's voice was more than just a musical experience; it was a source of unadulterated delight. Her presence as a Black Venda female artist who boldly rose above the shackles of discrimination resonated deeply with her audience. Meintjes (2003: 53) posits that women, historically, have played limited roles in the recording, mixing, and mastering processes of records. However, they have exerted influence in other key aspects, such as overseeing rehearsals, contributing to lyrics, supporting vocalists in the background, and shaping the overall dance choreography for performances. Listening to Mawela's music was, for them, a joyful experience, a testament to her ability to shatter societal barriers and celebrate her heritage through her art.

Nonetheless, there existed a select group of individuals who had the privilege of knowing Mawela's musical journey intimately. These ardent followers had been by her side through the years when she performed under various stage names before she adopted her real name. They bore witness to her evolution, a transformation that mirrored her unwavering commitment to her craft and the unwavering loyalty of her dedicated supporters, Ramavhoya and Lotay are two of those remarkable followers.

There are two distinct occasions in Ramavhoya's recollection, during his primary school years, that underscore the profound impact of Mawela's music on him. These moments left an indelible mark on his memory, a testament to the unique influence wielded by her artistry. On one of these occasions, when the enchanting strains of Mawela's song called *Gwadamani* filled the night airwaves on Radio Venda (which is now Phalaphala FM), something magical transpired. It was as though the music possessed an ethereal quality, compelling him to stir from his slumber. In those quiet, nocturnal hours, he would awaken, drawn to the radio's transmission with rapt attention (personal communication, Norton Ramavhoya 2022). Mawela's vocals, accompanied by the deep, resonant message woven into her music, seemed to speak to him on a profoundly personal level, just like it did to many of her followers. It was as if the music had transcended mere entertainment and had become a deeply intimate conversation between artist and listener.

One particular Saturday remains etched in Ramavhoya's memory with remarkable clarity. As he strolled along the bustling streets, a serendipitous encounter occurred when he heard the unmistakable voice of the then-station presenter, Mr. Ligudu Tovhowani, engaged in an interview with Mawela on the radio. The revelation that Mawela herself was the subject of the interview sent a thrill through him, rendering him incapable of resisting the pull to draw nearer to the source of this enthralling conversation. Driven by an irresistible curiosity and an unshakable desire to partake in this unique moment, he navigated his way toward a nearby house, where a radio emitted the interview with heightened volume. There, he found himself standing beside the fence, engrossed in the compelling dialogue that unfolded over the course of a 30-minute interview. It was a profound experience, as this marked the very first time he had the privilege of hearing Mawela articulating her journey through the world of music. For him, it was a cherished day, an occasion that resonated deeply in his heart, as he was finally able to hear her voice in the intimate setting of a radio interview.

46 During his secondary school years, an intriguing revelation surfaced in Ramavhoya's life when his mother disclosed that she was well-acquainted with Mawela. Stirred by a newfound sense of enthusiasm and curiosity, Ramavhoya seized the opportunity and promptly approached his mother with a heartfelt request: to facilitate a meeting between himself and the esteemed artist. Remarkably, within a matter of mere days, his wish was granted, and he found himself on the cusp of an encounter that would transform his connection with Mawela. The meeting took place at Mawela's residence, a rendezvous that would prove to be a pivotal juncture in Ramavhoya's life. Here, in the intimate surroundings of her home, Mawela graciously extended her hospitality, opening the door to her world of musical artistry. It was during this memorable meeting that she generously shared her personal journey through the realms of music, allowing Ramavhoya to glimpse the rich history of her music career.

This encounter marked the inception of a deep and personal connection between Ramavhoya and Mawela's music. It was during this time that the seeds of profound admiration were sown, as he began to fall in love with her musical odyssey. Not content with merely being a silent admirer, Ramavhoya's commitment to the cause led him to become a fervent ambassador for Mawela's music. Drawing upon his connections and unwavering dedication, he embarked on a mission to promote her artistry and secure coveted interviews, thereby becoming an instrumental figure in propelling her career to greater heights. Ramavhoya found himself profoundly moved

by the narrative of Mawela's musical journey, a story that resonated deeply within his soul. This visit to Mawela's home was nothing short of a transformative experience, igniting within him a fervent passion to act in preserving the remarkable tale of her life during his own lifetime. With a deep sense of commitment, he expressed a heartfelt desire, sharing, 'I had an earnest wish to ensure that Mawela herself would be the one to articulate the narrative of her own life' (personal communication, Norton Ramavhoya 2022). As the bond between Mawela and Ramavhoya's family grew, a remarkable development occurred. Their connection transcended mere friendship, evolving into a profound and enduring relationship. This newfound closeness was exemplified by a gesture of tremendous significance – Mawela bestowed her name upon Ramavhoya's younger sister, solidifying the interwoven threads of their lives and strengthening the bond that united them.

As Ramavhoya embarked on his educational journey at the University of Johannesburg, the horizons of his knowledge about the media relations industry began to expand. It was during this period of growth and enlightenment that a chance encounter at a music store would further deepen his connection with Mawela's artistry. In the aisles of the music store, amidst an array of CD compilations, his eyes fell upon a Gallo CD bearing the unmistakable credit of the song *Uyi lova* to Mawela. A customary practice allowed customers to sample a CD before making a purchase, but in this instance, Ramavhoya was overcome by an intense curiosity. He could already vividly imagine the sweetness of her voice *nuñu-nuñu* even before the music began to play. Though he had never heard this particular song before, the sheer sight of her name on the CD cover kindled a deep longing within him, an insatiable desire to experience her artistry first-hand. It was a moment of magnetic allure, where the connection between the artist and her avid listener transcended the boundaries of mere music.

A burning passion ignited within Ramavhoya, a fervour that drove him to embark on an ardent quest to unearth Mawela's musical treasures. This relentless pursuit was not simply a casual endeavour but had evolved into a resolute mission. Before he discovered Mawela's CD in the music store, Ramavhoya had already etched his name into the annals of the gospel music world. He had forged a creative partnership with the legendary vocalist, Deborah Fraser, a collaboration where Mawela's name became a recurring theme in their conversations. Despite her being initially unidentified by name, Mawela's indelible mark on the music landscape was unmistakable.

The late Deborah Fraser, who had risen to iconic status, recalled the joy that Mawela's hit song, *Rosie My Girl*, never failed to bring. This cherished melody consistently elicited a warm smile from her. Moreover, another esteemed artist, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, showered Mawela with praise, attesting to her exceptional talent and impact on the world of music. Yvonne Chaka Chaka, in particular, retained vivid memories of the year 1988 when she collaborated with Mawela on the Rain Queen film, a production that paid homage to Queen Mudjadji of the Balobedu people. Mawela's hauntingly beautiful rendition of *Hao Nkarabe* left an indelible mark, contributing to the film's remarkable and evocative atmosphere. *Hao Nkarabe* is a song that came from the 1983 recording of her music. This collaboration became a testament to Mawela's far-reaching influence within the music and film industry, connecting her with iconic figures and leaving an enduring legacy.

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In the year 2013, a pivotal moment in Ramavhoya's journey unfolded as he delved into a blog penned by a British blogger Nick Lotay, which focussed on vintage South African songs. Enchanted by Lotay's insightful commentaries, Ramavhoya began following Lotay's blog closely. What truly caught his attention was Lotay's remarkable collection of Mawela's archival materials he posted on his blog, a treasure trove that held the key to unearthing the past. One particular memory stands out vividly in Ramavhoya's mind. During a visit to Mawela, she humbly confessed that the sands of time had obscured many of the songs she had recorded in her illustrious past. It was this moment that further fuelled his determination to ensure that her legacy was accurately preserved. As he continued his exploration of Lotay's blog, he encountered a piece that contained a minor factual inaccuracy regarding Mawela. Ramavhoya, ever the vigilant custodian of Mawela's musical history, felt compelled to reach out to Lotay. His intention was simple: to provide Lotay with precise and detailed information about Mawela's music career, setting the record straight. Little did he know that this act of correction would serve as the foundation for Lotay's formal introduction to direct communication with Mawela, an initiative that would reshape the course of Mawela's legacy and the work that these dedicated individuals would undertake to honour her artistry.

Seizing a remarkable opportunity, Ramavhoya facilitated a connection between Mawela and Lotay. Mawela graciously consented to this collaboration, and this union gave birth to a rich and eclectic music collection that added a fascinating layer to her life story. Ramavhoya's commitment to preserving Mawela's legacy was further exemplified when he conducted two comprehensive interviews with the artist. These interviews served as a vital source of accurate and detailed

information, forming the cornerstone for Lotay's blog dedicated to profiling Mawela's professional life. This profound and extensive profiling effort culminated in a masterpiece titled 'Irene Mawela: The Unknown Legend', which remains accessible on the Electric Jive blog. This comprehensive exploration of her life story served as a tribute to her remarkable contributions to the world of music. Furthermore, Ramavhoya undertook the noble task of arranging interviews for Mawela on various radio stations, providing her with a platform to narrate her own story to her devoted followers. Esteemed commercial radio stations such as Kaya FM, SA FM, Energy and Capricorn FM were captivated by the compelling narrative of her life, further solidifying her status as an icon within the South African music scene.



**Figure 2.1** Mawela after an interview at SA FM

Ramavhoya's unwavering quest to unearth the hidden gems of Mawela's music took him deep into the labyrinth of South African music archives. To his astonishment, he discovered a trove of songs meticulously crafted by Mawela primarily for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), compositions that had never seen the light of commercial release or public audiences. These musical treasures lay dormant, waiting to be unveiled and celebrated. In his dedicated pursuit, Ramavhoya not only delved into the realm of music but also engaged with other luminaries of Mawela's era, forging connections with notable figures such as the gifted guitarist Ntokozo Zungu from the legendary Stimela, the Xhosa artist Olga Mvincane, the former Mahotella Queens member Ms. Caroline Carpenter, and the accomplished Makgona Tsohle drummer and Mbaqanga co-founder, Lucky Monama. These interactions cemented Mawela's stature within the South African music industry, bestowing upon her a well-deserved and official seal of respect that resounds throughout the realm of musical excellence.

50 Ramavhoya's unwavering commitment extended beyond the relentless quest to recover Mawela's music collection. He believed that the most fitting tribute to her exceptional contributions lay in the conferment of an honorary doctorate, a gesture that would recognise her profound impact on the music industry. Driven by this vision, he took it upon himself to craft a concise yet historically rich motivation letter, presenting a compelling case to the esteemed University of Pretoria. His letter highlighted Mawela's unparalleled influence and outstanding achievements in the realm of music. Recognising the profound impact of Irene Mawela's contributions to the music industry, Professor Alexander Frederick Johnson, who served as the head of the department at that time, deemed it fitting to elevate her legacy to a historic pedestal. Acknowledging the significance of Mawela's body of work and her influential role in shaping the musical landscape, Prof. Johnson proposed the conferment of an honorary doctorate upon her. This decision reflected a profound appreciation for Irene Mawela's enduring influence and her invaluable role in the cultural and artistic fabric of the music industry.

The gesture aimed to formally recognise her exceptional talent, innovation, and dedication, elevating her status to that of an esteemed recipient of an honorary doctorate. In taking this step, Prof. Johnson sought not only to honour Mawela's individual achievements but also to highlight the broader impact of her work on the artistic and cultural heritage of the music industry. The decision to bestow an honorary doctorate upon Irene Mawela underscored the belief that her contributions were not only noteworthy in their time but had a lasting and transformative influence



that deserved the highest commendation. In an incredible turn of events, this heartfelt endeavour bore fruit, and the University of Pretoria acknowledged the significance of Mawela's contributions by granting her the well-deserved honorary doctorate. This remarkable achievement stands as a testament to both her extraordinary career and the unwavering dedication of Ramavhoya, who championed her cause with boundless passion.



**Figure 2.2 Mawela and the late Bob Mabena after an interview at Kaya FM radio station**

In the words of Ramavhoya, Mawela stands not only as a profound composer, performer, writer and legendary singer but also as a person of remarkable dignity, exuding love, respect, honour, and an innate sense of tranquillity. Her character, as perceived by both Lotay and Ramavhoya, is notably marked by two extraordinary qualities: humility and a deep-rooted reverence for God. These attributes form the foundation of her identity, endearing her to those who have had the privilege of knowing her. However, Ramavhoya acknowledges that much of his tireless efforts to amplify Mawela's name and legacy wouldn't have been possible without the invaluable support he received from Mawela's children. They understand the profound connection she shares with

her admirers, recognising her as a mother figure to all those who hold her dear. This collective acknowledgment of her role as a nurturing figure underscores the sense of family and unity that she fosters, making her not only a musical luminary but also a beacon of warmth, guidance, and shared love in the hearts of those who cherish her (personal communication, Norton Ramavhoya 2022).

In the eloquent words of Ramavhoya, he aptly describes her as ‘Mama Irene’ who is an instrument chosen by divine providence when God sought to effect positive change for the Vhavenda people of her time (personal communication, Norton Ramavhoya 2022). Today, the enduring legacy she has left behind continues to shine brightly, a testament to the profound impact she had on her community and the wider world. It’s important to recognise that her remarkable fame and influence couldn’t have reached such widespread acclaim without the unwavering support and unreserved promotion of her music by Phalaphala FM radio station. This radio station has consistently played her songs, creating a deep and lasting connection between her music and her devoted audience. It is through such dedicated promotion that her artistry has been allowed to transcend boundaries and resonate across generations, ensuring that her musical contributions endure as a source of inspiration and cultural pride.

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The fortuitous union of Mawela, Ramavhoya and Nick Lotay marked the commencement of a profound and enduring relationship. Lotay, a fervent South African music enthusiast, is a visionary who has embarked on a unique venture, founding Umsakazo Records. This label is more than just a recording studio; it is a haven dedicated to the reinterpretation and re-release of early South African music, with a particular emphasis on the soul-stirring genre of *mbaqanga* music. Lotay’s fervent passion for South African music knows no bounds; it has driven him to become not only a writer and a blogger but also a producer of South African music, all the way from the United Kingdom. His deep-rooted connection with the artistry of Mawela has been a lifelong journey. Recalling fond memories from as early as eight or nine years of age, Lotay was already exposed to her music through the medium of vinyl records, setting the stage for a lifetime of unwavering devotion to her unique musical sound world.

Upon hearing Irene Mawela’s voice, Nick Lotay was instantly captivated and began an enduring journey of following her musical career just like Ramavhona. His initiation into the enchanting world of Mawela’s music dates back to the year 2000 when he was a mere nine years old. From that

moment onwards, he became a devoted fan, his admiration for her artistry remaining steadfast. In 2013, Nick Lotay's connection with Mawela was solidified when Ramavhoya, acting as a catalyst, introduced them through a phone call. This introduction marked the beginning of a personal and professional association that would have a significant impact on Mawela's presence and recognition in the music industry. Ramavhoya, as an independent media journalist specialist, has consistently championed Mawela's career, playing a pivotal role in ensuring her publicity reaches a broader and more diverse audience. His unwavering support has been a driving force behind the elevation of Mawela's profile and her musical legacy. The culmination of Lotay's journey and his profound admiration for Mawela's music led to a momentous meeting in 2019. This meeting took place at the prestigious University of Pretoria, where Mawela received her honorary Ph.D., marking a deeply significant milestone in their shared journey.

Over the course of many years, Nick Lotay was intimately acquainted with the captivating voice and music of Irene Mawela. Her melodies had woven themselves into the fabric of his musical appreciation, yet the enigmatic origins of this remarkable artist remained a mystery to him. It was only when Lotay embarked on a determined quest to unravel the complete picture of Mawela's life and music that he began to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of her identity. As he delved deeper into his research, Lotay slowly but surely amassed an impressive collection of South African music, with Mawela's voice serving as a recurring thread that wove through the rich collection of his records. The recognition of her distinctive voice reverberated in his mind, yet it was an elusive name that eluded him. It was not until a pivotal moment when the pieces finally fell into place, that he realised that this voice belonged to the incomparable Mawela. The desire to connect with her, which had simmered in the background for years, surged to the forefront of Lotay's consciousness. The thought of establishing a connection with her in his lifetime became a heartfelt aspiration, increased by his profound respect and admiration for her musical contributions.

Lotay's discerning eye and discerning ear recognised in Mawela not just an artist, but a profoundly gifted musician whose compositions were imbued with richness and meaning. Her voice, exquisite and evocative, painted a musical canvas that resonated deeply with him. This realisation marked the genesis of his journey into writing about South African music as he matured and honed his appreciation for the art. The moment Ramavhoya reached out to Lotay to facilitate the long-awaited connection with Mawela was nothing short of a revelation. It was a pleasant surprise on two fronts. Firstly, he was astonished to receive contact from someone who shared his admiration

for this legendary artist, an acknowledgment that their shared passion for Mawela's work had found a kindred spirit. Secondly, the revelation that this iconic figure in South African music had no official recordings of her own came as a striking revelation, underscoring the importance of their collective mission to amplify her music and legacy.

The depth of Lotay's astonishment was further heightened by the realisation that Irene Mawela had been making musical contributions since as early as 1957. To discover that her discography was confined to merely five or six records was not just surprising but deeply unsettling. Prompted by this profound revelation, Lotay embarked on an earnest mission. His determination to rectify this discrepancy led him to painstakingly assemble as many of Mawela's songs as he could lay his hands on. With unwavering dedication, he meticulously compiled her music into a comprehensive collection, transferring these cherished melodies onto CDs. These CDs, filled with her evocative music, were carefully packaged and entrusted to the postal service, each one bearing his signature – a heartfelt offering to honour the artist whose talent had profoundly touched his soul.

54 Lotay's amazement reached new heights when he received an unexpected response from Mawela after he dispatched her a parcel of her music, accompanied by a heartfelt letter that included his contact information. The momentous occasion when his phone rang, and the dulcet tones on the other end of the line greeted his ears, was nothing short of surreal. To hear the very same voice that had enchanted him through her recordings speaking to him over the phone was a moment of sheer wonder. The beautiful, evocative voice that had serenaded countless listeners was now engaged in a personal conversation with him. This enchanting encounter took place in the year 2013, marking a pivotal juncture in their shared musical journey.

Over the span of several years, Nick Lotay and Mawela nurtured a deep and meaningful relationship conducted primarily through phone conversations. Their regular exchanges, conducted over phone calls, were occasionally supplemented with the occasional video call, strengthening their connection in the digital realm. However, it was only in the year 2019 that the two of them united, and they were able to bridge the physical distance that had separated them for so long. As they finally met face to face, an undeniable sense of relief and fulfilment enveloped the moment. Mawela, upon meeting Lotay, could heave a sigh of contentment and exclaim, 'At last, we meet.' This long-awaited encounter marked a significant milestone in their bond, a moment that transcended the boundaries of technology and cemented their connection

in the physical world. In those earlier days, as Lotay began his journey into Mawela's music, it was an era dominated by vinyl records and CDs. The digital music platforms like iTunes and the digital landscape as we know it today had not yet taken hold. Mawela's music had its roots in these analogue formats, which added a layer of historical significance to their enduring connection.

Lotay fondly recalls stumbling upon a compilation of South African music while perusing the shelves of various UK stores. This compilation was a veritable treasure trove, featuring a myriad of different groups, each with their own distinctive sound and identity. Among the remarkable tracks that graced this musical collection were offerings from iconic ensembles such as Ladysmith Black Mambazo, the Mahotella Queens, and the Soul Brothers, to name but a few. However, one particular recording piqued Lotay's curiosity. It was a track attributed to a group known as the Young Stars, and intriguingly, there was scant information available about them. With his characteristic tenacity, Lotay embarked on a quest to uncover the mystery behind this enigmatic group. After diligent and patient investigation, Lotay eventually unravelled the enigma. The Young Stars were revealed to be a studio ensemble associated with a label known as 'Records', which had been active during the vibrant musical landscape of the 1960s. This discovery shed light on a forgotten chapter in South African music history, exemplifying Lotay's dedication to unearthing and preserving the rich collection of this musical heritage (personal communication, Nick Lotay 2022).

Within the vast landscape of South African music, there existed a renowned label that operated discreetly, refraining from any overt credit for its contributions. It was from this intriguing anonymity that Lotay's journey into Irene Mawela's music began. However, this pursuit was not a straightforward and effortless endeavour. It unfolded over the course of numerous years and involved an arduous process of collecting and meticulous digging through the troves of South African music. Over time, the puzzle pieces of Mawela's identity began to emerge like a complex jigsaw, each fragment interlocking with another until a coherent picture took shape. Her name, a recurrent motif within the musical journey Lotay had been exploring, served as the key to unlocking the mystery. Determined to shine a light on this enigmatic figure, Lotay made it his mission to locate the elusive artist whose name had persistently surfaced throughout his journey into South African music. Mawela's music, a constant presence in his auditory landscape, had become a beacon guiding him toward the fulfilment of this musical quest.

As part of his dedicated work as a music writer for the esteemed blog 'Electric Jive', Lotay embarked on a mission to illuminate the vibrant history of South African music. In the course of his exploration, he came to a profound realisation that Irene Mawela stood as one of the most significant contributors to the rich heritage of South African music. Her artistry had left an indelible mark on the nation's musical landscape. However, this acknowledgment was tinged with a sense of sorrow and regret. Lotay recognised the unfortunate circumstances that had constrained Mawela's creative expression. The rigid and oppressive apartheid system of that era had cast a long shadow over her aspirations. She harboured a deep desire to sing in her native language, Tshivenda, a dream that was cruelly denied to her due to the harsh constraints imposed by the apartheid regime which used separate development policies to isolate the minority Black language speakers. This emotional chapter in her life serves as a moving reminder of the resilience of artists who persevered against the odds, shining a light on the indomitable human spirit.

56 Her main struggle, as Mawela tirelessly pursued her musical aspirations, revolved around a profound and enduring yearning. She embarked on a distressing journey, traversing from one recording studio to another, in search of a haven where her voice could finally sing in the tender cadences of her own language (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2021). In a heartfelt conversation with Lotay, Mawela conveyed the harrowing conditions of those early days. She described a time when the weight of her unfulfilled dream felt unbearable. A fiery passion burned within her, compelling her to express herself through the medium of her native tongue, Tshivenda. The disturbing irony lay in the fact that, despite her fervent desire and her loud cry, she was not even able to speak her own language, adding an extra layer of complexity to her heartfelt struggle. Her journey serves as a testament to the strength of her commitment and the formidable obstacles she overcame in her quest for musical expression. Lotay's longing to meet the artist who played a pivotal role in shaping his enduring passion for South African music reached a point where waiting became an unbearable endeavour.

The long-anticipated meeting between Irene Mawela and Nick Lotay in 2019 was nothing short of a profoundly moving experience for both individuals when they finally first laid eyes on each other at Mawela's honorary Ph.D. ceremony. For Lotay, the journey to meet her was imbued with a sense of eager anticipation that culminated in an unforgettable encounter. As Lotay embarked on a small tour of the University of Pretoria before their meeting, his primary focus was firmly fixed on the prospect of laying eyes on Mawela. The question that constantly echoed in his mind was whether

the person before him would indeed be Irene Mawela. The suspense built as he inquired within himself, and then, at last, he found her. It was a moment that defied belief, as he gazed upon the very real and extraordinary woman standing before him. Here she was, one of the greatest artists in the annals of South African history, transformed from an enduring voice on a recording into a living and breathing presence, making the meeting an utterly remarkable experience.

The moment Lotay set his eyes on Mawela in the flesh, it was nothing short of a mind-boggling and profoundly humbling experience. This remarkable artist, who had left an indelible mark through her extensive discography and exceptional talents, was now standing before him, radiating humility. One of the most striking aspects that immediately captivated Lotay was Mawela's evident humility. Despite her extraordinary accomplishments as a prolific composer and an enchanting vocalist, she bore not even a trace of conceit. Her life was a testament to her unwavering gratitude to God, a belief that she held dear and cherished. She often expressed her conviction that without the divine, she was nothing, underscoring the profound humility that was an intrinsic facet of her character. For Mawela, every friendship that blossomed through her music, including those



like Ramavhoya and Lotay, with whom she may not have shared an intimate bond, held a special place in her heart. Her enduring appreciation for the friends her music had brought into her life reflected her deep sense of connection and gratitude, shining a light on her remarkable character.

**Figure 2.3 Lotay and Mawela at the University of Pretoria after Mawela's receipt of an honorary Ph.D. in 2019.**

The bond between Lotay and Mawela deepened over time, strengthened by their ongoing phone conversations, and it reached a significant milestone when they finally met in person in 2019. However, their collaboration had already commenced, facilitated by virtual

communication and modern studio technologies. Their musical journey took a momentous turn in 2017 just before they could meet physically at Mawela's graduation when both recognised that the time had come to join forces creatively. Mawela had encountered challenges in distributing her music within South Africa. It was then that Lotay proposed a mutually beneficial solution: they should embark on a collaborative musical endeavour. His proposition carried with it the promise of not just local success but global distribution of her art, marking a pivotal moment in their creative partnership.

58 Lotay embarked on the creative process by crafting musical compositions on his guitar, and Mawela's response to the melodies he conjured was resoundingly positive – 'This is very good.' Her appreciation for the music was immediate and heartfelt. Drawing from her extensive experience working with renowned record labels such as EMI, Mavuthela, and Gallo, where she often collaborated with music composers, Mawela seamlessly transitioned into her familiar role. With the melodies at hand, she promptly commenced the task of crafting lyrics and melodic compositions, a role that had been a daily part of her professional life. This seamless fusion of Lotay's compositions and Mawela's lyrical competence marked the inception of a dynamic and harmonious creative partnership. This is the enchanting tale of how Lotay and Mawela embarked on their collaborative musical journey, despite the geographical chasm that separated them. Prior to their long-anticipated face-to-face meeting, Lotay's pivotal role in this remote partnership revolved around conceiving musical compositions. His process was to craft intricate musical beats, which he then dispatched to Mawela through the traditional post. On her end, Mawela received these musical canvases with attentive ears, immersing herself in their melodies. With her lyrical acumen and melodic ingenuity, she wove her artistry around these beats, thus bringing them to life with her profound talent. The alchemy of their distant collaboration was a testament to the power of music to transcend physical boundaries.

Lotay was quick to recognise that Mawela possessed an uncanny ability to assess the potential success of a song with unwavering honesty. Her deep-rooted knowledge of the music industry, accumulated over the decades since 1957, made her an authoritative figure who could swiftly discern whether a composition had the makings of a hit or not. Lotay held her expertise in the highest regard, never daring to second-guess her judgment. When Mawela conveyed that a musical piece sounded amiss, he wholeheartedly trusted her evaluation and acted on her feedback without hesitation. Their collaboration, which commenced in 2017 and continues to



thrive, is a testament to the synergy of their unique talents. Lotay's role remained consistent – he composed beats and transmitted them to Mawela. Yet, it was not a one-sided process. Mawela, at times, would invite Lotay to revisit some of her older music, tasking him with the creative challenge of infusing modern beats. In response, new songs or remixes would emerge, breathing fresh life into her timeless musical repertoire. Their enduring partnership exemplified a harmonious fusion of past and present, driven by their shared passion for music (personal communication, Nick Lotay 2022).

Lotay expressed profound gratitude for the timing of his acquaintance with Mawela, recognising that had their connection formed in the past, collaboration across countries would have been an immensely challenging endeavour. The thought of working with Mawela using traditional postal methods seemed daunting, and he could scarcely imagine the logistics of such a partnership. The post, in those days, introduced considerable delays, with the process of sending physical CDs taking up to six months before the recipient received the music. Fortunately, the landscape of communication and collaboration has evolved significantly since then, making their working relationship not only possible but also efficient. Contemporary tools and applications, such as WhatsApp, have emerged as powerful assets, enabling the swift transmission of content in real-time. This technological progress significantly improved the ease and effectiveness of their collaboration, bridging the geographical gap that would have once posed insurmountable challenges. Despite Irene Mawela being well into her 80s, she continues to gracefully embrace the march of time and the advancements in technology. With a spirit that ages like fine wine, she adeptly employs modern tech tools like WhatsApp, allowing her to maintain connections with a wide circle of individuals. In her collaboration with Lotay, this technological expertise translates into efficient communication. Their dynamic working relationship, solidified through this fusion of talent and technology, has yielded notable accomplishments. Across the vast geographical span between the UK and South Africa, they have crafted a portfolio of impressive singles and albums, a testament to their ability to bridge distances and cultures through the universal language of music.

When Lotay embarked on recording Mawela's music, it coincided with the resurgence of vinyl in a grand, nostalgic manner. In 2019 and again in 2021, he took the momentous step of releasing one of Mawela's albums on vinyl, and the response was nothing short of astounding. These vinyl releases continued to fly off the shelves, enduring as sought-after collector's items, showcasing

that her appeal transcends the borders of South Africa. This global admiration for Mawela is a testament to her universal charm, irrespective of the language in which she sings. While Mawela occasionally expressed concern about the inclusion of too many Venda songs in her albums, Lotay, ever the optimist, encouraged her to embrace artistic freedom. He reminded her that the era of caution regarding language usage in music had passed, and the key was to sing from the heart. He assured her that people cherished her voice and were drawn to her music regardless of the linguistic nuances, urging her to revel in her artistic expression.

Their music resonates with listeners on a deep level, captivating them through the enchanting beats, and captivating rhythms. For the audience, the sheer enjoyment of the music transcends linguistic boundaries, and whether the lyrics are in Venda, Zulu, or Sotho, it remains a source of pleasure. In their creative partnership, Lotay and Mawela share a unique and profound relationship, akin to that of a mother and son. Lotay affectionately refers to Mawela as *Mme anga*, signifying 'my mother', while Mawela reciprocates with *Nwananga*, translating to 'my child'. This endearing exchange of familial terms has cemented their close bond, not only as collaborators but as individuals who share a deep connection in both their professional and personal lives. Lotay's enduring love for South African music, particularly the captivating *mbaqanga* rhythm, was kindled during his teenage years, and it has since become an unyielding pursuit. As a dedicated music collector, his unceasing quest to discover and curate this unique musical genre has transformed into a passionate endeavour focussed on promoting South African music, particularly *mbaqanga*, within the vibrant musical landscape of the United Kingdom.

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Driven by an ardent love for the music, he took the remarkable step of acquiring a guitar, motivated by an innate desire to recreate the captivating sounds that had enraptured his soul. As a self-taught musician, Lotay never delved into the formalities of learning how to play the guitar, how to read sheet music or undergoing music education in school. He firmly subscribes to the belief that music resides within the individual, an intrinsic part of their being, waiting to be unleashed. In his view, the essence of music should flow naturally, without the constraints of academic education. For Lotay, the act of expressing what lies within the heart should be an intuitive and unbridled journey, a sentiment that underscores his profound connection to the world of music.

Driven by his unwavering commitment to promoting Irene Mawela's music, Lotay sought every conceivable avenue to advance her legacy. One of his notable endeavours was reaching out to

the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) archives, hoping to establish a collaborative partnership. He was eager to explore various possibilities that could mutually benefit Mawela and the archival repository. However, his initial overtures bore no fruit, and there seemed to be no promising outcome in sight. It was only when Lotay proposed a licensing arrangement for Mawela's songs, coupled with a profit-sharing agreement, that the SABC archives exhibited genuine interest. This juncture marked a pivotal moment in their interaction, highlighting the profound impact of financial incentives in catalysing interest and support.

Initially, Lotay's approach was rather modest. He initiated contact with the intent of obtaining Irene Mawela's transcription recordings for her personal enjoyment. Regrettably, his initial requests were met with resistance, and it wasn't until he introduced the prospect of a licensing arrangement that his overtures garnered genuine attention. Numerous musicians, with whom I've engaged in discussions, have expressed frustration over the SABC archive's reluctance to grant artists access to their own music. This issue stems from the SABC's perception that the collection belongs to the radio station, despite it being the creative product of the artists themselves. The crux of the matter lies in the often-stringent contracts that many artists unwittingly signed when entering agreements with the SABC studio for music recording.

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These contracts, viewed as impractical and even absurd by many artists, stipulated that the recorded music became the sole property of the SABC. Consequently, the artists found themselves in a situation where their own creations could only be played or utilised at the discretion of the SABC. This dynamic created a disconcerting scenario wherein the artists, despite being the originators of the music, were limited in their ability to control or access their own artistic works. The tension between artistic ownership and institutional control, as manifested in these contractual arrangements, has become a noteworthy challenge within the music industry. In the course of my interviews, I had the privilege of conversing with the esteemed musician Judas Kanakana Mathoho, commonly known as J.K. Mathoho, who candidly shared his disillusionment with the SABC's refusal to grant him access to his own musical archives.

Mathoho, a prominent artist, initiated his recording journey with the SABC in 1977, embarking on a creative partnership that spanned multiple albums over the years. Despite this substantial collaboration, his efforts to retrieve some of these recordings for personal collection and potential remixes have been met with persistent denial. Mathoho's desire to revisit and repurpose his own

musical legacy through remixes and re-releases is a testament to the enduring value he places on his artistic contributions. However, the SABC's steadfast refusal to provide him access to these records has become a source of profound frustration. This denial not only impedes his ability to curate and preserve his musical history but also hinders his creative autonomy to reinterpret and share his work with a contemporary audience. The situation highlights a broader concern within the industry, where artists like Mathoho find themselves entangled in contractual complexities that restrict their access to the fruits of their own labour. The clash between an artist's desire to reclaim and innovate with their creations and institutional control underscores the ongoing challenges in balancing artistic ownership and collaborative partnerships within the music realm (personal communication, J.K. Mathoho 2020).

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Renowned artists like Colbert Mukwevho, Adzimbei Band, and Irene Mawela have discovered immense satisfaction in reintroducing their classic albums to contemporary audiences through innovative remixes. These musical maestros, among many others, embark on a creative journey that skilfully fuses the vintage charm of their original compositions with modern sonic elements. The result is a captivating fusion that not only resonates with the present generation but also offers a nostalgic glimpse into the musical landscapes of bygone eras. For artists, the act of remixing serves as a powerful means to bridge generational gaps, providing a fresh and enticing soundscape that attracts a modern audience. The synergy between old and new sounds becomes a testament to the timelessness of their artistry, illustrating how music has evolved while preserving its intrinsic essence. Through this dynamic remixing process, these seasoned musicians offer a compelling narrative that speaks not only to the past but also to the potentiality of their creative expression in the present. The significance of these remixes extends beyond mere artistic experimentation; it plays a pivotal role in solidifying the legacy of these musical luminaries. By revisiting and reinventing their own classics, these artists assert their enduring influence on the broader spectrum of music enthusiasts. Intriguingly, several of these legendary figures opt to collaborate with their offspring, creating a beautiful intergenerational exchange that further enriches the musical heritage. However, the touching reality emerges when artists, due to contractual restrictions, are denied access to their own musical archives. This denial becomes disheartening for musicians who wish to engage in the collaborative process of melding the old and the new, especially when family members are involved in the creative journey. The inability to freely access and reinterpret their own work hampers the potential for these artists to contribute to the evolving narrative of their musical legacy and, in turn, restricts the scope of enriching collaborations that transcend generational boundaries.

An illustrative instance highlighting the impact of intergenerational collaborations is found in the musical partnership between BellaFonte and his mother, Irene Mawela. Together, they crafted a compelling remix of one of Mawela's songs named *Ndi itwani*, seamlessly blending traditional elements with a contemporary twist. This collaborative effort not only showcased the harmonious convergence of the old and the new but also marked a distinct moment in which a rich musical heritage was interwoven with a modern sound palette. BellaFonte, as the progeny of Irene Mawela, brought a fresh perspective to the collaboration. The infusion of a rap rendition by BellaFonte added a modern, dynamic layer to the composition. This collaborative venture became more than just a musical endeavour; it became a living testament to the evolving nature of music, where different generations contribute to a shared creative legacy.

In the case of *Ndi itwani*, the amalgamation of traditional and contemporary elements not only resonated with the audience but also exemplified the fluidity and timelessness of musical expression. This collaboration, marked by familial ties, not only celebrated the artistic lineage passed down from Irene Mawela but also demonstrated how the younger generation could contribute their unique stylistic elements to create a harmonious and innovative musical experience. Regrettably, when artists encounter barriers preventing them from accessing their own musical archives, as in the case mentioned earlier of Irene Mawela's denied access to her numerous collections of music by the SABC archives, it not only stifles their ability to revisit and reinterpret their own work but also obstructs the potential for enriching collaborations with the next generation. In situations where artists are unable to freely explore the vast landscapes of their artistic legacy, the opportunity for transformative intergenerational collaborations becomes constrained, impeding the growth and evolution of a dynamic musical heritage.

*Ndi itwani* stands not merely as a song for BellaFonte and Irene Mawela, but rather as a ground breaking musical piece originating from Irene Mawela's inaugural Tshivenda complete album. This significant work was meticulously recorded onto an LP in 1982 under the Mavuthela company, marking a pivotal moment in her illustrious career. The album, comprising 10 distinctive tracks, showcased Mawela's artistry in its entirety, but it was the track *Nditsheni Ndi Digatede* that emerged as the standout piece. Despite the formal title of the song being *Nditsheni Ndi Digatede*, the affectionate moniker *Ndi itwani* was coined by Mawela's devoted fan base. This nickname not only reflects the intimate connection her audience had with the song but also captures the essence of its popularity and widespread recognition. *Ndi itwani* transcended the confines of its

album, carving its niche as the most celebrated composition among Mawela's repertoire. The significance of this song lies not only in its melodic and lyrical brilliance but also in its ability to resonate deeply with the listeners. Beyond being a track on an album, *Ndi itwani* became a cultural touchstone, a musical beacon that illuminated Mawela's mastery of Tshivenda language and her talent in infusing traditional sounds with contemporary elements. It's crucial to acknowledge that *Ndi itwani* wasn't merely a singular musical endeavour; it represented a milestone in Irene Mawela's artistic journey, showcasing her ability to captivate audiences with a harmonious blend of cultural authenticity and modern creativity. The affectionate nickname given by fans serves as a testament to the enduring impact of this song, demonstrating how it transcended its formal title to become an indelible part of Irene Mawela's musical legacy.

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This pivotal album marked a transformative phase in Irene Mawela's career, as it became the catalyst for a significant shift in her artistic identity. Prior to this release, Mawela had often adopted various stage names in the course of her musical journey. However, it was the creation of this Tshivenda complete album in 1982 under the Mavuthela company that prompted her to embrace her authentic self. It was a touching moment where Mawela, with a newfound confidence in expressing herself through her mother tongue, chose to shed the aliases and present her true self to the world. In the process of crafting this album, Mawela not only showcased her musical prowess but also reclaimed her identity. The decision to use her real name rather than relying on stage pseudonyms underscored a powerful commitment to authenticity and cultural pride. Through this artistic endeavour, Mawela was not only singing in her own language but also asserting her individuality in a manner that resonated with her heritage. This album, beyond its musical merits, became a symbolic declaration of self-discovery and cultural affirmation for Irene Mawela. It marked a departure from the practice of adopting stage names and represented a bold step towards a more genuine and transparent artistic expression. By using her real name in this album, Mawela not only contributed to the rich sound of Tshivenda music but also celebrated her own identity, leaving an indelible mark on her artistic legacy.

A remix of a song as culturally significant as *Ndi itwani* holds profound historical implications for Irene Mawela's illustrious music career. This particular composition, originating from her first complete Tshivenda album recorded in 1982 under the Mavuthela company, represents a pivotal juncture in Mawela's artistic journey, a moment that she has been waiting for all her life. It symbolises her transition to singing entire albums in her native language and marks the moment

when she started using her real name, a testament to her commitment to authenticity and cultural expression. It is not just a celebration of a victory in her music career but a symbol of her resistance and resilience. The denial of access to such a musical archive, particularly when considering the potential for remixing, would be similar to rejecting access to a cherished treasure. In the context of Irene Mawela's musical legacy, it would go beyond being a mere setback; it would be an unforgettable and a regrettable time in her life to be denied such a significant moment she cherishes with her life that connects her own artistic evolution. To be unable to revisit and reinterpret a composition like *Ndi itwani* with her son through remixing would not just be a loss for the artist but also a missed opportunity for audiences to experience the fusion of the old and the new in her unique musical language.

Denying access to this musical archive becomes disheartening on multiple levels. It's a denial of the artist's right to revisit, redesign, relive and reshape her own creations, hindering her ability to contribute to the ongoing narrative of her musical legacy. Moreover, it denies fans and newer generations the opportunity to witness the evolution of a timeless piece of cultural and musical heritage. The potential for a remix, which could bring forth a fresh sonic interpretation, becomes a missed chance to bridge generational gaps and provide a contemporary audience with a renewed connection to the rich history encapsulated in *Ndi itwani*. In essence, the denial of access to such a significant musical archive represents not just a loss for the artist but also a limitation on the cultural and artistic dialogue that remixing could foster, which would leave a void in the ongoing narrative of Irene Mawela's impactful musical journey.

The difficulty Mawela encountered with the custodians of her recorded music at the SABC was a persistent source of frustration. It appeared as though they possessed a rich archive, yet they were hesitant to capitalise on it. This hesitancy manifested in various ways – the reluctance to broadcast her music on airwaves, the aversion to producing copies for a wider audience, and the general inertia that seemed to consign these invaluable recordings to a state of neglect. This puzzling reluctance to share her artistry with the world underscored the frustrating paradox of possessing a treasure trove of music but hesitating to let it breathe and resonate with audiences, a problem experienced by many popular Venda musicians whose collections are hosted at the SABC archives. Mawela, though undeniably one of South Africa's most prolific recording artists, has remained relatively obscure in the broader public consciousness due to the complex historical context in which she operated. Her prolific career was marked by a fascinating yet confounding

aspect – she adopted multiple pseudonyms and recording aliases throughout her journey and yet her resilience remained intact throughout her career until she could get her breakthrough in 1982 which was 26 years later after her first year of entering the music industry. This unique feature of her musical legacy often conceals the recognition she rightfully deserves. If one were to inquire about Mawela’s name, it’s quite likely that the majority of South African people might not immediately recognise it. However, if a snippet of her music were to grace their ears, a transformation would occur. The melodies that emanate from her vast body of work serve as a distinctive calling card. It’s at this point that individuals would likely exclaim, ‘Oh, we know that song or that voice!’ Her contributions are staggering, numbering in the thousands, each one released under various names and aliases, revealing the complexity and diversity of her artistic identity.

66 In Lotay’s eyes, Mawela emerges as an exceptional individual, transcending her enchanting vocal skill. While her voice remains one of the most resplendent and captivating in the realm of music, it is her extraordinary personal qualities that truly set her apart. For Lotay, some of the remarkable facets of Mawela’s character are her unwavering persistence and relentless perseverance. These qualities define her essence as an artist and as a human being. She is an embodiment of resolute determination, and she refuses to yield to adversity, no matter how daunting the circumstances. Her indomitable spirit serves as a beacon, guiding her through the labyrinthine pathways of her illustrious music career, and it is this unyielding tenacity that has propelled her to remarkable heights. The apartheid era presented an intimidating and often perilous landscape for many artists, marked by an overwhelming fear of White authority figures. The prevailing climate made it an exceedingly arduous task for most artists to confront and engage in any form of discourse with individuals of White ethnicity. A palpable apprehension pervaded the air, rooted in the deeply ingrained belief that challenging a White person was not just discouraged, but could carry severe consequences. Amidst this stifling atmosphere, Mawela emerged as a beacon of bravery and resistance. She exhibited the audacity to question the prevailing status quo and pushed against the boundaries of a society steeped in the indoctrinated belief that contesting the authority of a White person was an unthinkable act. In her defiance, Mawela demonstrated exceptional courage and the determination to dismantle the shackles of a prejudiced and oppressive mindset. Her actions were a testament to the power of a resolute individual to challenge the very core of systemic discrimination, transcending the deeply rooted fears that held others in check.



Mawela's extraordinary courage in speaking her mind to a White authority figure was nothing short of astonishing, especially considering her youth. Her bold challenge to the White establishment, a formidable force during that era, was a truly remarkable display of fortitude. Mawela's audacious decision to challenge her superiors and insist on singing in her native language stands as a testament to her extraordinary resilience and unwavering commitment to authenticity. In a time when prevailing norms often dictated artists to conform to certain commercial expectations, Mawela exhibited remarkable courage in asserting her cultural identity through her music. The boldness displayed by Mawela goes beyond a mere act of defiance; it signifies a profound act of resilience against the prevalent industry pressures. To insist on singing in her own language was an assertion of her artistic individuality, a declaration that her creative expression would not be confined or diluted by external expectations. This act required not only artistic conviction but also a deep-seated belief in the importance of preserving and promoting her cultural heritage. Mawela's resilience becomes particularly remarkable when considering the broader context of the music industry during that era. The prevailing norms often favoured commercially viable, widely understood languages, and deviating from this trend could have been perceived as a risky career move. However, Mawela's commitment to singing in her own language transcended such concerns, reflecting a determination to prioritise cultural authenticity over conforming to mainstream expectations.

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In essence, Mawela's courageous stand to sing in her own language was an act of artistic defiance, a demonstration of resilience that paved the way for future generations of artists to embrace and celebrate their cultural identity through music. It remains a shining example of how individual artists can catalyse meaningful change within the industry by staying true to their roots and challenging established norms.

What makes this tale even more remarkable is the eventual concession by the White bosses. Despite the considerable time and effort it took to sway their stance, the fact that they ultimately acceded to her request was nothing short of wonderful. In time, it dawned on them that Mawela represented a valuable asset, one who was actively generating profits for their enterprise, even though her direct communication was through the talent scouts who were mainly Black people, it took her time to convince them to convince their White recording company superiors. In light of her evident commercial significance, they began to consider allowing her to sing in her native language, albeit in a gradual and phased manner until she could officially be allowed to record

a full album in Tshivenda. This transition aligned with a practical understanding that business ultimately revolves around financial considerations. Mawela's tenacity and their subsequent shift in perspective underscored the pivotal role that money often plays in reshaping decisions, ultimately leading to her long-desired expression in her own language.

The narrative of Irene Mawela's upbringing and her musical journey unequivocally reveals her status as a profoundly gifted musician, one deeply intertwined with her devoted followers. Her music serves as a soothing balm, mending fractured hearts, reuniting estranged families, bestowing solace upon the tormented, and providing succour to the wounded. With her enchanting voice and meticulously crafted lyrics, Mawela's artistry has the remarkable power to bring about transformation in the lives of many. While her legacy endures and continues to touch souls, it is moving to acknowledge that the recognition she garnered during her active performing years did not attain the same magnitude as some of her contemporaries who achieved zeniths of fame. This discrepancy in acknowledgment stems from the disadvantages she confronted along her journey, yet her impact remains profound and enduring.

68 The bulk of the awards that have adorned Mawela's illustrious career came to her in the latter two decades of her life. This temporal clustering of accolades can be attributed, in part, to a chapter in her life when she temporarily stepped away from the music industry. During this hiatus, she wholeheartedly dedicated herself to raising her children and nurturing her family. Despite the inherent challenges of being born into the Venda ethnic group during a period marked by the oppressive apartheid policies of separate development, Mawela harnessed her unique Gauteng province upbringing to her advantage. She leveraged her remarkable multilingual abilities to craft an enduring legacy in her music career, navigating the complex socio-political landscape of her time to carve out a distinctive place in the world of South African music.

## Conclusion

The compelling narratives shared by both Ramavhoya and Lotay serve as powerful testaments to Irene Mawela's remarkable success in the South African music industry. In the face of formidable odds, she demonstrated unwavering determination to champion the right to sing in her native language. Those who have been devoted followers of her music can attest to her indomitable spirit and her unrelenting love for the art form. Irene Mawela has left an indelible mark on the

lives of countless individuals through her music, a legacy that endures even after seven decades in the music industry. Remarkably, she continues to record music, defying the passage of time at the age of 84, a testament to the enduring power of her voice. Her influence has also extended to her son, who has embraced music as a career. With the resonant testimonies of Ramavhoya and Lotay, it is abundantly clear that Mawela's music transcends cultural barriers and transcends the confines of historical boundaries, uniting people through the universal language of melody and emotion. Irene Mawela's music stands as a steadfast pillar of support for numerous individuals who embarked on their musical journeys during an era of profound oppression in South Africa. This was a time when the apartheid government actively employed discrimination rooted in language and culture to systematically segregate and subjugate the populace. In the midst of these grievous adversities, Mawela faced considerable losses, not only in terms of her musical repertoire but also in financial terms. The intricacies of her situation stemmed from the fact that much of her extensive catalogue was registered under various pseudonyms, making it exceedingly challenging to establish her true identity. Consequently, this hindered her ability to claim the rightful royalties she deserved, further underscoring the injustices she endured. In the face of these formidable challenges and hardships, Irene Mawela's music continues to radiate a luminous brilliance that has not only garnered her numerous prestigious awards but also bestowed upon her the invaluable recognition and reverence of society at large. In the subsequent chapter dedicated to her remarkable musical achievements, I shall delve further into the profound impact and accolades that have graced her illustrious career.

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## Chapter 3

### The historical account of the journey of Mawela's music

Matodzi Irene Mawela came into this world on March 3, 1940, in Alexandra, and later relocated to Soweto, specifically to an area known as Moroka. Soweto's Moroka was her childhood home, where she not only grew up but also attended primary school. From her young age, Mawela consistently credits her extraordinary singing talent to her early years. She holds vivid memories of her mother recognising her inherent talent when she was but an infant. This exceptional ability was evident even during her breastfeeding days. Her mother, in response to her melodious cries, would lovingly gaze into her eyes and, with a gentle voice, serenade her with traditional Venda lullabies, a practice that would swiftly hush the young Mawela. Among these cherished lullabies, one titled *Ndi ala* held a special place in her heart. The enchanting melody of the song had a profound impact on young Mawela. Each time her mother sang this tune, Mawela would be completely captivated by the music, lending her undivided attention to the harmonious sounds. Recognising the song's remarkable ability to soothe her, Mawela's mother made it a regular practice to sing *Ndi ala* whenever her daughter cried. This melodious lullaby held a unique power, capable of hushing Mawela's tears and locking her gaze into her mother's eyes. It was a song that held the key to her tranquillity.

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This traditional cyclical song, although rather brief, carries a unique quality. If sung continuously, the song can become somewhat monotonous. Traditionally its primary purpose is to lull a child to sleep, and the most effective technique for inducing slumber involves singing the initial cycles of the song and then transitioning into a gentle hum for the remainder part of the song. It was during this humming phase that Mawela's mother observed her daughter's inclination to join in. This song is renowned in the Venda community for its ability to lull children into a peaceful sleep, and its lyrics tell a beautiful story. The Venda lullaby that Mawela's mother sang to soothe her as a child carries a profound cultural and maternal essence. The lyrics, which loosely translate to 'wherever the child goes, the stomach eats, even when I am full, I eat, I eat, I eat', encapsulate the unconditional love and care that a mother provides to her child. The lullaby conveys the idea that a mother's nurturing instinct is ceaseless, just like the act of eating, and is not contingent on her own comfort or fullness.

The song's repetitive nature and simple yet meaningful lyrics create a soothing and rhythmic melody that helps lull infants into a peaceful slumber. As the mother sings this lullaby, it serves as a bonding experience between the mother and child, fostering a sense of security and warmth. The act of humming, often used as the child drifts into sleep, symbolises a seamless transition from wakefulness to the peaceful realm of dreams. In essence, this lullaby not only carries the cultural heritage of the Venda people but also embodies the universal love and care that mothers offer to their children. It is a beautiful testament to the enduring connection between a mother and her child, a connection that extends beyond physical nourishment and touches the emotional and spiritual realms of a child's life. This lullaby resonated deeply with Mawela and became an early introduction to the world of music, setting the stage for her remarkable career as a singer and composer. Below are the lyrics translated into English.

*Ihii Ihii*

*Thumbu ya tshi xele maenda*

*Nangwe ndo fura ndi a la*

*Ndi a la, ndi a la*

*Ihii, Ihii*

wherever the child goes, the stomach eats

even when I am full, I eat

I eat, I eat

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The significance of the song lies in its profound message about the relationship between a child and their parents. The lullaby's lyrics convey that a child is entirely dependent on their parents for sustenance and care. It emphasises the child's inherent trust and obedience, as they follow their parents without question. The child's inability to communicate their fullness, both physically and emotionally, is a central theme of the song. In a deeper sense, the song reflects the implicit and unwavering bond between parents and their child. The child's actions are symbolic of complete trust and reliance on their parents, who provide for their needs and well-being without any hesitation. This unspoken trust and harmony within the family are encapsulated in the lullaby's soothing melody. For Irene Mawela, this song served as an early introduction to the world of music. Every evening, as her mother sang this traditional lullaby, she joined in during the humming part. This participation not only fostered a deep connection between mother and child but also ignited the musical spark within Mawela. The lullaby's repetitive yet comforting melody and the child's natural inclination to hum along planted the seed for her remarkable journey toward a successful singing career. It beautifully exemplifies the way cultural traditions and maternal love can shape a person's life and destiny. The musical compositions created in one's later life can be profoundly influenced by the enduring impact of children's songs and memories. These

early musical experiences serve as a surrogate foundation for the adaptation of future musical nuances, shaping the individual's musical expression and composition throughout their lifetime, a testament to Mawela's experience (Netshivhambe 2022; Blacking 1967).

In 1967, Blacking authored a comprehensive Ph.D. thesis on Venda children's songs which was later published into a book, a meticulously researched work that garnered diverse reviews. His work sheds light on how the children's songs play a pivotal role in shaping the holistic upbringing of a Venda child. Among the numerous scholars who have critically reviewed this thesis, I will specifically highlight Twining (1969). Her examination underscores Blacking's (1967) analysis of Venda Children's Songs, revealing a profound insight into the interconnectedness between life and music (Tracey 1968; Twining 1969; Jones 1970). Mawela's inclination to join in the humming part of the lullaby was a natural expression of her connection to music which later became a reminiscent experience in her music career. Her inability to sing the words, being so young, was not a hindrance but rather an opportunity to showcase her unique response to melodies and sounds. A humming skill which would later be instrumental in her ability to compose music referred to as *mafhuwe* (Netshivhambe 2019). Her mother recognised this exceptional relationship with music and would later share the story of her early encounters with the lullaby. Humming or moving to the sound of music holds a significant place in African society as an intuitive method to musically engage the brain. It serves as a natural way to nurture musical responsiveness, laying a foundation that becomes evident as individuals grow older. This early introduction to the rhythms and melodies of music creates an inherent connection to the art form, fostering an innate understanding of music that can be expressed in more complex ways as one's musical journey unfolds. In Mawela's case, her early humming and response to music set the stage for her remarkable journey into the world of singing and music (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2021). As Mawela continued to grow, her love for music blossomed in tandem with her own development. She was drawn to various tunes and melodies, even though she might not have fully comprehended the lyrical content of the songs at such a tender age. This early exposure to the world of music, marked by her instinctive singing and response to different tunes, laid the foundation for her lifelong passion and talent for singing. It was a journey that began with a simple yet meaningful lullaby and would eventually lead her to a distinguished career as a renowned singer and musician. As Mawela progressed on her musical journey, her artistic development was carefully nurtured and skilfully refined through captivating performances held in diverse settings, including educational institutions and places of worship such as schools and churches.

She commenced her singing journey in local schools, at concerts, parties, and diverse community gatherings, seizing any opportunity to share her musical talent within the township where she spent her formative years. Her initial public performances took place at St. Mathews Primary School<sup>3</sup>, a Roman Catholic institution situated in what is currently known as Senaoane in Soweto. Notably, her family held a strong affiliation with the Roman Catholic faith, thus underscoring the significance of her early engagement with the school.

An interesting historical note in Mawela's life is that Moroka, the place where she grew up holds a special place in South African history, as it was the location where King George VI embarked on a royal visit to South Africa in 1947, accompanied by his family, including Queen Elizabeth and their two daughters, Princess Elizabeth and Princess Margaret. A young Irene Mawela was honoured to be among those who formed the guard of honour during this momentous visit by King George to South Africa. Of course, at this time her talent had not yet been discovered fully particularly by studio recording companies. Being chosen as one of the guards of honour during King George VI's visit was a profound honour for young Mawela as she states (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2021). This role placed her among the select few responsible for forming the protective wall of guards to welcome such an important guest. The experience allowed her to have a close, first-hand look at King George and his family as they passed through the guard of honour. Mawela was a mere seven years old when this remarkable event took place. A decade later, at the age of seventeen, she embarked on her professional music career as a signed artist with EMI. This marked the beginning of her journey in the music industry.

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Mawela's family underwent several relocations during her upbringing. The journey started from Alexander, then shifted to Moroka, followed by a move to Maseru. From Maseru, they moved back to Soweto in Naledi where Mawela spent the latter part of her youth until her marriage. Soweto eventually became her primary and enduring home, where she not only established her roots but also had the opportunity to immerse herself in the diverse languages that the region offered. This cultural and linguistic exposure in Soweto played a significant role in shaping her multifaceted musical career. Since Mawela embarked on her musical journey by performing at various events such as schools, weddings and church gatherings, her captivating live performances garnered

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3 St. Matthews Primary School, where Irene Mawela had her initial public performances, was founded in the mid-1930s, a period that predates the formal implementation of the National Party's apartheid policies in 1948. This institution operated under the auspices of Roman Catholic missionaries and was established in sync with the early formation of Black townships in South Africa. It was within this dynamic educational environment that Mawela began her musical journey.



attention from these activities. A significant turning point in her career occurred during a wedding celebration that took place just two houses away from her residence. It was at this event that she came to the notice of Mr. Rupert Bopape, a talent scout affiliated with EMI Records, in the year 1957. At that time, Mawela was a youthful 17-year-old with a remarkable vocal gift. Interestingly, another talented individual, Monica Mgiqa, residing in a house directly opposite to hers, was discovered simultaneously, marking the beginning of their musical journeys.



**Figure 3.1. Mawela singing in public space after she had already started recording commercial music.**

Irene Mawela had a deep-seated passion for singing, which she viewed as a profound means of connecting with her audience. She wholeheartedly embraced every opportunity to share her

vocal talents with the public. She saw each performance platform as a golden chance to give her absolute best, considering each moment as a lifetime opportunity to captivate her listeners with her remarkable singing abilities. Monica Mgiqa and Irene Mawela emerged as the two exceptionally talented singers earmarked for a recording opportunity when Bopape recognised their potential. However, their youth presented a logistical challenge, requiring Bopape to personally seek parental consent for these two young women to travel to Johannesburg for the recording sessions. In that era, it was no simple task to persuade parents to allow their children to venture into the city, given the stringent government restrictions on the movements of Black individuals (Smit 2001; Vosloo 2020). The strict control over movements during that time was characterised by a meticulous system in which individuals had to carry proper identification to establish their origins. This system primarily emerged from the management of migrant labourers who flocked to urban areas in search of employment opportunities (Wolpe 1972: 447). Attaining parental consent was not solely a matter of securing permission; it was also necessary due to the fact that these girls were minors. To avoid any legal complications, the young singers required a responsible adult to accompany them to the city. This stringent regulatory environment necessitated a well-thought-out approach to any journey.

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Initially, securing parental consent proved to be a formidable challenge, as it was an unconventional notion for young girls to embark on a music recording career at such a tender age. In many instances within the Black community, parents were often sceptical of music as a viable profession. This scepticism meant that parental approval for such endeavours was a rare occurrence. Compounding this hesitation was the fact that the girls were still attending school and were quite young. Additionally, the parents grappled with the fear that early exposure to potential financial gain would entice their daughters to abandon their education in pursuit of a career in music.

### **Mawela's official entrance into the professional music industry**

The decision for Mawela's parents to support her entry into the music industry at a tender age, while she was still pursuing her education, posed an initial dilemma within their community. In the predominantly Black community, the prevailing sentiment stressed the paramount importance of education before indulging in artistic and cultural pursuits in a committed manner. Indeed, there exists a prevalent sentiment among the parents of Black students, who actively advocate for their children to pursue more secure and promising career paths. This proactive guidance stems

from a desire to shield their offspring from the potential disappointment of facing unemployment or securing low-paying jobs. Consequently, careers perceived to lack job guarantees are often steered clear of, as parents strive to ensure their children embark on professional journeys that promise stability and fulfilment (Mhlongo and O'Neil 2016; Ozdemir and Hacifazlioglu 2008). Over time, however, a profound shift in perspective occurred within Mawela's family. They became assured that their daughters' burgeoning music endeavours would not compromise their scholastic journeys.

This assurance was solidified by the existence of a well-organised musical initiative, complete with a dedicated mobile service that would transport the young girls to the studio in the afternoons, meticulously designed to harmonise with their school schedules. This meticulous arrangement persuaded Mawela's parents to consent to their daughters embarking on a career in music from a remarkably young age. The proposition appeared not only well-structured but also remarkably professional. Transport logistics were efficiently in place, leaving no room for doubt or hesitation in allowing their daughters to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As articulated by Meintjes (2003: 54), talent scouts like Bopape and Nzimande were staunch advocates for the empowerment and elevation of women in the music industry. Their commitment to fostering gender inclusivity translated into providing ample opportunities for female artists to assume prominent roles as lead singers. Under the nurturing guidance of Bopape, in particular, it can be inferred that the young female talents were entrusted to capable hands, ensuring not only their artistic development but also affirming a commitment to gender equality within the realm of music.

Upon her arrival at EMI, Mawela initially embarked on her musical journey as a backup singer, lending her exquisite, resplendent voice to a multitude of musicians. Her vocal talent was of such calibre that it became nearly impossible for any artist to overlook her and not include her in their compositions. Even as she eventually gained the opportunity to release her own solo albums, Mawela didn't relinquish her role as a session musician, steadfastly providing her harmonious support to a plethora of fellow artists. This unwavering commitment to her dual roles served as undeniable evidence to her parents that music was truly Mawela's destiny. It was a path that allowed her to earn a livelihood from a very young age, showcasing her exceptional talent as a backing vocalist. In hindsight, her mother began to connect the dots, tracing Mawela's musical journey back to her infancy when she would softly hum lullabies that had the magical power to lull her to sleep.

Mawela's dual role as a backing vocal and singer assumed even greater significance during her tenure at Troubadour, as this recording company distinguished itself from others through its unique approach to musician compensation. Meintjes (2003) contends that Troubadour's remuneration structure set it apart as a superior studio, compensating its musicians on a weekly, fortnightly, or monthly basis – a notably advantageous arrangement for the artists. The studio adeptly managed this financial model by having many of its artists record under different names, a strategic practice of remuneration also corroborated by Allen (2003: 231). This distinctive operational approach not only underscored Troubadour's commitment to fair and regular compensation but also exemplified a shrewd business strategy in the dynamic landscape of the music industry.

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Growing up in a diverse and multilingual township, Mawela imbibed the invaluable skill of mastering an array of languages. This unique upbringing endowed her with the exceptional ability to fluently converse in numerous dialects simultaneously, a remarkable asset that would later serve as her guiding light in navigating the intricate landscape of the music industry. In those initial stages when record deals were elusive, Mawela adroitly harnessed her linguistic skill. She deftly became a sought-after session vocalist, lending her multifaceted vocal talents to other artists. Not only did this allow her to earn a living, but it also served as a strategic stepping stone to fortify her music career portfolio. Collaborating with a diverse array of musicians, she absorbed the intricacies of musical composition and melody creation, thus honing her craft and broadening her artistic horizons. In essence, Mawela ingeniously leveraged her linguistic versatility to emerge as a prominent backing singer, not only to earn her keep but also to cultivate her own musical artistry. This period of collaboration not only allowed her to fine-tune her vocal abilities but also nurtured her aptitude for crafting soul-stirring musical compositions.

Demonstrating her remarkable independence and a keen understanding of the nuances of being a lead singer, Mawela's journey as a backing vocalist was a swift ascent towards musical mastery. Her inherent talent and rapid learning curve in this supportive role instilled unwavering confidence in her managers. This confidence eventually paved the way for her to step into the spotlight and embark on her solo recording career. Mawela's remarkable ascent as a backing vocalist was underscored by the fact that she frequently lent her vocal talents to already illustrious musicians who served as revered role models for many, including herself. Each opportunity to support other artists not only contributed to her financial well-being but also functioned as a rigorous training ground, continually refining and elevating her vocal artistry. The diverse linguistic

ability of her experience was equally impressive, with Mawela's vocals gracefully embracing a spectrum of South African languages, including Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, Venda, Tsonga, Pedi, Ndebele, and Tswana. In doing so, she not only paid homage to these marginalised languages but also showcased her remarkable ability to transcend linguistic boundaries, adding an extra layer of depth to her artistry (Chebanne and Dlali 2019; Siegel 2006; Mncwango 2009).

Among the distinguished musicians with whom Irene Mawela shared her vocal talents as a revered backing vocalist, a constellation of stars illuminated her path. These luminaries included the likes of Susan Gabashane, the mesmeric harmonies of the Killingstone Stars, the enchanting and vivacious voices of the Dark City Sisters, the sonorous resonance of the Black Sea Giants, and the legendary presence of Mahlathini (Simon Nkabinde), whose very name resonated with power and charisma. The ensemble known as the Dark City Sisters, active during the period from 1958 to 1962, was a collective of remarkable talents that brought together a group of extraordinary vocalists. This assembly included the likes of Esther Khoza, Nunu Maseko, Irene Mawela, Francisca Mngomezulu, Hilda Mogapi, Joyce Mogatusi, Grace Msika, and Kate Olene. Each member contributed a unique and indispensable element to the group's harmonious blend, creating a musical synergy that resonated with audiences during a pivotal era in South African music. Their collaboration was not just a convergence of voices but a celebration of individual artistry, as each member brought her distinct flavour and style to the collective sound of the Dark City Sisters.

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In the vibrant South African musical landscape, Mawela was fortunate enough to collaborate with the original Black Mambazo, a seminal and trailblazing ensemble, distinct from the globally acclaimed male a cappella group, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, which would later achieve international fame under the leadership of Joseph Shabalala. The collaborative synergy between Ladysmith Black Mambazo and Paul Simon for the ground breaking 1986 *Graceland* album marked a resounding success, catapulting the group into the international spotlight. This musical alliance not only propelled the album to unprecedented acclaim but also paved the way for Ladysmith Black Mambazo to embark on triumphant international tours, solidifying their reputation as cultural ambassadors with a distinct musical identity. The resonance of *Graceland* not only underscored the harmonious fusion of South African and global sounds but also established Ladysmith Black Mambazo as a formidable force in the global music landscape, securing for them a prominent and enduring place in the annals of musical achievement (Meintjes 1990).

It's important to note that Ladysmith Black Mambazo emerged as a new and separate entity during EMI's management under Gallo's auspices, marking a significant juncture in the evolution of South African music (Meintjes 2003; Muller 2004; Allen 2003). In her illustrious career, Irene Mawela seamlessly transitioned between the roles of a backing vocalist and a lead singer, a testament to her remarkable versatility and vocal prowess. Notably, within groups like the Killingstone Stars and various songs of The Dark City Sisters, she took on the role of the lead singer, enchanting audiences with her captivating melodies and evocative lyrics.

What truly rendered her voice iconic was its astounding chameleon-like ability to traverse a vast spectrum of vocal ranges. Whether she needed to soar as a high soprano, lend her harmonious depth as an alto, carry a tune as a high tenor, or resonate with the sonorous depth of a deep tenor, Mawela's vocal versatility was nothing short of awe-inspiring. This expansive vocal range endowed her with the unique ability to seamlessly integrate her voice into a multitude of musical arrangements, making her an invaluable asset to any musical project and further elevating her status as a versatile and gifted artist.

## 80 Mawela's plea to sing in her language

During the initial two years of her recording journey at EMI, spanning from 1957 to 1959, Mawela consistently lent her enchanting voice to songs predominantly in Zulu, Sotho, and Xhosa. It was during this period that she began to muster the courage to approach the studio's decision-makers with her fervent desire to sing in her native tongue. However, when Mawela presented her heartfelt plea to express herself in her own language in 1959, her request was met with an immediate and unwavering rejection. Her impassioned appeal to sing in her mother tongue, brimming with cultural authenticity, fell on deaf ears, leaving her disheartened as she was sternly denied permission to do so. Familiar with Mawela and her indomitable spirit, she refused to be discouraged by the circumstances. She recognised that she was asking for something that seemed unattainable at the time, yet her determination propelled her to take that first crucial step. She understood the seemingly insurmountable odds were stacked against her request, primarily due to the belief that there was no viable market for music sung in Tshivenda and Xitsonga, languages spoken by a minority. She was candidly informed that by singing in these languages, she might alienate the more prominent Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho-speaking audiences, potentially causing financial loss for the record company. The decision-makers were apprehensive that even with

a voice as enchanting as hers and the potential to amass a devoted following, her vocal talents alone would not suffice as a marketable commodity if she insisted on singing in her native tongue. Despite these formidable obstacles, Mawela's resolve remained unshaken.

In her unwavering pursuit to sing in her native Venda language, Mawela boldly attempted to sway the decision-makers by asserting that the Venda community was not limited to solely consuming music in their own tongue. She argued that Venda people displayed a strong penchant for music sung in languages other than their own and fervently supported artists from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Mawela's counterargument was grounded in the belief that her fellow Venda people yearned for the opportunity to relish music in their mother tongue, connecting with it on a profoundly cultural level. She was resolute in her conviction that Venda speakers were unjustly denied the privilege of savouring music in their own language. However, her plea was met with a rebuttal. She was informed that Venda people were indeed linguistically versatile and proficient in comprehending various South African languages. This proficiency, it was contended, allowed them to embrace and follow music in popular languages spoken across the country, thereby steering clear of music in their native tongue. Mawela's unwavering determination to sing in her native language was met with resistance, but her tenacity refused to yield to the status quo. Her indomitable character would not permit her to settle for anything less than the opportunity to express herself in her own tongue. Despite the initial setback, her relentless fight continued unabated.

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In response to the challenging situation, the EMI executives devised a shrewd strategy to address the delicate balance of linguistic diversity within the music industry. They decided to obscure the cultural origins of musicians hailing from what was perceived as linguistic minority backgrounds. This clever approach involved altering their names or surnames, or assigning them stage names that concealed their cultural identities. The aim was to soothe the concerns of Zulu, Xhosa, or Sotho speakers while still allowing artists like Mawela to bring their authentic voices and narratives to the forefront. The transformation in Irene Mawela's identity unfolded swiftly upon her entry into EMI in 1957. Her given name, while distinctly English, carried with it no overt indicators of her cultural heritage, affording her a certain degree of anonymity. To align with the company's strategy, a new surname was bestowed upon her, and she was henceforth known as Irene Nhlapo.

For the young, ambitious 17-year-old, this change in identity was not without mixed emotions.

The alteration of her surname represented a departure from her true self, and she couldn't help but harbour some reservations. Mawela's change of surname by her bosses evoked memories of a prevalent practice among certain Afrikaner employers, who, when faced with the challenge of grappling with lengthy or unfamiliar African names that lacked Christian associations, would often impose a simplification by assigning a shorter, more conventional Afrikaans name. This historical trend saw individuals with names deemed complex or challenging replaced with more commonly used Afrikaans names like Piet, Johannes, Jacobus, Willem, Petrus, Andries, and the like. The adoption of these alternative names served not only to simplify pronunciation but also reflected a sense of dehumanisation within a broader cultural dynamic that sometimes overshadowed and, in some cases, replaced the authentic birth names of individuals within the socio-political context of the time. However, her unwavering determination to realise her dreams in the music industry, coupled with the promise of success, led her to acquiesce and accept this modification as an indispensable step on her path to achievement.

82 The exhilaration that coursed through Mawela upon securing this remarkable opportunity at such a tender age eclipsed her awareness of the profound cultural and political chasms engineered by the apartheid government as a facet of their 'separate development' policies (Hamm 1991: 152). In her youthful enthusiasm, she chose to overlook the complex web of socio-political dynamics that were shaping the landscape of her homeland. The advent of the National Party's ascension to power in 1948, a mere three years after the culmination of World War II, marked the inception of a new era in South Africa. This regime was marked by an ominous resolve to exploit divisions within the Black community as a strategic tool for maintaining authoritarian control, effectively wielding power with an unyielding grip. The government's objective was to perpetuate a system of racial segregation that would profoundly affect the lives of all South Africans, including Irene Mawela, whose burgeoning career was intricately intertwined with the evolving political backdrop of her time (Hamm 1991; Wuriga 2005).

Mawela's introduction to the new regime occurred at the tender age of eight, a stage of life characterised by youthful innocence and a limited understanding of the complex political landscape. As a child, she remained largely oblivious to the intricate political developments unfolding around her. The political tumult that engulfed the nation placed an even greater burden on the already beleaguered Black community, which was grappling with the oppressive weight of segregation and the systematic stripping away of their rights and privileges. The apartheid



regime, driven by its discriminatory ideology, sought to forcibly repatriate Black individuals to their designated homelands and concurrently impede their migration to urban areas. Despite the arduous conditions prevailing in their homelands, where economic opportunities were limited, many Black people found themselves compelled to relocate to urban spaces as the only viable means of survival and providing for their families. In response, the apartheid government employed separate development policies to curtail and control this migration, thus exerting its authority over the movement of Black citizens.

The restrictive measures implemented by the apartheid regime aimed at regulating Black migration involved a stringent permit system, starkly contrasting with the more unrestricted movement that had characterised pre-apartheid times. Though migration persisted, it was now subject to meticulous scrutiny and control, underscoring the oppressive nature of the policies enforced by the government. In this context, the journey from homelands to urban centres became not only an act of seeking better prospects but also a struggle against a regime that systematically sought to limit the movement and opportunities of Black individuals within the confines of a deeply segregated society. The advent of the new regime heralded a particularly onerous era for Black individuals, as it sanctioned a stark inequality where they were denied the very equity and opportunities accorded to their White counterparts. Black citizens were not only systematically marginalised but were also constrained to serve as laborers and denied access to the educational opportunities that might empower them to break free from this cycle of exploitation. The oppressive regime effectively reinforced a rigid racial hierarchy that maintained the dominance of the White population while relegating Black people to a subordinate position with limited prospects for advancement (Muller 1963; Halbach 1988; Ogura 1996; Strauss 2019; Bakker et al. 2019). Halbach (1988: 511) stipulates that the effected remigration into the homelands was, however, by no means voluntary, even in those cases where it took place without visible official pressure.

Mawela's deep-seated discomfort with the discrimination she faced due to the language she spoke marked the genesis of her transformative odyssey, one dedicated to securing her identity and advocating for equity, not just for herself but for women and those belonging to so-called minority racial groups. After an arduous three-year tenure at EMI, during which she earnestly endeavoured to align with her superiors' expectations without reciprocation on their part, she found herself at a pivotal crossroads. Faced with a seemingly insurmountable impasse, she arrived at the resolute conclusion that the most viable path forward for her musical endeavours lay in

unapologetically championing her language and heritage. With a determination born from her enduring struggle, she took the bold step of leaving EMI to forge her own path, leveraging her mother tongue as a vehicle for the promotion of her unique brand of music and cultural identity. This decision represented not only her artistic liberation but also her defiance against the status quo, setting in motion a transformative journey that would inspire generations to come. Upon making the momentous decision to part ways with EMI, Irene Mawela opted for a swift and unannounced exit, fuelled by her profound discontent and disillusionment. Her departure was shrouded in silence as she quietly slipped away from the realm of EMI and ventured into the uncharted territory of Troubadour Records.

### **Recording studio hunting in search of inclusivity**

84 In the pivotal year of 1960, Mawela's transition from EMI to Troubadour Records sent shockwaves throughout the music industry. Her defection stirred up a significant commotion, especially within the corridors of EMI, given her stature as a seasoned session musician and an invaluable asset to the company. The year in which Mawela made her pivotal move to Troubadour Records, 1960, was not only significant in her personal journey but also emblematic of broader historical changes unfolding in South Africa. It marked a period of profound socio-political transformation. During this transformative year, South Africa saw the establishment of the Bantu radio station, a development that reflected the apartheid regime's attempts to manipulate and control information and communication. Additionally, the year witnessed the harrowing and deeply significant Sharpeville Massacre, an event that would etch itself into the annals of South African history as a poignant symbol of the struggle against racial oppression (Muller 2004).

During the tumultuous period spanning the 1950s through the 1960s, a significant exodus of musicians from South Africa unfolded, as artists sought refuge and creative freedom beyond the confines of their homeland. The socio-political climate during this era, characterised by the repressive policies of apartheid, prompted a considerable number of musicians to embark on journeys of exile in pursuit of artistic expression unhampered by the constraints imposed by the discriminatory system. The decision to leave South Africa was not merely a geographical relocation; it represented an expression of resistance against the oppressive regime. Musicians, cognisant of the limitations imposed on their creativity within the apartheid context, chose to venture into exile to continue their craft without the stifling censorship and racial restrictions prevalent in their

home country. This wave of musical migration during the 1950s and 1960s mirrored a broader movement of cultural and intellectual figures leaving South Africa, contributing to a diaspora that carried the voices and talents of these artists to international stages. In doing so, these musicians not only sought personal emancipation but also became emblematic figures in the global struggle against apartheid, employing their art as a powerful form of dissent and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

In the global context, 1960 was a year of hope and independence for many nations. Seventeen countries celebrated their newfound sovereignty, marking an era of decolonisation and self-determination. This wave of independence was underpinned by United Nations Resolution 143, which held particular relevance for South Africa in the wake of the Sharpeville Massacre (Lissoni 2012). The international community's response to this tragic event through the resolution further underscored the interconnectedness of global politics and South Africa's complex struggle for racial equality. In the face of pervasive injustices unfolding worldwide, a collective imperative often emerges, compelling humanity to unite in a resolute stance against these grievances. A universal outcry resonates across borders, underscoring the urgency for a comprehensive and coordinated global response. Within the tumultuous landscape of South Africa, egregious massacres like the Sharpeville tragedy, coupled with the enduring oppression faced by the Black population, served as a clarion call for an international intervention aimed at securing the emancipation of the people. Moreover, the broader African continent found itself at a pivotal juncture, as mounting pressure from within and a burgeoning global momentum converged to propel a fervent push towards dismantling the shackles of colonialism. This momentum, characterised by a fervour for independence, intensified the demand for a concerted global effort to address the multifaceted challenges posed by colonial rule and champion the cause of sovereignty for each nation within Africa.

Music, wielding a profound influence, emerged as a potent catalyst in the quest for liberation across African nations. Despite concerted efforts by colonial regimes to stifle these resonant voices, the undeniable power of music became increasingly evident. In the wake of the early independence movements in select African countries, it became clear that the harmonious expressions of freedom and resistance had the transformative potential to shape the course of history. The melodic resistance persisted, creating an audible tapestry of resilience that defied attempts at suppression. The intrinsic link between music and the burgeoning spirit of

independence underscored its role as a powerful force for change. As some African nations successfully secured their freedom, the resounding success of these early endeavours illuminated the path forward, demonstrating that sustained pressure, particularly through artistic expression, could yield positive and transformative outcomes on the broader stage of decolonisation. In this symphony of liberation, music not only served as a means of cultural preservation but also as a universal language that resonated with the aspirations of a people yearning for autonomy. The struggle against colonial oppression found a harmonious ally in the cadence of protest songs and the lyrical narratives that defiantly echoed the collective desire for a free and self-determined African continent. The resonance of these musical expressions reverberated globally, amplifying the call for justice and inspiring a unified movement towards the realisation of a liberated, sovereign Africa (Kubik 1981).

86 Mawela's indomitable spirit epitomised a resilience that, though not broadcast on a global scale, resonated as a compelling national outcry. It stood as a fervent demand for attention, a plea for the acknowledgment of her inherent right to express herself freely through the medium of her own language. Faced with the relentless refusal from recording studios to grant her this fundamental artistic autonomy, Mawela made a courageous choice – stepping away from those establishments that were, in essence, waging a war against her musical identity and, by extension, her very human dignity. In navigating this tumultuous terrain, Mawela's departure from the studios represented not only a tactical retreat but a strategic stand for the preservation of her artistic integrity. This decision underscored her unwavering commitment to the authenticity of her craft, asserting that the right to sing in one's own language is an intrinsic part of the broader tapestry of human expression. By choosing to disengage from the confines of studios that sought to impose linguistic restrictions, Mawela boldly reclaimed control over her narrative, simultaneously challenging the oppressive forces that sought to diminish the richness of her cultural and artistic heritage. In this act of departure, Mawela transformed a personal struggle into a symbolic declaration, illustrating that the fight for artistic freedom and cultural authenticity is a battle that transcends individual narratives. It became a resonant chord in the symphony of a broader societal movement, echoing the imperative for the recognition of diverse voices and the preservation of cultural identity in the face of attempts to silence or dilute them

Mawela had been a steadfast figure, known for lending her melodious voice as a backing vocalist to numerous artists, playing an indispensable role in their musical endeavours. Her exit also came

at a point where she had recorded several unreleased songs under the EMI banner. However, her dissatisfaction and disillusionment with her treatment far outweighed any concern over these unreleased works. Mawela's determination to assert her own voice and agency in the world of music eclipsed any reservations about the unfinished projects, setting her on a course to champion her cultural identity and artistic autonomy. Mawela's role as a backing vocalist in the studio proved to be a lifeline for numerous musicians who sought her invaluable assistance when no other support was available. Her studio sessions became a sanctuary for artists in need, as she dedicated a substantial portion of her time to this endeavour. In her eyes, her work as a backing vocalist transcended mere hobby; she approached it with unwavering commitment, treating it as a full-fledged occupation. Every free moment she had was devoted to the studio, ensuring that her presence was a constant and reliable resource for those who required her vocal skills. Her dedication not only contributed to the quality of numerous musical projects but also allowed her to generate income as a backing vocal artist. This income was a testament to her exceptional talent and the respect she garnered in the industry. Among the many tracks she contributed to, notable songs such as *Vukani Madoda (Kikilikili)* had already been recorded with the Dark City Sisters. Regrettably, they remained unreleased when Mawela embarked on her journey to Troubadour Records, a decision rooted in her pursuit of artistic independence and her desire to promote her cultural identity through her music (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

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Upon her arrival at Troubadour Records, Mawela's initial impression was one of optimism, as she believed she had made the right decision by leaving EMI. However, to her astonishment, the landscape at Troubadour was no different from what she had encountered previously, especially concerning her request to sing in her native language. Mawela had harboured hope, believing that Troubadour would provide a more favourable environment for her artistic aspirations. Her optimism stemmed from the fact that the talent scout at Troubadour was a Venda individual named Cuthbert Matumba, originally hailing from Tshakhuma in Venda (who is now late). She viewed this fortuitous connection as a divine blessing, assuming that having a fellow Venda person overseeing talent acquisition would lead to more significant support for her desire to sing in her mother tongue. However, her optimism would later give way to the realisation that Matumba, though a Venda individual, was just indeed a producer and talent scout for Troubadour Records but not a decision-maker on matters such as singing language choice. While Allen (2003: 230) contends that Troubadour Katz and Fagan demonstrated a degree of leniency towards their Black employees, particularly in the context of decision-making, it is crucial to recognise that

ultimate authority over what was deemed commercially viable still rested in their hands. Despite this acknowledgment, Allen (2003) emphasises that for figures like Cuthbert, the perceived risk of permitting Mawela to sing in her native language outweighed any potential risk to his own reputation. Allen argues that 'unusually for the era, for instance, they gave talent scout Cuthbert Matumba the freedom to run the studio almost entirely as he saw fit. Matumba could, as a result, make the most of his exceptional marketing skills and his commercial and artistic instincts' (Allen 2003: 231). The presence of a fellow Venda person in a prominent role within the company did not automatically translate into support for her quest to promote her cultural heritage through her music, leaving her to navigate another complex and challenging chapter in her artistic journey (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2019).

This positioned Matumba in a dual role, one that entailed not only identifying promising talents but also steering them towards commercial success, effectively translating artistry into revenue for the record company.

88 The responsibility of talent scouting typically fell into the hands of influential Black individuals who held sway not only in their own community but also wielded significant influence within the studio recording realm. These figures enjoyed the trust of their White counterparts, who relied on their discerning abilities to identify promising talent and nurture musicians with the potential to ascend to commercial stardom (Meintjes 2003). For Irene Mawela, this confluence of talent and commercial acumen seemed like the much-anticipated breakthrough she had been seeking – an opportunity to see her music recorded in her beloved mother tongue, poised for public consumption. Yet, much to her bewilderment, the narrative remained frustratingly consistent. Her earnest pleas to sing in her native language continued to be met with resistance, and the company's preference for songs in languages such as Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho remained unaltered. The disappointment she experienced was profound, casting a shadow of hopelessness over her aspirations. It appeared that the path to fulfilling her artistic vision, deeply rooted in her cultural identity, remained elusive, leading her to grapple with a disheartening reality.

Another startling revelation awaited her at Troubadour Records. She had anticipated the need to modify her surname once again, thereby adopting a new stage name. This measure was devised not only to enable her to rebrand herself but also to evade recognition by her former superiors from EMI, who might not identify her unless they discerned her distinctive voice. It was

a deliberate stratagem to ensure a degree of anonymity in her quest for artistic independence. As time progressed, her worst fears materialised. The very scenario she had hoped to avoid ultimately became her reality. Her former EMI bosses, alerted by her unmistakable voice in new songs recorded at Troubadour, commenced their pursuit of her. The unexpected intrusion from her past underscored the challenges she had hoped to surmount by aligning herself with Troubadour, further highlighting the complexity of her journey and the lingering expectations she had harboured for a different trajectory in her artistic career.

Mawela discovered a comforting sense of camaraderie upon her arrival at Troubadour Records. She encountered a community of fellow artists who were not only willing but eager to collaborate with her. Among them were notable talents like Mabel Mafuya, Dorothy Masuku, Ruth Xaba, and Marry Thobei. Dorothy Masuku, among the musicians associated with Troubadour, not only achieved notable success but also received exceptional treatment from the company. According to Allen (2003: 244), her standing within the Troubadour establishment was elevated, positioning her at a higher status compared to many other artists affiliated with the same company. It was within this supportive creative environment that she began to recognise the diversity in how artists represented themselves. Dorothy Masuku and Marry Thobei, two formidable voices in their own right, had chosen to perform under their true names, a decision that resonated with Mawela's quest for authenticity in her artistic journey. In contrast, the others had previously operated under the moniker of the 'Sweet Sixteens', highlighting the various strategies artists employed to navigate the complex industry landscape. Moreover, alongside this ensemble of remarkable female singers, Troubadour Records boasted additional talents such as Olga Mhlongo, Lindi Khumalo, and Idah Radebe, who enriched the vibrant artistic sound of the label. This creative synergy provided Mawela with both inspiration and a sense of belonging, reinforcing her commitment to her craft and her pursuit of musical authenticity.

Upon her entrance into Troubadour Records, Mawela encountered a song titled *Intandane*, which had already been composed by the talented Ruth Xaba. This song had achieved considerable success and acclaim during its time, even though Mawela was not involved in its creation. *Intandane* held a unique distinction as a traditional Zulu wedding song, cherished for its historical resonance and cultural significance. This evocative piece had been embraced by artists and audiences alike, becoming a cherished part of Zulu culture. Its familiarity within the community made it a cherished and resonant musical gem, evoking a sense of shared cultural identity among

those who celebrated its heartfelt melodies and lyrics. While Mawela had not contributed to this particular composition, her presence at Troubadour Records marked a new chapter in her journey, offering the opportunity to leave her own artistic imprint on the ritual of South African music. While Mawela was deeply engrossed in her recording endeavours at Troubadour Records, she suddenly became aware of a disconcerting development. Word had reached her that her former employers at EMI were actively engaged in a quest to locate her, spurred by her unannounced departure from their company. Despite the various strategies employed by her new team at Troubadour to conceal her identity, Mawela's unmistakably golden voice proved to be an indomitable giveaway for those who held intimate knowledge of her work. The pursuit by her previous superiors was facilitated by their pre-existing familiarity with her vocal signature from her past recordings. The instant recognition of her voice in some of the songs released by Troubadour Records served as a clear revelation that she had indeed departed for a different recording label. The discovery did not elicit a favourable response from her former employers, as her abrupt exit without any prior notice left them with a palpable sense of dissatisfaction, adding a layer of complexity to her ongoing artistic journey.

90 The situation took on a heightened sense of urgency due to the concern raised by Mawela's former EMI bosses. In their eyes, her departure from their label was regarded as an infringement upon her pre-existing contract with EMI. Mawela had, of course, candidly shared her story with the management at Troubadour, expressing her profound discontent with the treatment she had endured during her tenure at EMI. She detailed her deep-seated disappointment, stemming from her repeated requests to sing in her native Venda language, which had been consistently denied. She made it abundantly clear to the Troubadour management that her departure from EMI had been unannounced, primarily because she had already embarked on a resolute path to fight for her right to sing in her mother tongue. Yet, as this revelation unfolded, the Troubadour management became increasingly cognisant of the possibility that Mawela might still be bound by contractual obligations with EMI. This realisation casts a cloud of uncertainty over their agreement with her, threatening to complicate the path forward in her continued pursuit of artistic freedom. her situation was also detected by the Troubadour bosses.

Recognising the need for precaution and desiring to create a shield of anonymity around Mawela, the Troubadour Records management made a significant decision. They opted to bestow upon her a new name, one that would effectively obscure her identity and make it arduous for anyone



to locate her under her previous moniker, Irene Nhlapo. This strategic choice of a new performing identity was 'Sarah Ngwenya', a name that would serve as her new artistic persona moving forward. However, it's worth noting that in some instances, her albums were released under the name 'Irene Ngwenya', adding an additional layer of complexity to her performing identity. Instead of simplifying the matter, this dual identity introduced a fresh layer of intricacy for her devoted followers. Irene Mawela, once recognisable under her given name, was now confronted with the challenge of navigating her burgeoning musical career under the dual pseudonyms of Irene Ngwenya and Sarah Ngwenya, creating an intricate dynamic of identities for her fans to decipher.



**Figure 3.2 An example of an LP on which Mawela released as Irene Ngwenya, released under the name Irene and The Sweet Sixteens**

Irene Mawela was taken aback when EMI representatives made an unexpected appearance at Troubadour Records. Their presence at Troubadour was prompted by a startling discovery: they had unmistakably identified her distinctive voice in some of the songs that had been released by Troubadour, featuring her vocals. Coincidentally, this visit coincided with a day when Mawela was engrossed in a recording session within Troubadour's studio. The Troubadour management had been apprised of Mawela's earlier account of her departure from EMI, and when the EMI delegation arrived, it became abundantly clear that their visit was driven by a quest to locate her.

The presence of her former employers at the Troubadour studio further complicated the situation, highlighting the delicate interplay between her past and present contracts and obligations in the music industry.

92 Upon the unexpected arrival of the EMI delegation at Troubadour Records, an observant individual quickly recognised their identity and rushed to the recording studio to relay this crucial information to Irene Mawela, who, by this point, was going by the name Sarah Ngwenya as her performing persona. The urgency of the situation became apparent, and it was decided that Mawela should be discreetly moved to another room within the same building to ensure she remained out of the sight of the EMI representatives. The person who had come to seek Mawela at Troubadour was none other than her former talent scout from EMI, Rubert Bopape. In describing Bopape, Mawela recalled him as a figure who commanded a certain degree of fear and respect within the music industry, thanks to both his influential position at EMI and his formidable character. However, when he arrived at Troubadour, he found himself confronted by someone equally resolute and unyielding in their resolve. The incident at Troubadour, particularly when EMI managers arrived in search of Mawela, served as a stark revelation for the Troubadour management. It underscored the vulnerability of their relationship with Mawela and brought into focus the unsettling realisation that, if circumstances similar to those at EMI unfolded, there existed a genuine possibility that she might choose to depart without prior notice. This revelation carried significant weight, especially considering Troubadour's commendable track record of treating its musicians well. The incident illuminated the delicate nature of artist-management dynamics and prompted a reassessment of the potential fragility inherent in even seemingly robust and positive musical affiliations. It's worth noting that Mawela wasn't the sole artist who had left EMI during this period; she was part of a trio of singers who had made the collective decision to embark on a new chapter in their careers, an act of artistic and personal independence that was about to face a complex test.

The departure of these three accomplished female singers dealt a substantial blow to the EMI group. Not only had they been integral in providing stellar backing vocals during recording sessions for various artists, but they also held the distinction of being solo artists, each releasing their own albums. Replacing these three exceptionally talented and versatile musicians posed a formidable challenge. The task of finding new artists to fill their formidable shoes seemed like a herculean endeavour. The EMI bosses began to realise, perhaps belatedly, that they had missed a significant opportunity to address Mawela's request and reach a compromise. Had they heeded her concerns and found common ground, the situation might not have escalated to the point of

her and her two peers seeking refuge at Troubadour Records. The other two singers who had left EMI with Irene Mawela (Nhlapo) were Olga Mhlongo and Dalsie Luthuli. In their attempt to remain concealed when Bopape arrived at Troubadour Records, they too were ushered into the same secluded room as Mawela. Like Mawela, they were each assigned new names upon their arrival at Troubadour, part of a concerted effort to shield their identities from any prying eyes and to navigate the delicate situation they found themselves in.

Upon Bopape's arrival at Troubadour Records, his opening statement reverberated through the studio: 'I heard that my artists are here.' The Troubadour team, however, feigned ignorance, inquiring about the specific artists he was referring to. In response, he mentioned the names of the artists he sought: Irene Nhlapo, Olga Mhlongo, and Dalsie Luthuli. To this, the Troubadour representatives, maintaining the guise of unfamiliarity, expressed that such artists were not recognised within their domain. However, Bopape persisted, pressing for information about the recent additions to Troubadour Records. He inquired if there were indeed new artists who had recently joined the recording label. In response, he was informed that indeed, there were newcomers to the label, but not the ones he had named. They provided him with the aliases by which these artists were now known within the Troubadour fold: Sarah Ngwena (formerly Irene Nhlapo at EMI), Rosemary (formerly Olga Mhlongo at EMI), and Octavia (formerly Dalsie Luthuli at EMI). This shrewd manoeuvre allowed them to navigate the delicate situation, keeping their true identities hidden from Bopape while continuing to pursue their artistic pursuits under their new names.

In this manner, the three singers successfully managed to evade the contractual obligations they had with EMI, allowing the agreement to dissolve organically over time due to their absence. Bopape's relentless determination to locate the new artists who had joined Troubadour was fuelled by the unmistakable familiarity of his artists' voices in recordings produced by Troubadour. His final gambit was to request the opportunity to listen to recordings of the purported new artists at Troubadour, hoping to definitively identify his missing talents. However, this audacious move crossed a line and encroached upon the boundaries of propriety, as Troubadour was not his studio. His request was firmly denied, marking the limit of his enquiry and the end of his pursuit to reconcile their absence with their contractual obligations at EMI. This marked a turning point in the trio's artistic journey, as they were now free to chart a new course under their new identities and within the nurturing environment of Troubadour Records.

When Bopape expressed his desire to meet the new artists who had recently joined Troubadour, he encountered a stern response from the Troubadour management. They made it abundantly clear that a recording studio was not his domain, and he couldn't assert authority by demanding access to the artists as if it were his own. The message conveyed by the Troubadour bosses was unmistakable: his approach was neither welcomed nor tolerated in their space. Recognising the futility of his efforts, Bopape conceded and ultimately departed, having failed to uncover the truth about the whereabouts of his three missing artists. Meanwhile, the three musicians who had remained concealed in a separate room throughout this dramatic encounter were beckoned to emerge from their hiding place and resume their recording activities in the studio, finally able to continue their artistic journey with newfound freedom and creative possibilities.

### **Leaving corporate recording labels**

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Following the tumultuous experiences at both EMI and Troubadour Records, Irene Mawela made a pivotal decision to embark on a path of freelance work, steering her artistic journey away from corporate labels since Troubadour could not grant her the freedom she wanted to just like EMI. She sought to regain her artistic identity and creative autonomy, which had been challenged and constrained by the rigid structures of the music industry. This shift in her career trajectory coincided with the early 1960s activities, a period marked by profound turbulence and political uprisings, including the devastating Sharpeville massacre and numerous other riots led by ANC cadres. The ruling National Party regime, which had been in power since 1948, remained resolute in its commitment to enforcing strict separate development policies (Hamm 1991; Strauss 2019). Among their priorities was the control of music, as they were deeply concerned that it could be employed as a potent tool of dissent and solidarity among protestors. In this charged political climate, the management and manipulation of music held a strategic significance for the government in its efforts to maintain control and suppress opposition. The implementation of separate development policies posed formidable challenges for Mawela in expressing her music in her native language. These policies exerted a profound influence on the landscape of radio music programming, establishing a framework that prioritised specific genres and languages. In doing so, they inadvertently set a precedent that significantly influenced the decisions made by music recording studios regarding the promotion and production of certain musical styles. The restrictive nature of these policies not only impeded Mawela's artistic autonomy but also created a pervasive environment wherein the cultural richness of her linguistic expression became marginalised due to predetermined programming preferences.

As a response to the political unrest and uprisings of the early 1960s, the South African government implemented a stringent system of music censorship. This mechanism was vigilantly enforced to ensure that the music produced and recorded did not sound any alarms within the international community about the extent of oppression experienced by the Black population in South Africa. The authorities were determined to suppress any music that might potentially galvanise protests or mobilise local communities against the apartheid regime. In 1960, the apartheid government established the Bantu Radio station as part of its broader strategy to promote the use of Black languages (Hamm 1991). However, this move was not solely about linguistic promotion; it was also a means of exerting control over the dissemination of music. Under this system, music was meticulously filtered and curated to present only the positive aspects of the country, while deliberately omitting any references to the oppressive conditions that existed. The government sought to maintain a firm grip on the narrative, allowing music to serve as a tool for propaganda and social control, while stifling any potential for dissent or solidarity among the populace.

The establishment of the combined Venda and Tsonga radio station in 1965 marked a significant development in the promotion of these languages (Hamm 1991). Despite Irene Mawela's foray into freelancing during this period, she still grappled with the unmet desire to record in her native language, Venda. It wasn't until she seized an opportunity to record at the SABC Venda radio station that she began to see the prospect of her musical aspirations being realised. During this era, South African radio stations confronted a pressing issue – there was a pronounced scarcity of indigenous or traditional music, particularly from cultural and ethnic groups often considered to be in the minority. This deficiency in representation posed a challenge to the radio stations as they sought to cater to the diverse linguistic and cultural communities in the nation.

The radio stations embarked on a noble mission: to explore, champion, and safeguard the musical traditions of various linguistic communities. It was during this transformative period that numerous Venda musicians, including Irene Mawela, began to find the opportunities they had been yearning for to express themselves through their native languages. For Mawela, the chance to sing in her beloved Tshivenda language finally materialised through the welcoming embrace of the Venda radio station. This marked a profound turning point in her career, as she was able to realise the dream she had ardently pursued within the mainstream recording studios for so long. In the mid-1970s, she finally achieved her long-sought breakthrough with the recording of her first Tshivenda song, titled *Ndi ala*, an achievement facilitated by the platform of the Venda radio station, now known as Phalaphala. This momentous event not only allowed her to perform in her cherished

mother tongue but also represented a significant step forward in her journey to connect with her roots and create music that resonated deeply with her linguistic and cultural identity.

The pivotal moment when Mawela was afforded the opportunity to sing in her native language within the confines of the Radio Venda studio represented more than a personal breakthrough; it served as a watershed moment for recording studios at large. This opportunity became a compelling showcase, demonstrating that music in indigenous languages not only possesses artistic and cultural significance but also harbours a lucrative market potential. By breaking new ground and venturing into uncharted linguistic territories, the Radio Venda studio illuminated the viability and commercial appeal of such music, challenging preconceived notions within recording studios about what is marketable. Mawela's performance within this setting not only echoed the resonance of cultural authenticity but also paved the way for a paradigm shift, encouraging recording studios to recognise the untapped market and artistic brilliance inherent in music that authentically represents diverse linguistic and cultural narratives.

### **Breakthrough moment for recording in Tshivenda at SABC**

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Irene Mawela's journey into recording songs in her native language found its launch at the SABC studios. During this period, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) took a bold initiative, investing both time and resources in the acquisition of a mobile studio. This innovative move was aimed at venturing into the heart of the deep villages within diverse Black communities to discover and showcase indigenous musical talents. This pioneering approach served as an important means of promoting greater involvement and inclusion among previously marginalised Black individuals residing in the neglected and rural provinces of the country. The primary goal was to provide talented musicians from these rural regions with a valuable platform, granting them exposure to a broader audience through radio music programming. Moreover, the endeavour sought to rectify the historical imbalance that had persistently limited the representation and opportunities for musicians hailing from rural areas, thereby opening doors for greater equity and recognition in the music industry. The mobile studio represented a transformative step toward breaking down the barriers that had long confined the music and artistry emerging from the rural corners of the nation (personal communication, Munaka Ramunenyiwa 2021).

The advent of mobile recording studios proved to be a game-changer for indigenous communities, providing them with a long-awaited opportunity to share their musical talents with the world. These communities, often residing in remote and rural areas, were now able to access this mobile recording studio, enabling them to gain exposure and have their music broadcast on the airwaves, just like their counterparts in urban townships and cities. As time progressed, these mobile studios were also employed to scour these communities for emerging talent, actively reaching out to the grassroots level. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) came to the realisation that, to expand the programming of Black music, the most effective approach was to connect directly with the people. This approach was born out of a recognition that many budding artists lacked the financial means to record their albums in commercial studios. By taking music production directly to the communities, the SABC was able to nurture an inclusive and diverse musical landscape that showcased the rich and vibrant traditions of these underrepresented regions.

For the majority of these musicians who were unearthed in the remote rural landscapes through the SABC mobile studios, the prospect of securing a recording deal had previously been a near-impossible endeavour (personal communication, Munaka Ramunenyiwa<sup>4</sup> 2019). A significant barrier they encountered was the requirement to travel to Johannesburg for auditions at commercial studios, where they hoped their talent would be recognised and celebrated. This process proved particularly arduous for many of these artists, especially those hailing from regions like Venda. The logistical challenges were manifold, with accommodation posing a significant hurdle. Travelling to Johannesburg meant not only auditioning but also grappling with the complexities of finding a place to stay. Many of these talented individuals lacked friends or family in the city who could help with lodging, making it a formidable obstacle for them to navigate and thereby hindering their pursuit of a recording contract. Amidst the array of challenges confronting emerging Venda musicians aspiring to make a mark in the music industry, logistical hurdles such as transportation and accommodation, while formidable, paled in comparison to the overarching obstacle they encountered in Johannesburg's recording studios. The most formidable challenge transcended the physical logistics and instead manifested in the form of a systematic rejection rooted in persistent policies that categorised certain music styles as

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4 Munaka Ramunenyiwa played a pivotal role in the early days of Radio Venda, spearheading the ambitious project of scouting for gifted musicians tucked away in the rural villages by utilising the SABC mobile studio. Through his dedicated efforts, he recorded a myriad of musicians, and much of their subsequent success can be attributed to his astute talent-spotting skills. Beyond his professional contributions, Munaka Ramunenyiwa shared a deep and enduring friendship with Irene Mawela, strengthening their personal connection as they collaborated in the world of music.

commercially nonviable in the market. While navigating the bustling music scene of Johannesburg, these aspiring Venda musicians found themselves grappling not only with the practicalities of travel and accommodation but, more significantly, with the deeply entrenched biases within the industry. The prevailing policies, which deemed specific music styles as less profitable, became a formidable barrier, thwarting the aspirations of these artists who sought validation and recognition for their unique cultural expressions. The rejection of their music based on these preconceived notions underscored the need for a paradigm shift within the industry, recognising the inherent value and market potential of diverse musical styles that authentically represent the cultural richness of artists from varying backgrounds.

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Munaka Ramunenyiwa's residence in Soweto's Meadowlands was no ordinary dwelling – it was a four-room house that once belonged to his father. Munaka's father himself was a renowned figure in the world of radio, where he was affectionately known as Solomon Vevisa Ramunenyiwa, Vevisa was his nickname which he used often. However, this house took on a unique role, functioning as a makeshift lodging for numerous Venda musicians who were making their inaugural trips to Johannesburg in search of recording opportunities. It served as a haven for these aspiring artists, offering them shelter, support, and a sense of belonging as they ventured into the unfamiliar territory of the bustling city. Among the many musicians who found refuge under Munaka's roof, one of the most notable was Colbert Mukwevho, accompanied by his father, Abel Mukwevho. The Mukwevho family was well-known for its musical abilities, Abel Mukwevho, himself an artist celebrated for his remarkable song *Mukhada*, which remains one of his most iconic compositions, found solace and camaraderie within the walls of Munaka's house during their pursuit of musical dreams in Johannesburg (persona communication, Munaka Ramunenyiwa 2019).

Many of the artists who emerged during this pivotal era when the SABC utilised mobile studios were largely unversed in their rights as musicians. For them, the sheer joy of having their songs played and performed on the radio was enough to kindle their spirits. However, this eagerness came at a cost – the majority of their creations ultimately found a resting place within the SABC's library archives. Regrettably, these artists found themselves unable to access their own music. The moment they consented to being recorded, they unwittingly ceded their copyrights to the radio station. Nonetheless, despite this trade-off, this opportunity represented a lifeline for countless Venda musicians who were yearning to sing in their native languages. At a time when minority language speakers were being systematically silenced and their creative aspirations stifled, this



was a rare chance for them to have their voices and heritage heard, if only for a moment, on the airwaves. It symbolised a small but significant victory in their struggle for cultural preservation and representation in the musical landscape.

When Irene Mawela embarked on recording her maiden Venda song at the SABC Venda radio station, it wasn't solely a means of introducing her music to the public, as was the case with many of the Venda musicians uncovered through the mobile studio recordings. Instead, it was a resounding statement she was making to the recording executives of the prominent studios that had consistently denied her the opportunity to record her music in her Tshivenda language. Her decision was a bold declaration of her unwavering commitment to her linguistic and cultural identity, as well as her refusal to conform to the limitations imposed by the industry. Mawela's inaugural recording at the SABC and its subsequent broadcast represented more than a mere act of radio assistance; it embodied an ambassadorial triumph for her and a celebratory milestone for the entire Venda community. Beyond being a beneficiary of radio support, Mawela's presence on the airwaves symbolised a victorious moment, highlighting the resilience and talent of the Venda people. In essence, this event marked a cultural achievement that transcended individual success, standing as a testament to the rich artistic contributions of the Venda community within the broader musical landscape. It marked a moment of empowerment, as she sought to challenge the status quo and advocate for the representation of minority languages within the music industry.

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Her message resounded with crystal clarity, if the established recording studios were unwilling to provide her with the platform to sing in her native language, then she was determined to seek alternatives. Her resolve was unwavering, and her determination was palpable, leaving no doubt that she would do so with unmatched dedication and passion. The implied message was unmistakable – she would excel at this endeavour to such an extent that the industry leaders would rue the missed opportunity they had to support her. The impact of her message was precisely what Irene Mawela aimed to achieve in her effort to make a profound statement to the higher-ups in the big recording studios. In the process, she sent a powerful message about her unwavering commitment to her linguistic and cultural roots, and her unyielding drive to transcend the constraints that had thus far limited her. It was a resounding declaration of her independence and a call for the broader industry to recognise the value and potential of music in minority languages. Moreover, radio stations such as Radio Venda and Radio Lebowa fostered audience engagement by inviting listeners to contribute lyrics for their favourite musicians, facilitating a unique and

participatory connection between the artists and their fan base. This interaction not only encouraged creativity but also forged deeper bonds between the musicians and their audience, making the music more relatable and personal to the listeners (personal communications, Irene Mawela 2021 and Lekgoathi 2009).

In the early days of SABC radio stations, a unique opportunity was extended to listeners who could submit their written poems or lyrical contributions which had the potential to be incorporated into songs. This intriguing process had an intriguing twist: the contributors would remain in the dark about which artist had chosen their poems or lyrics for transformation into a song. It was only upon the release of the song that the listeners would discover if their creative expressions had been selected, and unfortunately, they did not receive any financial compensation for this artistic contribution. This practice was not exclusive to SABC, as prominent recording labels such as EMI and Gallo also engaged in a similar process. In their cases, lyrics or poems were sourced from the pool of submissions, and those not selected for radio station conversion could still find their way into songs through these established recording companies, offering another avenue for artistic expression and engagement with their audience.

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Intriguingly, even some seasoned professionals within the radio station who harboured their creative impulses would occasionally draft their own songs and offer them to the musicians. This process unfolded in a manner where, typically on a Friday, these musicians would be furnished with the written lyrics. The task at hand was to conjure a melodic composition, which would then be harmoniously woven into a complete song. Mawela possessed a unique and distinctive musical skill, particularly in the art of crafting melodic contours intricately interwoven with lyrical content. Her specialised skill set extended beyond merely creating tunes; it delved into the nuanced fusion of melody and meaning. Mawela's musical compositions were distinguished by her ability to weave a rich tapestry of sound that not only complemented but enhanced the narrative depth of the lyrics. This distinctive approach elevated her work, showcasing a harmonious synthesis of melody and message that underscored her artistic finesse and contributed to the enduring impact of her musical legacy. This approach, where the lyrics served as the initial creative spark, proved to be a supremely organic and intuitive method for many musicians to craft an original melody. It was often observed that commencing with the lyrics and subsequently fashioning a melody that harmoniously complemented the chosen words offered a compelling and fruitful approach to songwriting.

Conversely, when the creative process begins with the melody taking precedence, it often presents challenges, necessitating alterations to accommodate the lyrical content. Adapting the lyrics to a pre-established melody can require adjustments and compromises. In this scenario, once the musician has established the melody, the accompanying band members collaboratively immerse themselves in the music. Together, they engage in the task of crafting complementary harmonic progressions and rhythmic syncopation that harmonise seamlessly with the existing melody. According to Nichols et al. (2009: 471), the intrinsic rhythmic patterns ingrained in one's cultural environment play a pivotal role in shaping the realisation of melodic contours. Mawela, as an artist, seamlessly incorporates these cultural rhythmic elements into her music, drawing inspiration from the rich tradition of her cultural milieu when crafting melodic expressions. However, an intriguing question arises when considering the suppression of her cultural identity: if Mawela's cultural essence is stifled or constrained, how does she navigate the complex terrain of asserting and expressing her identity through her music?

In essence, the inherent connection between cultural rhythms and melodic contours suggests that music is not merely an auditory experience but a profound manifestation of cultural identity. If Mawela's cultural roots are suppressed, it raises enquiries about the authenticity of her artistic expression and the potential struggle to articulate her identity through music. This dynamic highlights the intricate interplay between cultural influences and musical creativity, underscoring the significance of preserving and embracing cultural identity as a foundation for authentic artistic expression. The dynamic interplay between cultural and inherent compositional techniques takes on a distinctive character when one engages in music composition within a mixed racial context. In such scenarios, a notable shift is observed, often leading to a more spontaneous and collective approach to the creative process in certain instances. When Mawela exercises her creative skills within a band setting, the band will often rely on initiating a jam session where each member contributes their musical ideas to formulate the song. Here, the melody's development may occur as a subsequent step, evolving organically after the core structure of the song has been solidified. This approach allows for a dynamic interplay of ideas within the band, fostering a collaborative atmosphere that can yield a diverse and harmonious musical composition.

In scenarios where the song's creation commences with the lyrics, the melodic structure and the crafting of words are seamlessly interwoven with the harmonic progression of the composition. In contrast, when the initial spark arises from a singer's pre-established melody, the harmonic

progression takes its cues from the melodic framework. Among popular musicians, the latter approach, where the melody takes precedence, is often the preferred method. This preference arises from the ease with which harmonious accompaniments can be fashioned to complement an existing melody. The flexibility inherent in this process allows for a harmonious synergy between the melodic and harmonic elements, streamlining the creative path and facilitating a smoother and more intuitive musical journey.

Nonetheless, the creative process can vary significantly from one artist to another. For many vocalists, a successful approach involves receiving a pre-recorded instrumental composition and then crafting lyrics to harmonise with the music. Mawela has always wanted to take charge of her musical creativity regardless of the odds. Alternatively, some singers thrive when they are actively engaged in the song's genesis alongside their band members. In such cases, the synergy of creativity and collaboration propels the process forward, enabling the song to come to life in a manner that feels effortless and organic. Indeed, in numerous instances, a sense of spontaneous creativity takes the reins, and the song writing process unfurls naturally and seamlessly. This flow of creativity allows for a harmonious fusion of musical elements, resulting in compositions that resonate with authenticity and ease. In certain circumstances, the quest for an optimal harmonic structure may entail making slight adjustments to the melody. Conversely, when a song already boasts an established harmonic progression, minor alterations might be necessary to harmonise seamlessly with specific lyrical nuances and cadences. This delicate dance between melody and harmony underscores the dynamic and adaptable nature of song writing, as musicians strive to strike a balance that brings out the essence and emotional resonance of the composition. a compositional position that Mawela has always wanted to have within her music.

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## Conclusion

Irene Mawela's musical odyssey is a testament to the enduring spirit and unwavering determination of a pioneering artist. As the first Venda Black female in a predominantly Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho-oriented industry, she faced formidable obstacles and forged a path for future Venda musicians to record in their native languages. Her journey unfolded amidst a backdrop of significant historical events, including the Sharpeville Massacre and the establishment of Radio Bantu, which signified the shifting socio-economic landscape of South Africa. Throughout her career, Mawela continually sought out studios that would embrace

her language and culture. Her perseverance was rewarded when she secured her first recording in Tshivenda at the Radio Venda studio, a pivotal moment that marked the opening of doors within the commercial recording industry, granting her the opportunity to sing in her mother tongue. Mawela's legacy extends beyond her musical prowess. Her indomitable courage and impassioned pursuit of what she believed was right have established her as a revered figure in the realm of music and an emblematic champion of equality and freedom. She stands as a brave stalwart who, through her resolute spirit, paved the way for others and contributed to the cultural richness and diversity of South African music.

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## Chapter 4

### Radio Venda: A game-changer for the Venda language

The decision to broaden radio programming for Black communities by the apartheid government in 1960 was a ground breaking development by the SABC which resulted in the establishment of the Bantu radio stations. Before 1960, this move led to the inclusion of additional languages alongside Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho in the already established English and Afrikaans radio stations which were broadcasting in Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg (Hamm 1991: 148). These three languages were granted limited airtime on the official English and Afrikaans radio stations before the unified Bantu radio stations came into being. This marked a significant milestone in providing linguistic representation and broadcasting diversity for the diverse cultural landscape of South Africa (Hamm 1991; Coplan 1985). In the year 1962, a significant milestone was reached as the transmission of radio programming in Black languages was extended to include Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho, operating under the name Radio Lebowa. This initiative offered a substantial sixteen and a half hours of daily broadcasting, as documented by Hamm (1991) and Lekgoathi (2009).

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The drive for linguistic inclusivity continued to evolve. By 1965, Venda and Tsonga languages were incorporated, functioning as a shared station for both linguistic communities. This expansion paved the way for a total of at least seven Bantu languages to be broadcast throughout the entire day, a momentous development that was reaching its zenith toward the end of the 1960s, as elaborated by Hamm in 1991 (Hamm 1991: 158). The establishment of the radio system marked a pivotal stride towards democratising information accessibility, utilising radio as a powerful mass medium (Kenny 2002). This initiative not only aimed to disseminate crucial information but also served as a strategic move to counter narratives casting doubt on the apartheid government's commitment to addressing the needs of the Black population. Despite its ostensibly inclusive intent, it is imperative to recognise that this endeavour carried a politicised and racialised agenda, seeking to project an image of governmental responsiveness while reinforcing existing power structures and narratives.

The inception of Radio Venda/Tsonga brought an immediate demand for songs in the Venda and Tsonga languages. These languages had faced a recording deficit owing to the perception that

they emanated from minority linguistic groups. Radio stations swiftly recognised the pressing need for the promotion of songs recorded in the Tshivenda language, catalysed by the surging public interest in this unique cultural and linguistic expression. As a result, a concerted effort was made to support and amplify the visibility of Tshivenda language songs within the broadcasting landscape. The impetus to promote such recordings gained momentum gradually, primarily emerging toward the latter part of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s. At the outset, Radio Venda/Tsonga had a rather limited airtime allocation, with broadcasts restricted to a mere 30 minutes. As time progressed, the station's airtime expanded significantly, evolving from just half an hour to one hour, three hours, and eventually six hours, symbolising the growing recognition of its importance. Notably, Radio Venda/Tsonga, despite its remarkable journey, finally achieved the milestone of broadcasting around the clock for a full 24 hours. This development showcased the evolving commitment to linguistic and cultural representation on the airwaves.

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Mawela's performances in her native Tshivenda language at the SABC's Radio Venda station marked a pivotal turning point. Her songs being broadcast on air served as the catalyst that opened the door for commercial recording studios to acknowledge the untapped potential in the Tshivenda music market. This recognition was fuelled by the establishment of Radio Venda in 1965, a station with a clear mandate to promote both the musical and linguistic heritage of the Venda people. Mawela's breakthrough not only demonstrated the appeal of Tshivenda music but also sent a powerful signal to recording studios that there was a thriving and vibrant audience eager to embrace this unique cultural expression. This convergence of artistic talent, radio broadcasting, and the emerging market for Tshivenda music collectively served as a driving force that encouraged commercial recording studios to venture into this rich musical landscape.

A significant dearth of such music underscored the pressing need for action, leading to the innovative idea of a mobile studio. This initiative aimed to expedite the recording process for countless musicians who were starved of the necessary resources. The goal was clear: to capture as many voices and melodies as swiftly as possible. This not only filled the void in Tshivenda music but also sent a powerful message to commercial recording studios. They could discern a burgeoning market for Tshivenda music, one that was bolstered by the presence of a dedicated radio station committed to promoting this vibrant linguistic and cultural heritage. Despite the backdrop of broadcasting policies mandating a rotation of songs in a prescribed sequence – English, Afrikaans, and a vernacular language, ideally aligning with the station's language focus – the



emergence of the mobile studio and the demand for Tshivenda music underscored the evolving dynamics within the industry. This innovative approach paved the way for greater inclusivity and representation in the world of radio programming, marking a significant shift in how vernacular languages were being promoted.

The established rotation system, which encompassed English, Afrikaans, and a vernacular language, didn't consistently favour Tshivenda songs. This was largely due to the prevailing expectation that even minority radio stations would predominantly feature or prioritise hit songs, which generally originated from more widely spoken languages. As a result, within this three-language rotation framework, Venda songs often found themselves at a disadvantage compared to the likes of Zulu, Xhosa, or Sotho songs, which might have achieved hit status during that era. In essence, the hit songs from the more prevalent languages enjoyed extensive airplay across numerous radio stations, a practice that had become ingrained, amplifying their prominence at the expense of other linguistic and cultural expressions. Conversely, the reciprocal scenario was far less common, wherein majority-language radio stations seldom featured hit songs from minority languages. Their programming typically adhered to a rotation system dominated by English, Afrikaans, and their respective vernacular languages. As time progressed, however, minority-language radio stations came to a sobering realisation. They recognised the imperative of empowering their own musicians who sang in their native languages. The logic behind this awakening was simple: if they didn't champion their artists, singing in their distinctive tongues, other stations were unlikely to prioritise or broadcast their songs. This marked a pivotal moment where these stations understood that to secure a platform for their musical heritage, they needed to take the lead in promoting their linguistic and cultural expressions.

Mawela's journey also highlights a worrying anecdote where her Tshivenda-language songs faced significant hurdles when they ventured beyond provincial boundaries. It was not uncommon for her music, crafted with such passion and cultural richness, to languish on the shelves of radio stations in other provinces, notably KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). These songs, delivered with deep artistic devotion, were often met with neglect and remained unheard, relegated to obscurity. Albums would occasionally find their way back to the studio, the publisher, or the distribution department, devoid of any radio airplay, a fate that was equally mirrored in music shops. The arduous journey of her Tshivenda songs underscored the challenges of achieving nationwide recognition, despite the profound artistry they embodied (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2021).

Mawela's experience revealed a disheartening pattern where her music was consistently dispatched to various music shops, yet her loyal followers, eagerly seeking her distinctive sound, would often leave empty-handed. The conspicuous absence of her music on store shelves became a sinister tool, deliberately employed to diminish the reach and impact of Tshivenda music. This orchestrated sabotage or marginalisation of the linguistic and cultural heritage within the music industry had far-reaching consequences. Not only did it jeopardise the sales of Tshivenda music, but it also sent a chilling message to commercial recording studios. The stark reality was that sales plummeted significantly when Tshivenda and other minority-language music entered the marketplace, leading to a reluctance among studios to record such music. This practice had a cascading effect, stifling the diversity and richness of linguistic expression within the recording industry.

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A parallel narrative unfolds when we turn our attention to live shows and associated performances within the bustling city of Johannesburg. Here, the plight of Venda musicians took a particularly disheartening turn, as invitations to perform in this vibrant urban hub were far and few between. This omission from live performances had a tangible and adverse impact on the sales of their music, creating a ripple effect that could not be overstated. The recording of music in languages like Tshivenda was perceived as a daunting venture, fraught with financial risk, and the potential for significant losses weighed heavily on the minds of recording companies. The prevailing sentiment was that venturing into these linguistic territories could indeed prove costly, contributing to the perpetuation of the underrepresentation of minority languages in the music industry (McNeil 2012).

In an effort to promote linguistic diversity and cultural inclusivity, radio stations like Radio Venda pioneered an innovative strategy known as transcription. This strategy was not limited to Radio Venda alone; it was subsequently embraced by numerous Bantu radio stations (Lambrechts 2012). The essence of transcription lay in the process of re-recording songs originally performed in one language, translating and reinterpreting them in the vernacular language that was being championed and this is how the musicians understood the undertaking, even though it also referred to all songs that were recorded under the SABC studio at large (personal communication, Matume Manavhela 2019). Mawela, herself, found herself deeply engaged in this transcription process, lending her soulful voice to songs that underwent translation and transformation into the Tshivenda language. This creative adaptation allowed for a broader repertoire of songs sung in

Tshivenda, thereby enriching the station's playlist with a vibrant array of culturally resonant music. Transcription, in this context, represented a remarkable effort to bridge linguistic divides and ensure that the distinctive voices and melodies of minority languages could find a prominent place in the world of radio and music. The transcription and translation process were a collaborative effort that often-engaged senior radio personnel well-versed in the language being promoted by a specific radio station. Their expertise was instrumental in ensuring the lyrical content resonated authentically with the local audience. In cases where nuances and cultural elements required particular attention, the singer of the song would also actively participate in the transcription process. This collaborative endeavour was critical in preserving the original essence and emotional depth of the music. Once the transcription was complete, the song would then find its exclusive place in the playlist of the particular radio station for which it had been transcribed. This dedicated airplay was a strategic move aimed at bolstering the repertoire of songs in the vernacular language, enhancing the station's commitment to linguistic and cultural representation, and ultimately contributing to a richer, more diverse soundscape for its audience (personal communications, Mpho Nefale 2021 and Mtume Manavhela 2021).

The transcription process, while beneficial in terms of exposing musicians to a broader audience, did not always yield substantial advantages for the artists performing these adapted songs. Notably, their primary benefit lay in the increased recognition of their vocal talents, as their names were often relegated to the background. In this context, the focus was predominantly on the promotion of the song itself, rather than the individual artist. The anonymity surrounding the musicians was reinforced by the fact that the songs were not originally composed by them, thus rendering their names less significant in the transcription process. While this approach served to amplify the reach of their voices, it also underscored the complex dynamics at play, wherein the artistry of the performers was sometimes overshadowed by the songs they interpreted, reflecting the nuanced interplay between creativity, linguistic representation, and the music industry. The SABC exclusively owns all transcribed songs, which are securely housed within the SABC archive (personal communication, Mtume Manavhela 2021).

Fundamentally, these musicians were engaged in the promotion of songs that were authored by someone else, essentially lending their voices to reinterpret and convey the translated lyrics. In this context, they did not possess the right to claim ownership or authorship of any of these songs. They functioned as an alternative version of the original singer, offering the song in a different

language, but the primary recognition and acknowledgment as the composer and owner of the song remained firmly vested in the hands of the main singer. The essence of their role lay in the art of interpretation and performance, rather than creative authorship, emphasising that they were an integral part of the song's adaptation, yet they couldn't lay claim to the song's originality. This distinction underscored the intricate dynamics surrounding song ownership and the role of artists who brought these songs to life in a new linguistic context.

Following the resonating success of Mawela's rendition of *Rosina*, a song that captured the hearts of audiences and gained substantial airplay on stations like Radio Venda and the then Lebowa Radio Station (now Thobela FM), Mawela's musical journey took a compelling turn. She became the recipient of numerous calls from commercial recording studios, all eager to collaborate with her and record her music in Tshivenda. Interestingly, even EMI, an entity that had initially hesitated to embrace her linguistic preference, underwent a significant transformation in its approach. EMI's management, recognising the immense potential and appeal of Mawela's artistry, embarked on a determined search to locate her after they heard her song *Rosina* recorded in Tshivenda. Their mission was to entice her back to the recording studio, this time with a resolute commitment to supporting her in singing in her native Tshivenda language, a stance she had passionately advocated for. Mawela's journey became a testament to the transformative power of artistry and the resonance of linguistic and cultural identity in the world of music.

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Nonetheless, locating Mawela proved to be a challenging task, as she harboured reservations about returning to EMI. Adding another layer to this intricate narrative, Bopape, a prominent figure at EMI who had been associated with Mawela, left the company in 1964 and found a new home in Gallo Africa. In his new role at Gallo, he assumed the responsibility of overseeing a diverse portfolio of Black artists. Specifically, Bopape managed the subsidiary known as Mavuthela Music Company, where he played a pivotal role in nurturing and promoting the talents of these artists. The serendipitous turn of events unfolded in early 1971 when Mawela and Bopape had an unexpected encounter. It took place at the South African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO) while they both waited in a queue to collect their respective royalties. This fateful meeting marked a significant juncture in Mawela's journey, rekindling a connection with Bopape and ultimately setting the stage for a new chapter in her music career. At this moment, Mawela found herself at a crossroads, confronted by the inevitability of revisiting her connection with her initial talent scout, Bopape. It was a realisation that she could not continue eluding her past association with EMI. Ironically, it was precisely when she had been evading the grip of EMI that she found herself reuniting with her former talent scout.

The situation, however, took a surprising and promising turn. This reunion was not marked by the constraints of her previous affiliation with EMI. Instead, she discovered that her previous talent scout had cut ties with EMI, a change that signalled a fresh beginning for her career in a new recording studio. In this twist of fate, Mawela was presented with the prospect of resuming her artistic journey under different and more accommodating circumstances. In the end, Mawela succumbed to Bopape's persuasive entreaties and made the decision to follow him to the new recording company. This pivotal choice marked the commencement of a significant chapter in her music career. During their second encounter, Bopape was situated at Gallo Records when he crossed paths with Mawela, a moment that transpired after their meeting in the old SAMRO building that was located at 73 Juta Street. It's worth noting that this meeting took place before SAMRO's offices subsequently relocated to 20 de Korte Street in Braamfontein Johannesburg. At Gallo Records, Bopape, with his extensive industry expertise, had already facilitated the transition of numerous artists who had been under his purview at EMI, paving the way for a host of talented individuals to explore new creative horizons and opportunities.

For Bopape, his decision to continue nurturing talent was intricately linked to safeguarding his esteemed reputation as one of the preeminent talent scouts with a remarkable ability to discern exceptional artistry from afar. In an industry where the identification of exceptional talent was of paramount importance, many recording studios and managers leaned heavily on individuals like Bopape (Meintjes 2009: 85). These talent scouts were, in essence, the gatekeepers who possessed an astute understanding of the nuanced nuances and preferences that defined the rich tradition of Black music. Their ability to recognise and foster burgeoning talent was instrumental in shaping the trajectory of artists and, by extension, the music industry as a whole, underscoring their indomitable role in championing creativity and innovation.

Gallo Records, a longstanding presence in the music industry since its inception in the early 1930s, had traversed a significant period. However, despite its enduring history, the shifting landscape of the music business demanded a more innovative and adaptive approach to maintain a prominent position in a fiercely competitive environment. This strategic shift toward greater creativity and agility was not the initial paradigm that Gallo Records had employed to secure its status as a major record company. Gallo Records adopted a strategic manoeuvre to solidify its dominance in the music industry, a tactic that involved acquiring other recording companies with the intention of not just surviving but thriving. This bold approach was geared toward eliminating competition and securing its position as the reigning powerhouse in the field of music (personal communication, Rob Allingham 2019). As outlined by Lara Allen (2007), the strategy of consolidating through

acquisitions propelled Gallo Records to ascend to the zenith, establishing itself as the foremost collector of recorded music in South Africa. The acquisition spree ultimately conferred upon Gallo a staggering share, encompassing approximately 80 to 85 per cent of the entire recorded music market, an impressive feat that consolidated its commanding presence within the industry. Allen stipulates that:

In 1963, however, the company made its first major acquisition, Trutone Records, and over the next twenty-five years bought a number of other local companies, along with their back catalogues. These included Teal, Troubadour, Record Industries, Meteor, RPM, and USA (Allen 2007: 267).

112 Regrettably, Gallo's acquisition spree extended to recording labels like Troubadour, absorbing them into its expanding empire. The burgeoning clout and influence wielded by Gallo within the recording industry acted as a magnetic force, drawing a multitude of artists who aspired to align themselves with this influential powerhouse. This also brought together scout talents from different studios into one recording company which also created so much competition among them (Meintjes 2003; Allen 2007). An illustrative example of Gallo's ascent was the acquisition of Troubadour Records, an event that transpired in 1969, as documented by Allen (2007). This confluence of events had significant implications. Notably, when Bopape crossed paths with Mawela in 1971, she found herself in a unique position – she was not affiliated with any recording label, and instead, she was navigating the music scene as a freelancer, passionately dedicated to promoting her artistry in her native language, since Troubadour also disappointed her in this regard.

Bopape and Mawela found themselves in the same queue at the SAMRO offices, both waiting to collect their respective royalties. This became the opportunity for them to reunite, reigniting the connection between the two. Bopape, seized the occasion to persuade Mawela to join Gallo Records, an entity now operating under the fresh and dynamic subsidiary of Mavuthela Music Company, which he was spearheading as the vanguard of popular Black music. Swiftly, he extended an invitation for Mawela to participate in rehearsals, providing her with the opportunity to meet the other artists under his stewardship, effectively laying the foundation for her re-entry into the recording industry. The rehearsals were scheduled to take place in Roodepoort, a location that Mawela was unfamiliar with at the time. Bopape, however, extended a reassuring promise

to Mawela, alleviating her concerns about navigating to Roodepoort. He pledged to personally collect her and ensure she reached the Mavuthela studios without any complications.

Upon her arrival at Mavuthela, Mawela encountered a standard procedure observed for all new artists entering the studio – an audition. This protocol was in place without exception, and it meant that Mawela, despite her prior experience in the industry, had to undergo the audition process like any other newcomer. The individuals comprising the audition panel were not acquainted with her, and in accordance with studio regulations, she was required to prove her talents through this formal audition. Interestingly, on the day of the auditions, a familiar face appeared in the audition room, a saxophonist named Ntemi Edmund Piliso, who had previously worked with Mawela during her time at EMI. His presence added an unexpected dimension to the proceedings, bridging the past and the present in the midst of this pivotal audition. Ntemi had built a formidable reputation as a highly regarded saxophonist, having been a prominent member of the Gallo band. This ensemble was known for accompanying session musicians and vocalists who didn't have their own dedicated bands. Ntemi's musical expertise primarily revolved around jazz-inspired *mbaqanga*, a style that resonated profoundly with most *mbaqanga* musicians, given its perfect synergy with their music.

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As Mawela embarked on her audition at Mavuthela, the process followed a structured format. Each auditionee was tasked with the challenge of selecting and performing any well-known song of their choice at the time of the audition. This approach allowed the artists to showcase their vocal prowess and interpretive skills, presenting their unique musical talents in a manner that was both expressive and personal. During the audition process, an accompanying band was present to perform the chosen song live alongside the individual being evaluated. The initial phase of the audition would unfold as expected, with the band playing the selected song in its original key. However, the true litmus test occurred when the band executed an unexpected modulation, shifting the song to an entirely new key without any prior notification to the vocalist. This abrupt change was a deliberate measure to gauge the artist's musical acumen and versatility. The auditors sought to determine if the singer possessed a finely tuned and discerning ear, enabling them to seamlessly adapt to the song's altered musical landscape. The ability to navigate these spontaneous key changes showcased the artist's capacity to listen attentively, attune to the nuances of the music, and fluidly adapt their performance to the evolving musical context.

Mawela's performance in the audition proved to be nothing short of exceptional. Her extensive experience as a seasoned vocalist, coupled with her background in supporting numerous artists, became evident as she effortlessly sailed through the audition. Her remarkable poise and dexterity in adapting to the sudden key modulation was a testament to her prowess. Subsequently, Ntemi Edmund Piliso, who had shared a musical journey with Mawela during their time at EMI, felt compelled to address the audition panel. He candidly conveyed his perspective, asserting that auditioning Mawela was a redundant exercise. He emphasised her well-established status as a singer, drawing upon their shared history at EMI to validate her credentials. Despite his intimate familiarity with Mawela's talents, Ntemi remained discreet, preferring not to interfere with the formal audition proceedings.

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Upon learning that a new artist had not only successfully passed the rigorous audition but also revealed her identity as Irene Mawela, Bopape displayed a keen interest. Inquiring about the newly minted talent, he was promptly informed that the artist in question was, indeed, Irene Mawela. To this revelation, Bopape expressed his familiarity with Mawela, disclosing that he had been the individual responsible for inviting her to join this new venture. As Mawela arrived at the scene, she found herself amidst other musical ensembles, including groups such as Izintombi Zomoya and Mgababa Queens, setting the stage for an exciting and collaborative chapter in her musical journey. Mawela's arrival at Mavuthela was met with a warm reception, and her remarkable vibrancy and collaborative spirit seamlessly integrated her into the existing musical milieu. She was promptly afforded the privilege of sharing her vocal talents with the two groups already established at Mavuthela, a testament to her adeptness at harmonising and working effectively within these ensembles.

As her journey at Mavuthela unfolded, Mawela found herself becoming an integral part of another musical group, The Sweet Melodians. It was during her tenure with this group that a pivotal moment occurred. Mawela, driven by her deep-seated passion for her native Tshivenda language, expressed her heartfelt desire to release her very own album in this language. This aspiration marked the initiation of a transformative phase in her career, as she sought to convey her artistic expression through the lens of her cultural and linguistic heritage. Bopape had been well aware of Mawela's longstanding aspiration, dating back to her departure from EMI due to her unfulfilled desire to sing in her beloved Tshivenda language. Acknowledging the importance of this artistic yearning, Bopape wholeheartedly embraced Mawela's aspiration, granting her the green light to



sing in the Tshivenda language, finally affording her the creative freedom she had longed for even though it would be on selected songs not on a full album. Nevertheless, the prevailing climate at the time imposed constraints on Black musicians. They were subjected to a stringent policy that restricted them to releasing only two songs in a year. This policy, reflective of the prevailing industry norms, presented a challenge to Mawela, who was eager to contribute her talent and share her musical heritage through the medium of her native language.

Mawela's ground breaking decision to sing in her native language at Mavuthela (Gallo Records) served as a pivotal moment, significantly altering the landscape for Venda musicians. Her choice blazed a trail, unveiling the potential for their music to be professionally recorded by commercial studios. This momentous development sparked tremendous enthusiasm among Venda musicians, who were already buoyed by the prospect of an SABC Radio initiative designed to uncover hidden talents in diverse communities. While the SABC's recording facility and its contract agreements were a noteworthy undertaking, it fell short of what many musicians aspired to achieve. The primary objective for these artists was to secure lucrative commercial recording deals that would not only amplify their music but also provide a substantial platform for their careers to flourish.

At the juncture when Mawela encountered Bopape, Troubadour Records had already transitioned into the fold of Gallo Records. This intricate development implied that regardless of her last affiliation with Troubadour, Bopape, who had already moved to Gallo Records, would have eventually crossed paths with Mawela. The gravitational pull of Gallo Records, as a music industry titan, made it almost inevitable. Moreover, it became increasingly evident to many artists, including Irene Mawela, that their creative works were often credited to obscure pseudonyms such as 'Gumede,' 'Ngubane,' 'Bepete,' or even 'Telegram Special'. The lack of transparency within Troubadour raised concerns, and Mawela's future within the label seemed uncertain. The opaque crediting of her compositions to other individuals added to the disquiet, prompting her to reassess her prospects and consider alternative paths within the music industry. As a result of the practice of attributing compositions to individuals without their awareness, many musicians suffered substantial losses in royalty revenue.

The mounting concerns and unease among artists at Troubadour, Mawela included, were indicative of a collective discomfort stemming from a situation that lacked transparency and clarity, even though Troubadour was known to be good to its artists when it came to remuneration

(Meintjes 2003; Allen 2003). It became increasingly apparent that something was amiss, a disconcerting undercurrent within the recording label. Frequently, when artists sought explanations from individuals like Cuthbert Matumba, they were met with a vague and unsatisfying response. They were informed that artists were restricted to releasing only a certain number of songs in a year, a policy that had been instituted by the company. However, this explanation left artists perplexed, as it appeared that Troubadour was either contradicting its own policy, which stipulated that artists could release only one album per year, or more disconcertingly, there were underlying issues related to the distribution of royalties. The suspicion loomed that these royalties might be rerouted and attributed to unknown entities, casting a shadow of doubt over the entire arrangement (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2021).

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In the initial stages of her foray into the recording industry, Mawela recalled the existence of a stringent policy that allowed each artist to release a mere two songs per year. These two songs would constitute what was considered an album, often accompanied by a handful of shorter tracks on both sides of the LP vinyl record. This reflected the technological limitations of that era, where the capacity of recording devices was relatively limited. However, as time progressed and recording technology underwent significant advancements, the landscape evolved. The transition to LP vinyl records, cassettes, and eventually CDs came with expanded capabilities, enabling artists to include more songs on a single release. Consequently, the policy saw modifications, gradually allowing for the inclusion of more tracks, such as four, eight, and beyond, as the recording devices became more adept at accommodating a more extensive repertoire on a single medium. This transformation in the industry marked a significant shift in the way music was created, distributed, and consumed.

The glaring absence of transparency that was observed by some artists at companies such as Troubadour became a source of concern, disquiet, and unease among the musicians. It prompted speculation that Troubadour, the recording label, might have realised. They seemingly recognised that the stringent policy of permitting only one album per artist per year was, in fact, having a detrimental impact on their sales. The artists were increasingly coming to terms with the stark reality that not every artist who released an album could guarantee substantial sales. Furthermore, not all musicians had the capacity to churn out hit after hit, a challenging feat within the dynamic world of music production. This predicament underscored the inherent risks for a company like Troubadour. Despite investing significant resources in numerous artists, there was no assurance

that the returns generated from these investments would be sufficient to cover the extensive expenses incurred during the creative process and the subsequent promotion of each project. This complex dynamic necessitated a re-evaluation of the existing policies and practices within the recording label, as the traditional model was proving to be an insufficient and rigid framework for artist and label alike.

Consequently, Troubadour found itself at a crossroads, prompting the label to embark on a bold and unconventional gamble. This gamble hinged on placing their trust in the artists who exuded confidence in their music's marketability. They shifted their strategy by tapping into the extensive repertoire of musicians like Mawela, who had composed and recorded numerous songs. Troubadour's approach involved releasing these songs under a veil of disguise, camouflaging either the musician's identity or the composer's name. The intention was to create the illusion of a constantly changing persona, even though it was the same artist singing each song. This unorthodox approach marked a deliberate departure from the traditional recording model, as the label sought innovative methods to leverage the creative output of their artists and explore fresh avenues for capturing the audience's attention. The implementation of this clandestine approach had significant repercussions, casting a shadow over the reputation of the recording company. Many artists became increasingly disenchanted, perceiving a veil of deception shrouding their craft, as their work was released under the guise of different names, ultimately benefitting the company's bottom line at the expense of their own artistic identities. The artists, perturbed by this lack of transparency, found themselves grappling with feelings of betrayal. This sense of dishonesty and manipulation eroded the trust and credibility that musicians had placed in the label. The fallout was undeniable as numerous artists, including Mawela, made the decision to sever their ties with the recording company. The artists' departure underscored the far-reaching consequences of the lack of transparency and integrity within the industry, as their creative autonomy and identities took precedence over financial gains.

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The SABC's initiative to provide Venda musicians with studio recording opportunities was commendable, however, it lacked essential elements typically associated with recording deals, such as access to commercial studios. It notably lacked an established distribution mechanism, which is essential for making music accessible to the public through music shops and various platforms. Moreover, artists in commercial studios benefitted from comprehensive support, including the assignment of a manager to oversee their careers. These managers played a

pivotal role in orchestrating the booking of live performances and gigs, streamlining the artists' professional journey. As Mawela's success at Gallo Records gained prominence, her decision to sing in the Tshivenda language served as a catalyst for a seismic shift in the aspirations of Venda artists, she was also pushing to have a full album sung in the Tshivenda language. The allure of commercial recording deals, with their multifaceted advantages, began to eclipse the SABC's archival project initiative. Musicians were increasingly drawn to the prospects offered by commercial studios, viewing these platforms as the gateway to a more substantial and flourishing musical career.

118 The SABC project, focussed on recording artists, was confined to the purview of a specific radio station and thus inherently restricted in its scope and the music could only be played by the SABC radio stations. It lacked the comprehensive distribution and marketing agreements that are typically integral to commercial recording deals. Consequently, for any musician, the allure of securing a commercial recording deal was an enticing prospect, primarily because of the myriad benefits inherent to such arrangements. Mawela's pioneering efforts at Gallo Records had a cascading effect, with a wave of Venda artists flocking to the studio in pursuit of their own recording deals. While only a select few were fortunate enough to secure contracts, Mawela's versatility was evident as she actively engaged with them. She either lent her vocal talents to their music or assumed the role of a backing vocalist, facilitating a seamless collaboration due to her proficiency in speaking and singing in their language. This collaborative spirit exemplified her commitment to nurturing and empowering fellow Venda artists within the industry.

Mawela's journey with Gallo Records marked a significant chapter in her career and in the careers of my Venda musicians. She recorded the enchanting song *Rosina* during her tenure at Trutone, which had already come under the Gallo umbrella. Furthermore, a deeply personal and cherished lullaby from her childhood, *Ndi ala*, was brought to life through recording for the very first time in 1972. This progressive recording took place at the Teal studio, and it was orchestrated under the watchful eye of talent scout David Thekwane. However, this period was characterised by a complex landscape within the recording industry. Gallo Records had made strategic moves to acquire a significant portion of the local record companies (Allen 2007). As a result, the boundaries between different studios and their ownership became increasingly blurred, particularly since the majority of these acquisitions by Gallo began in 1963. This transformation rendered it challenging to discern which studio was affiliated with which company, underlining the intricate dynamics and

evolution of the industry at that time. Lara Allen's (2007) account reveals that the initial acquisition made by Gallo Records was none other than Trutone. This landmark purchase marked the onset of a transformative period spanning twenty-five years, commencing in 1963 and extending through the 1980s. During this significant timeframe, Gallo Records embarked on an unprecedented spree of acquisitions, ultimately emerging as one of the most dominant and influential stakeholders in the realm of popular recorded music within South Africa. The Gallo imprint became synonymous with an expansive and diverse repository of musical material, underpinning its indelible mark on the nation's musical landscape (Allen 2007: 267).

In the formative stages of Mawela's musical career, particularly in her Tshivenda-language songs recorded within the realm of commercial studios, she frequently undertook a dual role that was quite distinctive. In these recordings, Mawela seamlessly assumed the positions of both lead singer and backing vocalist for her own compositions. This remarkable feat was made possible through the implementation of advanced production techniques, employing multitrack recording. The process enabled her to sing different vocal parts, including harmonies, while concurrently performing as the lead vocalist. Mawela faced the unique challenge of not only singing her own compositions but also providing backing vocals due to the absence of other artists in the studios proficient in Tshivenda. This circumstance not only placed an additional burden on her as the sole vocalist but also had a significant impact on the accurate pronunciation of her language. The precision of Tshivenda pronunciation held paramount importance for Mawela, emphasising the crucial need for her to ensure linguistic authenticity in her musical expressions. However, Mawela's versatility posed a unique challenge for others, such as her fellow artists from groups like Izintombi Zomoya and Mgababa Queens during her tenure at Mavuthela. When these artists endeavoured to provide backing vocals for her Tshivenda songs, they encountered difficulties, particularly in pronouncing certain Venda words accurately. These pronunciation challenges, in turn, risked misinterpretations and misalignments within the songs, underscoring the intricacies of harmonising in different languages and dialects.

Mawela's role as a versatile backing vocalist extended to her collaborations with fellow artists. However, there was an interesting dynamic at play. While Mawela lent her vocal talents to support their songs across various languages, her peers predominantly reciprocated the favour for her songs sung in Zulu, Xhosa, or Sotho. Notably, they refrained from contributing their vocal harmonies to her Tshivenda-language compositions. This decision was not a mere coincidence but

a deliberate strategy, as Mawela sought to champion the cause of Tshivenda music promotion with an unwavering commitment to linguistic authenticity. Throughout her illustrious career, Mawela's musical journey saw her partner with several prestigious studios and prominent recording labels. These included EMI, Troubadour Records, Trutone Records, Teal, Gallo-Mavuthela, and Umsakazo Records. Each of these recording hubs played a unique role in shaping her career, underlining her remarkable influence and versatility in the South African music industry.

Mawela held a deep-seated conviction that precise pronunciation was of paramount importance in her musical endeavours. She recognised that the true essence of her message lay within the words she sang. With an unwavering commitment to conveying her message clearly and authentically, she dedicated herself to ensuring that her lyrics resonated with the Venda-speaking community. Her primary objective was to eliminate any potential confusion, knowing that her message was directed squarely at this specific audience. Mawela's dedication to linguistic accuracy was not just a personal preference but a principled stance. She fervently believed that maintaining the purity of the Venda language was a matter of great significance. Musicians like Naledzani Netshirembe prioritise linguistic accuracy and meticulous pronunciation in their music. They approach this aspect with utmost seriousness, recognising that any deviation could lead to a misrepresentation of the language, potentially altering the intended meaning of the song (personal communication, Naledzani Netshirembe 2016). By preserving the integrity of the language in her music, Mawela aimed to set a precedent for emerging musicians, encouraging them not to compromise the essence of their cultural and linguistic heritage in their artistic pursuits. In doing so, she became an advocate for the preservation and promotion of Venda culture through her music.

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Mawela's unwavering commitment extended beyond a mere refusal to compromise her language for the sake of conveying a message. She was resolute in her desire for her lyrics to carry genuine depth and authentic meaning. Her pursuit extended to the realm of linguistic precision, meticulously ensuring that every word resonated with the true essence of the Tshivenda language. For Mawela, pronunciation was not merely about linguistic accuracy; it was about capturing the nuances, punctuations, and tonal shades that define the unique sonic tapestry of Tshivenda. Her music, therefore, served as a profound and resonant reflection of the rich cultural and linguistic heritage she held dear. During the 1970s, Mawela remained acutely conscious of the prevailing political climate, characterised by a government that exhibited a heightened sensitivity towards song lyrics and their suitability for public consumption. It was a time when the individuals

responsible for controlling the airwaves, stationed behind the radio desks, held the power to censor any song they deemed inappropriate, including scrutinising both the lyrical content and the pronunciation employed in the music. Mawela acknowledged the challenge that vernacular language posed for White managers at the SABC, often not fluent in Venda. There was a concern that these managers might unintentionally misinterpret a Tshivenda phrase, leading to potential misjudgements and even music bans. This environment meant that a single decision by a radio station's gatekeepers could significantly impact an artist's ability to have their work broadcast to the public. Mawela was acutely aware of the potential pitfalls that lay in the realm of content censorship and pronunciation, underscoring the delicate balance artists had to navigate in expressing their creativity within a highly regulated and scrutinised landscape (Hamm 1991).

Mawela's unyielding commitment to delivering her message in her native language was not only a testament to her authenticity but also a profound statement on her advocacy for linguistic equality. It was a declaration of her unwavering dedication to her cultural and linguistic heritage, seeking to ensure that her language enjoyed a rightful place on the stage of expression. Her music, drenched in the hues of her own language, represented a powerful embodiment of the principle of linguistic parity. Mawela's influence extended beyond her own recordings. Her music resonated across a wide spectrum of radio stations, including Radio Lebowa, which was dedicated to the promotion of the Northern Sotho or Sepedi language, now known as Lesedi FM. This extended reach underscored the significance of her contribution, as it not only preserved and promoted the linguistic diversity of South Africa but also sought to establish an equitable footing for languages, ensuring that each had its moment in the spotlight. In doing so, Mawela became a trailblazer in the ongoing quest for linguistic inclusivity and recognition. Mawela fondly recalls a time when music enthusiasts engaged in a tactile and participatory process to request their favourite songs. In those days, listeners would take pen to paper, writing their preferences on postcards, and sending them off to the radio station. It was a tangible act of communication that empowered the audience to have a direct say in the musical choices broadcast over the airwaves. In her reminiscences, Mawela paints a vivid picture of the fervent enthusiasm that surrounded Radio Lebowa. Established earlier in 1962 than Radio Venda, which came into existence in 1965, it had already garnered a dedicated following (Lekgoathi 2009). The airwaves of Radio Lebowa resonated with the voices of many who tuned in eagerly to savour the sounds of their chosen songs. Mawela's recollections offer a glimpse into the rich and diverse musical landscape of the time, underlining the integral role of radio stations in connecting artists with their passionate audiences (Lekgoathi 2009: 578–579).

Mawela's memories of Radio Lebowa are coloured with vivid recollections of the station's charismatic announcers, particularly one who left an indelible mark – Champ Metse Ramohoebo. It was not merely the fact that her songs found favour with Ramohoebo; it was the deeply touching and personalised approach he took when he plucked a postcard from the pile, bearing one of her songs. He had the remarkable ability to infuse a profound sense of significance into the airwaves before he played Mawela's music. In those moments, as the music took centre stage, Ramohoebo's intros were moving and personal, crafting an emotional connection between the artist and her audience. His distinctive style would often start with the words, '*Ka topa nnwe* Elias,' signalling the selection made by a listener named Elias. Yet, it was in his expressions of enthusiasm and delight as he introduced Mawela's songs, exclaiming, 'I pick another one by Elias,' that the magic unfolded. It was a touching demonstration of the power of radio to create a special bond between the artist and their dedicated listeners, leaving an indelible mark on Mawela's heart and her journey in the world of music.

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These individuals like Champ Metse Ramohoebo played an instrumental role in championing Mawela's music even before the inception of Radio Venda, despite the fact that her songs were not predominantly in the Tshivenda language. What endeared many Venda people to Radio Lebowa was its pioneering status in the radio landscape. It had embarked on its broadcasting journey earlier than Radio Venda, enjoying a head start that translated into extended broadcasting hours. This early advantage allowed Radio Lebowa to secure a coveted position as a 24-hour station well before Radio Venda could claim the same round-the-clock programming status. In the eyes and ears of eager listeners, this marked Radio Lebowa as a beacon of accessibility and a comprehensive source of entertainment and cultural connection, making it a cherished platform for Mawela's music.

During the period when Radio Lebowa had firmly established itself as a 24-hour music powerhouse, Radio Venda was still navigating a schedule shared with the Tsonga radio station. Radio Venda embarked on its broadcasting journey with more modest time slots, beginning with a meagre 30 minutes to an hour. However, Radio Venda's commitment to expansion was evident, gradually extending its airtime to one hour, then three hours, and beyond. As Radio Venda's broadcast hours increased, so did its reach and influence in the region. Yet, even during Radio Venda's early days when it commenced its broadcasts at 6 a.m. and concluded at 10 p.m., the allure of Radio Lebowa remained strong. Many Venda listeners would turn their dials to



Radio Lebowa to follow its extensive music programming. It was in these moments that the fond connection between Venda people and Irene Mawela's music was cemented, as they eagerly penned postcards to request her songs. The enchanting melodies and captivating lyrics woven into Mawela's music found a special place in the hearts of listeners, transcending radio station boundaries and becoming an integral part of their musical journey. The gradual introduction of radio broadcasts in minutes, then a few hours until a 24-hour cycle has been a common approach for the establishment of nearly all South African Bantu radio stations, with the exception of Radio Zulu.

In her own candid words, Mawela paints a vivid portrait of an individual within the Gallo organisation, a fellow Tsonga-speaking person hailing from Mpumalanga, who paradoxically harboured a strong aversion toward the promotion of both Venda and Tsonga languages. Strikingly, this person, who shared linguistic and cultural ties with the very languages he seemingly disdained, emerged as a significant impediment to the broader promotion of Venda and Tsonga music. Mawela, while choosing not to disclose this individual's identity, was resolute in her intent to shed light on the undercurrent of hostility directed toward Venda and Tsonga languages. This internal resistance posed a considerable challenge to the aspirations of musicians in these languages, limiting their access to the radio stations that primarily catered to the majority-speaking population. Mawela's revelation serves as a testament to the complex dynamics at play within the music industry, illustrating how even those who shared linguistic heritage could become unexpected obstacles to the advancement of their own cultures and languages.

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This individual exhibited a steadfast resistance to the inclusion of Venda and Tsonga songs in the broader music landscape, harbouring an unwavering aversion to these languages. He was resolute in his determination to thwart any initiatives aimed at granting songs sung in Venda and Tsonga greater visibility among a wider audience. Mawela's account highlights the extent of his influence within the organisation, as he wielded authority over the representatives, commonly referred to as 'reps', responsible for distributing albums to various destinations, including radio stations and music shops. His sway over the distribution process posed a formidable barrier to the dissemination of Venda and Tsonga music, stifling its access to platforms that could have brought it to a more diverse and appreciative listenership.

This individual employed a deliberate strategy to undermine the presence of Tshivenda albums within specific regions, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN). His calculated approach entailed redirecting Tshivenda albums to KZN, effectively isolating them from a receptive market. By doing so, he aimed to label these albums as unsellable, unmarketable, and ultimately unprofitable, thus stifling their potential reach and appeal. As a result of this orchestrated manoeuvre, Mawela's albums designated for KZN were summarily returned, deprived of the opportunity for airplay. The language barrier posed a significant hurdle, rendering the albums unsuitable for broadcast on radio stations within KZN, further contributing to the obstruction of Tshivenda music's expansion and recognition. Mawela's experiences serve as a poignant illustration of the challenges faced by artists seeking to promote their work in less widely spoken languages, battling not only the complexities of the industry but also the actions of those who resisted cultural diversity and linguistic inclusivity (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2021).

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Irene Mawela's successful career at Gallo Records acted as a beacon, drawing the attention and aspirations of other talented Venda musicians. The ripple effect of her achievements paved the way for a new generation of Venda artists to secure recording deals for their music within the Gallo stable. Eric Mukhese is often cited as one of the earliest pioneers to follow in Mawela's footsteps, becoming the second Venda musician to be recorded by Gallo. In the wake of these trailblazers, subsequent Venda musicians, such as Alpheus Ramavhea Mundalamo and Elvis Mandiza, also found their place within the Gallo family. While these remarkable artists have sadly passed away, their artistic legacies continue to thrive and resonate through the airwaves of Phalaphala FM. This station, previously known as Radio Venda, has become a vital platform for preserving and celebrating the musical contributions of these Venda artists, ensuring that their work remains alive and cherished by generations to come.

Notably, there were some renowned Venda popular musicians for whom Irene Mawela did not provide backing vocals, including the Adziambei Band and the Thrilling Artist. Despite not collaborating with these specific artists, Mawela regarded her role as a studio artist or session musician with unwavering dedication. Her commitment to her craft was exemplified by her regular presence in the studio, where she would diligently attend each day. Her reputation as a seasoned and reliable backing vocalist made her the first choice for new artists seeking the expertise of a backing vocalist when recording their songs. In this capacity, Mawela played a pivotal role in enhancing and enriching the music of various artists, contributing her distinct

vocal talents to numerous studio sessions. Irene Mawela's remarkable multilingual proficiency proved to be a significant asset in her extensive career as a backing vocalist. Her willingness to adapt and learn various languages, even in cases where she might not have been familiar with certain pronunciations, set her apart. When collaborating with artists from diverse linguistic backgrounds, Mawela exhibited a strong commitment to accuracy. To ensure that she complemented each song perfectly in terms of language and tone, she would actively seek guidance and clarification on correct pronunciation, demonstrating her dedication to her craft and the integrity of the music she supported.

In stark contrast to many other backing vocalists who were disinclined to venture beyond their comfort zones, Irene Mawela's unique approach set her apart. While some backing vocalists were content to support artists singing in their own language or within the boundaries of their linguistic comfort, Mawela exhibited an exceptional willingness to embrace diversity. Her unwavering commitment to providing backing vocals for nearly any artist who sought her assistance was a testament to her versatility and dedication. This attribute made her peers perceive her as having a distinct advantage in the realm of backing vocals. Mawela's multilingual proficiency allowed her to navigate a wide range of musical styles and artists, and she was rightfully compensated as a session musician for her vital contribution to enhancing and enriching the songs she backed. Her ability to seamlessly adapt to different languages and musical genres truly set her apart from her contemporaries in the industry. Interestingly, Irene Mawela's exceptional multilingual prowess, which some viewed as a challenge, did not hinder her willingness to collaborate with fellow artists. On the contrary, her eagerness to embrace linguistic diversity became a cornerstone of her career, serving as a unique advantage.

This remarkable versatility not only allowed her to provide invaluable assistance to a wide array of artists but also functioned as a personal training ground for her own vocal abilities. Mawela's dedication to mastering diverse languages and vocal styles expanded the horizons of her own vocal range, making her an even more accomplished and versatile artist. The early 1970s marked a significant turning point in the history of Tshivenda music. During this time, commercial recording studios began to embrace Tshivenda songs, opening the doors for Venda musicians to express themselves with newfound confidence and enthusiasm. The realisation that a burgeoning market awaited their music filled them with a sense of purpose and fearlessness. In this evolving landscape, Radio Venda emerged as a pivotal force for promoting Tshivenda music. The radio

station skilfully navigated the overarching policies dictated by the apartheid government, which aimed to facilitate separate development and the promotion of distinct cultural and ethnic identities. This strategic alignment provided a robust platform for the flourishing Tshivenda music scene, enabling it to thrive and reach a broader audience.

Radio stations played a pivotal role in championing the promotion of distinct cultural and ethnic identities, despite the stringent regulations that still governed their operations. Their commitment to this cause was evident in various ways, including a rigorous oversight mechanism. This included the involvement of a White supervisor who meticulously reviewed all the songs slated for programming, ensuring that their content remained free from hate speech and vulgarity. This stringent quality control mechanism aimed to maintain the integrity of the messages conveyed through the songs broadcast on the airwaves. In the selection of individuals responsible for overseeing the content of songs, radio stations often sought individuals from White families residing within the respective Black communities. These individuals were chosen based on their fluency in the local language, as they had spent years living and interacting within the Black communities. Many of them were farm owners whose properties were situated in areas inhabited by Black people. Growing up on these farms, their own children had the unique opportunity to be raised alongside their Black counterparts. As a result, they became fluent in the local language by immersing themselves in the daily life and interactions with the local community, playing and learning alongside their peers. This upbringing allowed them to speak the language fluently, making them well-suited for the role of supervising song content to ensure linguistic and cultural accuracy.

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The majority of radio announcers during this period were typically chosen from the ranks of the Black elite. These individuals had pursued higher education, often attending college to study education or teaching. This background made them highly desirable for radio stations, as they were perceived as easy to work with and capable of adhering to established norms and regulations. One key reason for their popularity among radio stations was the level of education they had achieved. At the time, becoming a teacher was considered the highest educational attainment attainable for a Black person. Consequently, these individuals were not only well-versed in their chosen fields but were also seen as reliable and compliant, making them excellent candidates for radio announcing positions (Lekgoathi 2009: 581). Nevertheless, this principle did not extend to White individuals hired as managers in positions overseeing Black employees, whether in the role of overall station management or as department heads responsible for areas

like the language library or the news section. The selection of White managers for these roles was primarily based on specific qualifications and skills related to managing Black personnel, rather than their educational background or qualifications. Mawela recalls that in the early days of her music being featured on radio Venda, a White man named Devon Benjamin Bezuidenhout was responsible for overseeing language management. Under his management, a systematic and meticulous process of music censorship and control was established on the radio station.

Songs that were judged to contain messages that fell outside the radio station's standards were subject to a specific censorship process. Their LP vinyl records were intentionally defaced with a roofing nail, bearing the Afrikaans word that meant cancel. This action served as a clear warning, ensuring that these records were never to be played on the radio. To safeguard her music from being flagged for removal, Mawela took meticulous care to craft songs featuring clean, appropriate lyrics in Tshivenda. She was committed to upholding the highest standards of her language to ensure that her music would not be subjected to language-based scrutiny or censorship. As the late 1970s and early 1980s unfolded, Mawela remained constrained by the prevailing policy of releasing only one Tshivenda song in each album, and occasionally, two songs at most. This limitation was primarily due to the limitations of recording devices like LPs and Vinyl records, which could only accommodate a limited number of songs. To navigate around this policy and satisfy her desire to create more Tshivenda music, Mawela occasionally resorted to releasing albums in other languages, cleverly incorporating one or two Tshivenda tracks within these multilingual albums.

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During this transition from vinyl records to cassette tapes in the early 1980s, a shift in the music industry was evident, with recording companies gradually phasing out vinyl records in favour of the emerging 'eight-track cassettes'. These eight-track cassettes were large cassette tapes that lacked the rewind capabilities commonly found in later cassette formats (Hunt and Mellicker 2008: 80). During this period, Irene Mawela was not only adapting to the changing music landscape but also dedicating a significant portion of her time to raising her children. This maternal role meant that she had less time to spend in the recording studio while tending to her family. This period afforded her a much-needed break from the music industry and offered an opportunity for reflection. It allowed her to observe that her long journey, which began in 1957, was slowly moving toward the realisation of her dream: the official recognition of Tshivenda music within commercial studios, on par with languages like Zulu, Sotho, and Xhosa.

Raising her family during this time also provided her with the space to carefully consider the path she wanted to follow. She needed to decide whether to continue pursuing her music career with the same unwavering passion as before or to embrace a new identity as a family-oriented musician. Opting for a family-oriented music career would have inevitably led to a reduction in her visibility in the music scene, as the demands of family life would have limited her time for performances and recording. In light of this, she made the difficult decision to end her marriage, recognising that it wasn't aligning with her career goals. This choice allowed her to fully commit to her music while also raising her children. Mawela expresses the poignant truth about the struggle of Venda popular music artists to gain recognition and support in the public sphere. The historically limited support from other cultural groups, coupled with the enduring effects of the apartheid-era separate development policies, paints a sombre picture of the South African music industry. Regrettably, this situation has not seen substantial improvement, and the legacy of apartheid continues to cast its shadow over the diverse cultural groups in South Africa.

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The enduring struggle persists in South Africa, with some individuals still seeking to assert superiority over others based on historical privileges that were entrenched by the apartheid regime. Venda musicians have endured significant losses, such as the rejection of their music by radio stations targeting the so-called majority ethnic groups like the Zulu and Xhosa. These radio stations would frequently return Venda music to the recording studios without granting it any airplay, perpetuating a longstanding injustice. The situation was slightly different when it came to the Sotho station, which exhibited a somewhat more responsive approach. They did, on occasion, play selected Venda songs, although it was done in a somewhat scattered manner. This irregular practice can be understood in the context of the apartheid government's separate development policies, which aimed to categorise people into groups based on linguistic similarities and, as a result, had a direct impact on the broadcasting landscape.

Under the influence of apartheid policies, these linguistic groupings were structured in a way that aligned Nguni languages together, Sotho languages formed another group, and Tshivenda and Tsonga languages were grouped separately. These classifications and divisions were a direct result of the apartheid government's agenda to segregate and categorise the population along linguistic lines (Khunou 2009: 84). In Limpopo, where Northern Sotho speakers coexist with Venda and Tsonga communities, these linguistic groups have historically shared their territories and learned to live in peaceful coexistence. Both the Northern Sotho and Venda languages share similarities,

and these communities have a long history of harmonious interaction. However, Irene Mawela later discovered that there was a concerted effort to obstruct and undermine the availability of Venda-language music in stores and on radio stations. A group of individuals seemed determined to suppress the promotion of Venda music, leading to considerable sabotage within the industry. The Northern Sotho community found themselves in a comparatively more developed area, which in turn, unintentionally fostered a subtle hierarchy among these three cultures – Northern Sotho, Venda, and Tsonga. This hierarchy was not a natural occurrence but rather a strategic manipulation by the apartheid government, aimed at exacerbating divisions within the broader Black community.

One of Irene Mawela's songs, titled *unga mushayi mfazi u zo baleka ne bodo lenyama*, faced the imminent threat of being banned due to strict SABC regulations. She had to clarify the meaning of her lyrics, which depicted a woman fleeing with a pot of meat. This issue was not unique to Mawela; many musicians encountered similar challenges when their songs were submitted to different radio stations for potential programming. The individuals in charge of language control, often White, frequently lacked a profound comprehension of the intricate vernacular parables and idioms, which were employed as a way to covertly convey specific meanings. This practice is akin to what Henry Louis Gates (1988) referred to as 'signifying' in American Black music, where musicians used their art to communicate amongst themselves while excluding those who were not privy to the nuanced language. The White language managers would often choose to prohibit or prevent the programming of a song if it contained words or phrases they did not comprehend, unless those terms were explained in simple vernacular language. Radio announcers similarly saw this as a clever tactic, employing common language to obscure the meaning of their discussions from the White individuals who could understand their vernacular language. This approach allowed for covert communication among the musicians and announcers, safeguarding their discussions from those who lacked familiarity with the nuanced language and its concealed meanings.

Cloonan (2006: 16) refers to this practice as the utilisation of double-meaning language to evade censorship. Musicians employed specific words or phrases that held a dual meaning – one intended for common understanding by the majority and another that conveyed a hidden message only comprehensible to a select few. This allowed them to express their intended sentiments covertly while avoiding the scrutiny of censors and authorities. Through her

experience with the song that nearly faced censorship, Mawela came to realise the pervasive nature of political censorship. She understood that to avoid trouble and potential bans, it was safer to employ straightforward, uncomplicated vernacular language in her songs. Delving into deeper or hidden meanings could attract unwanted attention and sanctions from radio stations, ultimately affecting her music's sales and reach. Mawela's remarkable talent in the studio was unmistakable, and she had an innate ability to identify potential hits on the spot. Her role as a backing vocalist was invaluable in assisting other artists in crafting singing styles that perfectly complemented the song, whether it required a danceable rhythm, jive, melodious tunes, or intricate cross-rhythms. While many of her contemporaries focussed on creating dance music, Mawela's work was primarily driven by conveying profound messages. Her lyrics were crafted with a strong educational, guiding, admonishing, corrective, and directive bent. Through her music, she aimed to preserve and restore the values and way of life that she believed were passed down from one generation to the next, emphasising the importance of cultural continuity.

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Mawela holds a strong belief in upholding good moral values and being a responsible citizen, and she considers this a fundamental aspect of a person's character. The advocacy for good morals is a deeply cherished theme that permeates the messages of her music. As a result of her commitment to this message, her music transcends various categories, encompassing *mbaqanga*, jazz, blues, and afro-pop. Her creative process often involved arriving at the studio to find a band rehearsing or jamming, and she would be called upon to contribute lyrics and melodies to transform these musical arrangements into complete songs. This collaborative approach allowed her to infuse her songs with the moral and ethical values she held dear. On numerous occasions, Mawela found herself in situations where she was required to spontaneously improvise, crafting melodies and lyrics for songs that were being created on the spot. This process not only highlighted her artistic versatility but also emphasised the importance of maintaining a frequent studio presence to nurture her creativity. She quickly recognised that a musician's career often hinged on their ability to seize the creative spark of the moment, responding swiftly to the ever-evolving musical landscape.

Active engagement in music-making is a crucial catalyst for enhancing one's creative prowess. The creative energy required for musical inspiration thrives on the continuous involvement of a musician, as this ongoing stimulation is essential for consistently generating hit songs. Mawela's



dedicated routine of frequenting the studio not only facilitated her ability to craft numerous songs but also resulted in a prolific output that continues to defy enumeration to this day. Mawela's exceptional skill in seamlessly adapting to existing songs and various harmonic progressions proved to be a considerable advantage. This remarkable ability allowed her to effortlessly compose new songs spontaneously and provide backing vocals for a multitude of musicians. Oftentimes, she could forego extensive rehearsals and instead rely on her intuitive connection with the music. With a natural responsiveness to the melodies, she harmoniously sang along and instinctively devised complementary vocal arrangements, showcasing her innate musical talents. Mawela's extensive repertoire includes a vast number of songs, some of which she performed as a backing vocalist. The precise count of her songs eludes her, but a list submitted to SAMRO for royalty purposes by SABC provides insight into her prolific career, with over 1 000 of her songs gracing the airwaves of radio stations. Notably, many early Venda musicians who followed in her footsteps and recorded at Gallo, particularly under the Mavuthela Records subsidiary, were fortunate to have Irene Mawela's distinctive backing vocals enhance their musical creations. Her contributions left an indelible mark on the music scene, enriching the works of numerous artists. Radio played a pivotal role in moulding and nurturing the vocabulary of vernacular languages. Consequently, language experts and custodians of linguistic purity held a strict stance on maintaining the integrity of these languages. Music, given its significant influence and reach, came under frequent scrutiny, particularly regarding the use of pristine language. Bantu radio stations were envisioned as educational instruments, not only for the promotion of vernacular languages but also for their cultural and linguistic development. As a result, linguistic cleanliness was of paramount importance, and music was a key area where these principles were rigorously upheld.

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The language promoted on the radio was intended to be straightforward and accessible, comprehensible to anyone familiar with or capable of speaking the language in question. The use of intricate or cryptic language could be perceived in two contrasting ways: firstly, as a method to conceal specific meanings from those who were not privy to the lingo, and secondly, as an obstacle hindering language comprehension. The language controllers aimed to ensure that listeners wouldn't feel compelled to seek alternative stations due to language barriers, offensive content, vulgar expressions, or cryptic messages. The White language managers maintained stringent oversight to spot any instances of unclean language, vulgarity, covert messages in the music, or politically sensitive language. SABC strictly adhered to language standards that required

cleanliness, linguistic purity, and adherence to acceptable speech norms. Vulgar or unrefined language, as well as any deviation from proper vernacular language etiquette, was discouraged. Additionally, language that conveyed messages contrary to the ruling party, dissenting perspectives, or any form of negative influence, was swiftly censored by the appointed White language managers.

## Conclusion

The advent of Radio Bantu marked a pivotal moment for marginalised languages that had been largely excluded from commercial studios and airplay. The prevalent argument had been that these languages lacked a sufficient following to justify recording their music. Irene Mawela, however, achieved a breakthrough by singing in her native Venda on Radio Bantu. The creation of Radio Bantu not only provided a platform for her, but it also rekindled hope among countless musicians who had been struggling to have their music recorded. The introduction of the Radio Bantu mobile studio further extended the opportunity for their music to be preserved and shared. This marked a significant step forward in acknowledging the cultural diversity and richness of South Africa's music landscape. While this opportunity to record with the Radio Bantu mobile studio was a significant turning point, it's important to note that many musicians expressed a preference for commercial studios. Their recordings for Radio Bantu often ended up as part of the radio's archive, essentially becoming the property of the radio station. These artists would have ideally preferred to record in commercial studios, where established copyright distribution frameworks between musicians and recording companies could provide a clearer path to ownership and royalties. This underscores the ongoing challenge of ensuring equitable recognition, compensation, and control for musicians who seek to share their voices and cultural heritage through their music. The opportunity to record her music with the radio studio marked a significant turning point in Irene Mawela's career. It provided her with the platform and confidence to pursue recording in her native language, Tshivenda, without any compromises. As recording studios observed the feasibility and market potential through the establishment of the Venda radio station, Mawela's path towards preserving her linguistic and cultural heritage in her music became clearer. This shift not only enriched her artistic journey but also contributed to a growing body of work in the Venda language that was previously underrepresented in the music industry. The talent search project initiated by the SABC, utilising the mobile studio, was driven by a compelling objective: to encourage and empower musicians to record their music in their native languages. The ultimate

goal was to have this music featured on the radio, thereby promoting linguistic diversity and cultural preservation. Through this innovative approach, the project sought to amplify the voices of marginalised linguistic communities and pave the way for greater representation in the music industry.

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## Chapter 5

### Exploring new horizons: Mawela explores gospel music

In 1957, when Irene Mawela found herself working for EMI at the tender age of 17, it was not a mere coincidence or an accidental twist of fate; rather, it marked a crucial milestone in her remarkable musical journey. Her journey began as one of Rupert Bopape's prized talent scouting projects, a position that would launch her into the world of music. At the time, Bopape was a prominent session singer, and his mentorship and guidance were instrumental in shaping Irene's budding career. This period was marked by the emergence of a tight-knit collective of artists who delved into exploring the uncharted territories of music, and their collective efforts led to a profound appreciation for the so-called 'Dark Sisters'. This group of gifted performers included not only Irene Mawela but also other exceptional voices such as Joyce Mogatusi, Francisca Mngomezulu, Hilda Mogapi, and Esther Khoza. Together, they formed a collective that transcended traditional musical boundaries, and their voices resonated with a harmony that was nothing short of magical.

The beauty of the Dark Sisters group lay in its fluid composition; the personnel involved often shifted and evolved, reflecting the ever-changing dynamics of their musical pursuits. Their collective impact was like a symphony of shifting group members, each contributing their unique talents and energies to create a harmonious beauty of sound. These extraordinary women became pioneers, challenging conventions and redefining the musical landscape of their time. In summary, Mawela's journey from a young recruit at EMI to a member of the revered Dark Sisters was not just a stroke of luck; it was a significant chapter in the annals of music history. It marked the beginning of a remarkable era of collaboration and innovation, as she and her fellow Dark Sisters broke new ground and left an indelible mark on the world of music.

According to Rob Allingham, who delves into the intricate history of this musical era, the lead singer of the more established incarnation of the Dark City Sisters was none other than Joyce Mogatusi. However, the dynamics of this ensemble, like many others of the time, were characterised by a constantly shifting line-up of female vocalists. Mawela, too, found herself in the midst of these talented women, participating in recordings that sometimes bore the name 'Dark City Sisters' while at other times emerged under the moniker 'Killingstone Stars'. The

collective of female singers Mawela was a part of was a group of talented musicians, and they left their musical mark under various names, not limited to just the Dark City Sisters. Two other notable names under which this group of talented women recorded were the 'Killingstone Stars' and the 'Flying Jazz Queens'. These names signified the adaptability and dynamism of these artists who were driven by their passion for music and their eagerness to explore various musical avenues (personal communication, Rob Allingham 2021).

The origin of the name 'Dark City Sisters' holds a unique cultural significance. It reflected the lifestyle associated with Alexander township during that era, characterised by the absence of streetlights, rendering the township relatively dark at night, a township where Mawela was born. This name not only served as a tribute to their local roots but also symbolised the resilience and creativity of these remarkable women who thrived in challenging conditions, ultimately illuminating the musical world with their talent. In sum, the journey of Mawela and her fellow female vocalists was a fascinating exploration of the fluid and collaborative nature of music in their time. They left behind a legacy under various names, each representing a different facet of their artistry, and the name Dark City Sisters remains a testament to their ability to shine even in the darkest of circumstances.

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During this transformative period in Mawela's career, she was an integral part of several distinct musical groups, with the creative direction and leadership entrusted to the inimitable Rupert Bopape. At this juncture, Bopape was not just any figure in the music industry; he was revered as the preeminent talent scout of his time. His reputation as a talent scout extended far and wide, and he was celebrated for his exceptional ability to spot promising artists and nurture their potential. EMI, recognising his extraordinary talent-spotting acumen, had bestowed upon him the crucial responsibility of overseeing this important facet of the music industry. Bopape's role transcended that of a mere talent scout; he was a central figure in EMI's South African operation, overseeing it with a level of mastery that few could rival. As a producer at EMI, he was not only responsible for discovering raw talent but also for guiding it through the intricate process of music production. His skilful touch and creative vision brought these various musical projects to life, ultimately contributing to their exceptional quality and widespread appeal. In essence, Bopape was the driving force behind the music industry's evolution during this period. His dual roles as a talent scout and producer allowed him to shape the careers of artists like Irene Mawela and many others, moulding them into the musical luminaries they would become. EMI's trust in his abilities

was well-founded, and his remarkable contributions left an indelible mark on the African music landscape. This era, guided by Bopape's expertise, stands as a testament to the extraordinary talent that emerged from the crucible of creative collaboration, forging a path for artists like Mawela to make their voices heard on a grand stage.

During this pivotal phase of Mawela's career, Bopape not only recognised her extraordinary talent but also glimpsed the possibility of a profound partnership, both on and off the stage. While Mawela was still in the bloom of her youth and may not have initially considered the idea, Bopape saw something special in her that transcended the professional realm. As time passed, the weight of this unspoken connection between Bopape and Mawela began to intensify, prompting a significant turning point in her journey. The atmosphere at EMI became increasingly burdensome for her as she yearned for more creative freedom and the opportunity to sing in her native language. This longing for artistic expression in her own linguistic roots was not adequately fulfilled within the confines of EMI's artistic direction.

In 1962, five years after she had first entered the recording industry, Mawela decided to take a bold step. Fuelled by her artistic aspirations and a desire to embrace her cultural identity, she made the courageous choice to leave EMI and join Troubadour as already explained in Chapter 4 of this book. This move represented not only a pivotal juncture in her career but also a personal transformation. It was a testament to her unwavering commitment to her craft and her determination to have her voice heard in her own language. By transitioning to Troubadour, Mawela opened the door to a new chapter in her musical journey, one that would allow her to fully explore her cultural heritage and artistic vision. The shift symbolised her independence as an artist and her commitment to preserving her linguistic and cultural roots in her music. In summary, Mawela's decision to leave EMI and embrace Troubadour in 1962 was a courageous move driven by a yearning for artistic authenticity and the desire to sing in her native language. It marked the beginning of a new era in her career and showcased her unwavering dedication to both her music and her cultural heritage.

Bopape's unwavering pursuit of Mawela finally bore fruit when she accepted his proposal. This romantic connection added a unique layer of complexity to their professional collaboration, further deepening their personal and creative ties. Their relationship mirrored the intricate dynamics of the African recording scene of that era, marked by a shared sense of creativity, camaraderie, and

innovation. Troubadour, much like EMI, operated within a similar framework in which a collective of talented singers would come together in various permutations, creating a rich sound of vocal harmonies and artistic expressions. These groupings of artists were as fluid as the melodies they created, and it was common practice for their recordings to be released under a variety of names as already explained in the previous chapter. This approach not only showcased the versatility of the artists but also catered to the ever-evolving tastes of the music-loving audience.

The collaborative spirit that defined the African recording scene during this period was a testament to the boundless creativity and adaptability of these talented individuals. They seamlessly blended their voices and talents, transcending the limitations of conventional music structures and leaving an indelible mark on the musical landscape. It was within this dynamic and innovative atmosphere that Mawela and Bopape's partnership continued to thrive, resulting in a remarkable fusion of personal and artistic connection. In essence, the story of Mawela and Bopape exemplified the intricate interplay between personal and professional elements, a reflection of the dynamic and ever-evolving nature of the African recording industry at the time. Their journey was one of artistic collaboration and shared passion, underlining the fluidity and adaptability of musicians who were driven by their unwavering commitment to the music they created.

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Within the vibrant musical sound world of Troubadour, a kaleidoscope of diverse voices and talents converged. Yet, among the multitude of singers, one particularly shone with a brilliance that made her a standout presence – none other than Mawela. Her voice, rich and versatile, was the linchpin of many ensembles, where her role could vary from harmonising to taking the lead. One such notable group in which she played a significant part was known as the 'Sweet Sixteen'. Following her transition to Troubadour, Mawela found a newfound sense of liberation in her musical journey. At Troubadour, the creative atmosphere and artistic direction allowed her to break free from the constraints that had bound her at EMI. Here, she was able to record her music with a profound sense of joy and creative autonomy, unrestricted by external pressures. This freedom allowed her to express herself, not only in her own voice but also in her unique artistic vision, and to sing her songs with a sense of fulfilment that had eluded her in her previous professional experience at EMI. Mawela's shift to Troubadour represented a transformative phase in her career, marked by artistic liberation and the opportunity to realise her musical potential on her own terms. The Sweet Sixteen and the diverse range of vocalists at Troubadour provided the perfect backdrop for her to flourish, and her artistic journey continued to evolve with the kind of creative freedom that her heart had long desired.



When Troubadour underwent a significant transformation, being absorbed into the True Tone division of Gallo a new chapter for Mawela started. This transition marked a pivotal shift in Mawela's artistic journey. Under the new umbrella of Gallo, Mawela continued to record and create music, seamlessly adapting to the evolving landscape of the music industry. It's worth noting that throughout her illustrious career, Irene Mawela consistently retained the stage name 'Ngwenya' rather than her own surname. This artistic identity allowed her to maintain a certain level of anonymity and artistic freedom while also adding an air of mystique to her persona. The choice to adopt the name 'Ngwenya' was a deliberate one, signifying her deep-rooted commitment to her craft and her desire to separate her artistry from her personal life.

In the early 1970s, Mawela continued to record under the collective title 'The Sweet Sixteen'. Within this ensemble, the line-up for lead singer duties was known to shift, at times featuring Sannah as the lead vocalist and, at other times, showcasing Mawela in the spotlight. This dynamic interplay of voices and roles was a testament to Mawela's versatility and the fluid nature of her contributions to the music industry. It highlighted her ability to adapt to varying vocal responsibilities while maintaining her distinctive artistry and melodic allure. Bhekitshe Shabalala held a pivotal role as the male vocalist within the musical ensemble known as '*Izintombi Zesi Manje Manje*', a group that had found its home at Troubadour. His resonant male voice added a distinctive element to the group's harmonious sound, contributing to their unique blend of melodies and rhythms. Under Shabalala's influence, *Izintombi Zesi Manje Manje* flourished, captivating audiences with their captivating performances. As time progressed and the early 1970s rolled around, Bhekitshe Shabalala's musical journey took a new turn. He transitioned from being the sole male voice in the ensemble to engaging in harmonious collaborations with two remarkable female vocalists, Sannah and Mawela. This collaborative evolution marked a significant shift in the dynamics of their performances, as Shabalala harmonised with Sannah and Mawela, creating a rich sound of vocal arrangements that showcased their collective artistry.

The coming together of these voices was a testament to the flexibility and adaptability of the artists, showcasing their willingness to explore and experiment with different musical roles. This harmonious synergy not only enriched their collective sound but also demonstrated their commitment to pushing the boundaries of their creative endeavours. In essence, Bhekitshe Shabalala's journey from being the male voice of *Izintombi Zesi Manje Manje* to harmonising with Sannah and Mawela in the early 1970s represented an exciting chapter in his musical career. It exemplified the artists' dedication to artistic growth and their capacity to explore new horizons

within the ever-evolving realm of music. The releases from this period showcased a fascinating interplay of names. Sometimes, the records would emerge under the collective banner of The Sweet Sixteen. However, on occasion, a more distinct configuration would arise, featuring Irene Mawela as Irene 'Ngwenya' and 'The Sweet Sixteen'. This dynamic, ever-evolving nomenclature added an extra layer of intrigue to their artistic output, underscoring the adaptability and versatility of the artists involved. In a pivotal twist of fate, Rupert Bopape, who had previously held a prominent role within EMI, embarked on a new chapter in his career by making the transition to Gallo. In his new capacity, he carried with him a deep commitment to nurturing the talent he had scouted during his tenure at EMI. His vision was to bring these exceptional artists into the fold at Gallo, creating a space for them to further explore their creative potential.

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Following her entry into Gallo, Irene Mawela's life took an unexpected personal turn as she became romantically involved with Rupert Bopape, her longtime collaborator. Mawela ended up getting married to Bopape. Their shared journey in music had kindled a deeper connection, eventually culminating in their marriage. The union of their lives was a testament to the intertwining of their personal and professional worlds. As time progressed, Rupert Bopape decided to retire and return to his hometown in Tzaneen. Despite the geographical separation, Mawela continued to be an integral part of their marriage, demonstrating her unwavering commitment to the relationship they had built. Their shared history was marked by creative endeavours, personal milestones, and a profound bond that transcended the boundaries of their careers. However, a pivotal moment arrived when Mawela, who had by then become a mother to three children with Bopape, made the difficult decision to move out of their shared household. This decision marked a significant turning point in her life, reflecting her independent spirit and her determination to forge her own path.

### **Mawela ventures into the sound of gospel music**

In her ongoing musical journey, Mawela continued to perform and occasionally ventured into the recording studio. Notably, Rob Allingham, in a gesture of support and collaboration, utilised some of the pension money he had received from Gallo to finance a gospel album for Mawela. This project was a departure from her typical style of music, and it faced challenges in terms of marketing and resources. The recording took place in a house studio with limited resources, which impacted its reach and success in the music industry. In summary, Irene Mawela's life and career were marked by a complex interplay of personal and professional elements. Her

relationship with Bopape was a significant chapter, characterised by shared experiences in music and a bond that endured even as their paths diverged. Her continued dedication to her craft and willingness to explore different musical genres exemplified her unwavering commitment to her artistic journey. Rob Allingham's commitment to Mawela's gospel album was nothing short of unrelenting. He recalls investing a considerable amount of his pension savings into the project, demonstrating his dedication to her music. This endeavour took place in approximately 2009, and Allingham's contribution amounted to a significant sum, around twenty-five thousand Rands, which was around \$1200 at the time and a substantial financial commitment for what was essentially an independent project. The decision to utilise his pension savings was, in many ways, a testament to the deep belief and trust Allingham had in Mawela's artistic talents. Having worked closely with her for an extended period, he had developed a profound understanding of her immense capability and the potential of the gospel album to showcase her versatility as an artist.

Despite the considerable financial risk involved, Allingham was willing to take a chance on Mawela, driven by his conviction that her talent deserved to be shared with a wider audience. He saw beyond the financial challenges, embracing the belief that the power of her music would ultimately transcend the initial investment. Rob Allingham and Mawela had a close acquaintance dating back to their time at Gallo. Allingham, an experienced archivist, had a lengthy tenure with the company (Allen 2003). However, the album's limited commercial success meant that his pension savings were never fully recovered, making this endeavour a distressing reminder of the sacrifices and risks often undertaken in the pursuit of supporting and promoting the careers of talented artists. The financial investment, while substantial, proved insufficient to cover the comprehensive requirements of marketing and other essential aspects of the recording process. Rob Allingham undertook the recording of the project and subsequently licensed it to Gallo, aiming to provide Irene Mawela's gospel album with the professional support and distribution it required. Allingham received valuable assistance from Lucky Monama and had high hopes for Manasseh's involvement as a co-producer, recognising the vital role that marketing and distribution played in the success of the project.

Despite their earnest efforts, the team encountered unforeseen challenges and roadblocks that hindered the project's progress. The intricate nature of the music industry, along with the ever-evolving demands of the market, posed obstacles that proved difficult to overcome. The vision to bring Mawela's gospel album to a wider audience was noble, but navigating the complex

landscape of production and promotion was no easy task. In their pursuit of musical excellence and sharing Irene Mawela's artistry with the world, the team learned first-hand the intricate dance of creativity, production, and marketing within the music industry. It was a testament to their unwavering commitment to supporting talented artists and their willingness to confront and overcome the challenges that often arise on the path to artistic achievement.



Figure 5.1. Cover page for the gospel album that Mawela worked on together with Rob Allingham, released in 2007

One of the prominent challenges that Rob Allingham encountered with the project was the formidable hurdle of publicity and marketing. This aspect of the venture necessitated a financial investment that neither Allingham nor Mawela had at their disposal. The standard modus operandi in the music industry involved commercial recording studios allocating resources for TV appearances and radio interviews, recognising the indispensable role these promotional activities played in expanding the artist's reach and audience engagement. At a pivotal juncture in the project, Irene Mawela was slated to make an appearance on a gospel show, a critical opportunity to promote her music and connect with a broader viewership. However, the financial requirement just for her participation in the show exceeded the available resources of both Allingham and Mawela. The prohibitive costs for securing such appearances presented a formidable obstacle, leaving them in a quandary and making it apparent that without the requisite financial backing, certain key avenues for promoting the gospel album remained inaccessible.

This challenge highlighted the financial constraints faced by independent artists and producers, underscoring the complexities of navigating the music industry. While the dedication and creative drive were abundant, financial limitations often constrained the ability to fully realise the potential of their projects. It served as a reminder of the vital role that financial support and investment play in the marketing and promotion of music within the ever-competitive music industry landscape. The inability to secure the necessary funds for Irene Mawela's participation in gospel shows presented a significant predicament. This unforeseen challenge hindered her capacity to promote the gospel album effectively, marking one of the critical stumbling blocks in the overall project's success. The potential avenue to reach a wider audience through gospel programmes remained frustratingly out of reach, underscoring the project's limitations.

One notable turning point during the recording of the gospel album was marked by Irene Mawela's unexpected request, which took Rob Allingham by surprise. In a departure from her typical approach, Mawela insisted on incorporating a feature that was foreign to her customary style. She specifically requested the use of auto-tune on her voice for one of the tracks, a departure from her usual vocal presentation. This uncharacteristic decision to employ auto-tune, a technology associated with pitch correction and modification, reflected Mawela's desire to explore new creative avenues and add a modern twist to her music. It was an unconventional choice that showcased her willingness to adapt to the evolving musical landscape while also

embracing innovative elements in her artistry. However, this creative choice, while reflecting Mawela's openness to experimentation, was not without its challenges and risks. It introduced a layer of complexity to the recording process, highlighting the delicate balance between artistic exploration and preserving one's authentic voice in a rapidly evolving music industry.

Rob Allingham made a noteworthy observation about Mawela's unusual request for auto-tune. Typically, auto-tune technology is associated with correcting the pitch of singers who may struggle with staying on key. However, Mawela, in stark contrast, possessed an innate and exceptional vocal talent that allowed her to sing and harmonise effortlessly with precision. Her remarkable vocal abilities set her apart as a singer who could tackle any tune with grace and proficiency, rendering the traditional use of auto-tune quite redundant in her case. The specific track for which Mawela requested auto-tune treatment was titled *Khotsi Anga*. This song held a special place in the gospel music repertoire, as it had achieved mainstream popularity and was widely recognised. It was a composition that resonated deeply with audiences, to the extent that it was frequently performed in various settings, including school prayer sessions. The familiarity of the song extended to school mornings, where it was often chosen to commence the day's proceedings with spiritual reflection and devotion.

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In her decision to incorporate auto-tune into *Khotsi Anga*, Mawela aimed to infuse this beloved and iconic gospel song with a fresh, contemporary interpretation, capturing the essence of her artistic evolution. This choice was both a testament to her musical adaptability and her intention to present a timeless piece of music in a novel and innovative light, all the while respecting the heritage and significance of the original composition. A song like *Khotsi Anga* had its origins intertwined with the arrival of missionaries who brought the gospel to Africa (Muller 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 1986; Agawu and Amu 1987). As part of the hymnals they introduced, this particular song became part of the musical repertoire taught to Black communities. These hymnals played a significant role in spreading the message of Christianity, often serving as the conduit through which gospel music was introduced to African communities.

*Khotsi Anga* possessed a unique musical duality. On one hand, it retained the spiritual and soulful essence characteristic of gospel music, offering a form of worship and reflection. However, it also featured a more contemporary and rhythmic vibe, distinct from the slow and sombre tone often associated with traditional gospel tracks. This modern rhythmic quality made it more appealing

to a younger demographic, especially the youth, who sought music that could be danced to and celebrated. The song, with its fusion of tradition and contemporary appeal, provided a bridge between the rich heritage of gospel music and the evolving tastes of the younger generation. It exemplified the dynamic nature of gospel music, capable of resonating with audiences across different generations and embracing various cultural and musical influences. *Khotsi Anga* encapsulated the spirit of gospel music's enduring legacy, where tradition and modernity converged in harmonious celebration. Mawela's music has consistently resonated with the older demographic, yet she has made a deliberate effort to incorporate elements that appeal to younger audiences. Despite not being categorised solely among mature musicians, she strives to cater to a diverse listener base.

Mawela's decision to incorporate auto-tune into *Khotsi Anga* stemmed from her keen awareness of the changing musical landscape and a desire to ensure her music remained relevant to the younger generation. She recognised that contemporary music trends often leaned towards a more rhythmic and electronically influenced sound, which resonated strongly with youth audiences. By infusing her music with this modern twist, she aimed to bridge the generational gap and engage a wider and more diverse fan base. This is why Rob Allingham was willing to make this financial investment in the project, he was driven by his belief in Mawela's artistic vision and capabilities. While he provided the resources necessary for the album's production, he was careful not to impose his creative preferences on Mawela. His trust in her judgment as an artist allowed her the artistic freedom to shape the project in accordance with her unique vision, understanding that it was her creative intuition that would define the album's character.

The resulting album comprised ten tracks, each a testament to Mawela's musical innovation and her willingness to embrace new sounds. However, despite the diligent efforts and artistic exploration, the album did not perform well in the market. This outcome emphasised the unpredictable nature of the music industry, where commercial success often eludes even the most talented and dedicated artists, highlighting the challenging journey that musicians face in a highly competitive and dynamic market. In her gospel album, Mawela aspires to connect with a broader audience by incorporating a diverse range of South African Black languages. Impressively, she features four Zulu songs, three Sotho songs, one Xhosa song, and an English track, demonstrating a deliberate effort to transcend ethnic boundaries. However, the inclusion of only two Tshivenda songs underscores her commitment to inclusivity, yet it also poses a potential challenge. Striking a

balance between cultural diversity and maintaining a wide appeal can be precarious for musicians. Notably, Mawela's decision to employ auto-tune solely in the *Khotsi Anga* song, out of the album's ten tracks, showcases her artistic versatility and willingness to experiment with different musical elements.

Throughout her illustrious music career, Mawela had become ingrained with a mindset attuned to a specific approach when it came to album production. This conditioning was not merely a fleeting aspect but rather a deeply rooted aspect of her artistic philosophy. Over time, her creative journey and the myriad experiences within the industry had shaped her perspective, instilling in her a consistent method of thinking and executing projects, especially when it came to the meticulous process of crafting an album. The song *Khotsi Anga* is a traditional hymn with a substantial eight verses. In a creative departure, Irene Mawela made the deliberate choice to skip the initial three verses, initiating her rendition from verse number 4. This selective approach allowed her to infuse her unique artistic signature into the hymn, adding a personalised touch to the song. This practice of incorporating original lyrics into gospel hymns is a common artistic technique employed by many musicians, serving as a means to impart a distinct and individualised character to the rendition.

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Here are the original lyrics for *Khotsi Anga* for reference:

1. *Khotsi-anga,* (My father)  
*Mune wanga,* (my redeemer)  
*Maanda anga* (my strength)  
*Ndi henewe.* (is you)
2. *Zwi mmbavhaho,* (what bothers me)  
*Zwi nthuphaho,* (what distresses me)  
*Zwi nndinaho,* (what troubles me)  
*Ndi da nazwo.* (comes along with me)
3. *Ndi hangwelwe* (may I be forgiven)  
*Ndi thadulwe* (may I be offloaded)  
*Ndi ruliwe* (may I be burden free)



- |    |                        |                           |
|----|------------------------|---------------------------|
|    | <i>Nga onoyu.</i>      | (by you Lord)             |
| 4. | <i>Yesu wanga</i>      | (my Jesus)                |
|    | <i>Ndila yanga,</i>    | (my way)                  |
|    | <i>Denzhe langa</i>    | (my light)                |
|    | <i>Vhonela-ha.</i>     | (shine on)                |
| 5. | <i>Vhafuniwa</i>       | (beloved people)          |
|    | <i>Ndi maswina</i>     | (are enemies)             |
|    | <i>Zwisiwana</i>       | (poor people)             |
|    | <i>Na vhalidzi.</i>    | (and bereaved)            |
| 6. | <i>Mphumise-vho</i>    | (dry my tears)            |
|    | <i>Ndi shayaho,</i>    | (I am poor)               |
|    | <i>ndi lilaho,</i>     | (I am crying)             |
|    | <i>tshisiwana.</i>     | (a poor person)           |
| 7. | <i>Ndi tshi do fa,</i> | (when I die)              |
|    | <i>U do di mpha</i>    | (you will give me)        |
|    | <i>Lone ifa</i>        | (an inheritance)          |
|    | <i>Li sa sini.</i>     | (everlasting inheritance) |
| 8. | <i>Ndi swike-vho</i>   | (I long to reach)         |
|    | <i>Hu rendwaho</i>     | (where there are praises) |
|    | <i>O tangwaho</i>      | (for the holly one)       |
|    | <i>Nga vhakhethwa</i>  | (among the chosen ones)   |

Mawela's adaptation of this hymn reflected not only her reverence for the gospel tradition but also her aspiration to reinterpret and breathe new life into a well-loved piece of music. Her addition of original lyrics provided a contemporary and personalised dimension to the hymn, showcasing the creative journey of an artist seeking to merge the timeless with the contemporary in a harmonious musical blend. The album bore the evocative title *Tlhokomela Sera*, a phrase that translated to 'watch out for the enemy'. Released and published under the banner of the renowned Gallo Record Company, the album was a testament to Irene Mawela's musical journey and her commitment to sharing her artistry with the world.

The album's track list comprised a selection of compositions that encapsulated Mawela's artistic vision and creative expression. These tracks served as both an auditory assertion and a testament to her deep connection with her craft, inviting listeners into a world of melodies, messages, and musical exploration. The album was a compelling representation of her unwavering passion for gospel music and her dedication to the power of song to convey profound spiritual and emotional narratives.

1. *Sheshisa Mfundisi*
2. *Tlhokomela Sera*
3. *Morena Re Thuse*
4. *Kwelo Khaya*
5. *Baja Bantima*
6. *Mme Anga Khotsi Anga*
7. *Loyo Muntu*
8. *Khotsi Anga*
9. *Yehova*
10. Jesus the Son of God

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The album *Tlhokomela Sera* stood apart from Irene Mawela's previous discography, as it offered a fresh perspective on her musical message. It unveiled a hitherto unexplored facet of her artistry, one that was deeply dedicated to Christian and believer audiences. Simultaneously, it presented a narrative that encouraged and reminded the youth to anchor their lives in their faith and spirituality. This dual approach distinguished the album by not only catering to her existing fan base but also addressing a new generation with a vital spiritual message. Despite the album's limited commercial success in terms of profit generation, it triumphed as a beacon of success in conveying a distinct and compelling message to Mawela's followers. The impact of the album extended beyond monetary gains, for it carried a spiritual resonance that resonated with its listeners. It exemplified Mawela's commitment to using her music as a vessel to inspire, uplift, and guide her audience in matters of faith and devotion, reinforcing her stature as a musician who ventured beyond the realms of popular acclaim to make a meaningful and lasting impact.

The release of *Tlhokomela Sera* served as an eye-opening experience for both Mawela and her audience. It shattered the preconceived notion that a popular musician's primary focus is solely on

entertainment, detached from the profound messages of gospel music. This album demonstrated that even within the realm of popular music, artists could embrace their spiritual and religious convictions, and use their platform to communicate a profound gospel message. For Mawela, this return to gospel music was, in many ways, a homecoming. It hearkened back to her formative years attending the Catholic church with her parents. Throughout her upbringing, she had been steeped in the traditions of church music, and her early exposure to these spiritual melodies and hymns had a profound influence on her artistic development.

Her transition into the mainstream music industry had initially pulled her away from her gospel roots, as this industry often revolves around commercial motives and profitability. However, the release of *Tlhokomela Sera* marked a reconnection with her spiritual foundation, serving as a strong reminder of her musical heritage. It showcased her ability to navigate different musical genres while reinforcing the notion that music, at its core, can be a powerful medium for expressing faith, values, and messages of spiritual significance. Gospel music holds significant potential for financial success and profitability, much like other genres. However, it's a unique category of music that intertwines closely with an artist's character. Those who choose to sing gospel are often expected to embody and exemplify the messages they convey through their music. In essence, there's an inherent connection between the artist's life and the spiritual or moral principles they sing about.

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The artist's life and conduct should mirror the profound messages within their gospel music, serving as a genuine reflection of their faith, values, and beliefs. This alignment between art and life adds depth and authenticity to the gospel music experience and reinforces the artist's role as a spiritual guide and mentor to their audience. Yet, it's essential to recognise that living up to the moral and spiritual standards espoused in gospel music is not always a straightforward endeavour. Many musicians, especially those who have ventured into other aspects of the popular music industry, have experienced the challenges of reconciling their personal lives with the virtuous messages they sing about. The dichotomy between the demands and temptations of the music industry and the moral imperatives of gospel music can pose a significant challenge for artists seeking to strike a balance between their artistic and personal identities.

Once again, Mawela found herself confronting a familiar challenge, one that had characterised her music journey from the outset. To ensure her music's commercial success, she had to navigate the delicate balance of language selection, often resorting to incorporating multiple languages

and singing less frequently in her native tongue. This predicament mirrored the struggle she had encountered in her longstanding involvement with *mbaqanga* music, where catering to a diverse and expansive audience necessitated a linguistic compromise. In the creation of *Tlhokomela Sera*, Mawela ventured into the realm of reimagining some of her own prior compositions. A notable example was her reinterpretation of the song *Morena Re Thuse*, which had originally been sung in Tshivenda. In this instance, she chose to perform it in Sotho, infusing it with a gospel-inspired message. This transformation of her earlier works illustrated Mawela's artistic evolution and her capacity to imbue her songs with renewed vitality and meaning.

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The bilingual approach within the album underscored Mawela's versatility as an artist and her ability to adapt her music to different cultural contexts, reflecting her commitment to connecting with a diverse audience while preserving the essence of her artistic expression. It was a testament to her enduring journey and her readiness to navigate the complexities of language and culture to reach her listeners with powerful messages and heartfelt melodies. Mawela's decision to incorporate different languages into her music, particularly Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho or the accessible languages by many as they are called, served as an effective strategy for disseminating her profound messages to a broader and more diverse audience. This approach allowed her to transcend linguistic boundaries and convey her spiritual and moral themes not only to her Venda community but also to a wider spectrum of listeners.

The gradual shift away from predominantly Venda songs was influenced by the broader musical landscape's preferences and a quest to connect with a more extensive demographic. A multitude of renowned gospel songs in South Africa find their melodic expression through the enchanting sounds of Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho languages. This is notably exemplified by the pervasive influence of the Joyous Celebration Group, a musical ensemble that has captured the hearts of many aficionados. With a significant following, this group has established a musical tapestry rich in cultural diversity, where the resonant hymns and soul-stirring melodies effortlessly transcend linguistic boundaries. The harmonious blend of Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho languages in their repertoire contributes to the widespread adoration and appreciation of their gospel compositions across diverse communities. This resulted in the album featuring only two Venda songs, namely *Khotsi Anga* and *Mme Anga Khotsi Anga*. The latter was a remix of one of her earlier compositions, addressing the deeply personal and universal theme of parental loss. In the second Tshivenda song, titled *Mme Anga Khotsi Anga*, Mawela shifts her focus to her biological parents. This marks a

departure from the overarching theme of the first song, *Khotsi Anga*, where the reference is to the heavenly father. In this way, Mawela managed to maintain a connection with her cultural heritage while expanding her reach and resonance by delving into themes that resonated universally. This strategic and artistic shift underscored her adaptability and the evolving dynamics of her musical expression. It was a demonstration of her commitment to conveying meaningful and heartfelt messages to a diverse audience, transcending the boundaries of language to connect with listeners on a profound and emotional level. As mentioned in a previous chapter, the strategy of blending languages, as presented earlier, can be a double-edged sword for artists. It introduces a potential challenge wherein listeners may find it difficult to seamlessly follow the artist's linguistic transitions.

In the initial phase of her recording career, Mawela confronted a prevailing industry trend that leaned toward songs primarily designed for the urban market and sung in specific languages. For music to find broader acceptance and success within this urban milieu, it was often perceived as imperative that the lyrics be delivered in either Zulu, Xhosa or Sotho, three languages that had achieved prominence within the urban music scene (Hamm 1991; Madalane 2014). Conversely, compositions rendered in Venda or Tsonga faced a unique categorisation and were frequently associated with what might be termed a 'niche Neo-traditional market' (Wells 1996; Coplan 2001; Kubik 1981). These genres, albeit deeply rooted in tradition and cultural heritage, were somewhat marginalised in comparison to their Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho counterparts, which had garnered a more mainstream appeal.

This distinction in the reception and categorisation of songs within the South African music landscape highlighted the complex interplay between linguistic preferences, cultural identity, and commercial viability. It underscored the challenges faced by artists like Mawela, who aimed to find a balance between honouring their cultural heritage and adapting their music to align with the prevailing market dynamics of the urban music scene. While there were artists recording in languages other than Zulu, Xhosa, or Sotho, their music often found itself categorised as representing what might be termed 'minority languages'. Coplan unequivocally asserts that minority languages are essentially overlooked, disregarded or neglected (Coplan 2001: 111). In the context of the South African music industry, where the urban market held significant sway, these minority language tracks often faced challenges in achieving widespread recognition and success. The prevailing perception was that for music to resonate with urban audiences, it had to

be delivered in one of the more prominent languages.

### **Tribal imbalances, commercial realities of linguistic and cultural diversity**

This dynamic underscored the intricate relationship between linguistic diversity and the commercial realities of the music industry. While South Africa is characterised by a rich diversity of languages and cultures, the notion of which music sells better in what language permeated across genres, affects the accessibility and reception of songs across linguistic lines. This challenge highlighted the need for artists to navigate not only the creative aspects of their music but also the complex dynamics of language and culture within the music market. The historical legacy of colonisation had a profound and enduring impact that reverberated strongly in the collective consciousness of people, not only within South Africa but also in many other African nations that experienced the yoke of colonial rule. One of the most palpable remnants of this legacy was the persistent issue of tribal imbalances and tensions (Baloyi 2018; Mlambo and Masuku 2023).

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These tribal imbalances were not a natural outgrowth of indigenous societies but were, in many instances, engineered by colonial powers. The colonial agenda often involved sowing discord and destabilisation among local communities. By fostering divisions and rivalries, the colonial authorities aimed to maintain their dominance and control over the regions they had colonised. The deliberate strategy of pitting different cultures and tribes against one another distracted the local populations from the real issue at hand – the presence of colonial oppressors. This diversion of attention and resources toward internal tribal conflicts weakened the collective unity and resistance of the indigenous peoples, thereby allowing the colonial powers to assert and perpetuate their dominance. The ramifications of this historical strategy persisted in the post-colonial era, contributing to ethnic and tribal tensions that, to varying degrees, continue to shape the social and political landscapes of many African nations. It serves as a stark reminder of the enduring impact of colonisation, which left behind complex legacies that continue to influence the dynamics of contemporary African societies (Mlambo and Masuku 2023).

The strategy of division and conquest, often referred to as ‘divide and conquer’, was a deliberate tactic employed by colonial powers. By fomenting internal divisions among local communities, these colonial forces sought to consolidate their control (Morrock 1973; Christopher 1988; Bethke 2012). This strategy operated on the premise that when indigenous populations were

preoccupied with internal conflicts, they were less likely to unite against their colonial rulers. It created a façade of innocence, whereby the colonial powers could manipulate and utilise local factions to perpetuate discord and maintain their authority. However, the repercussions of this divisive strategy were profound and enduring. The stigmas and divisions sown by colonial rule became deeply embedded in the social fabric and cultures of the affected populations. This not only disrupted traditional communal bonds but also fostered enduring animosities and rivalries among different ethnic and tribal groups. These divisions persisted long after the colonial era had ended, leading to ongoing inter-group tensions and conflicts, creating minority and majority Black ethnic groups (Mlambo and Masuku 2023).

The insidious nature of these stigmas, firmly rooted in the collective psyche, meant that undoing their damage required decades and even centuries of effort. The scars of colonialism ran deep, and the process of healing and reconciliation demanded a sustained commitment to bridging cultural gaps, fostering understanding, and building a more inclusive and united society. Colonial powers, in their quest to maintain control and dominance, implemented a calculated strategy that thrived on sowing hatred and divisions among the local populations. Their aim was to create an environment of destabilisation, where tensions and hostilities among different cultural and ethnic groups would be the prevailing norm. When a talented individual emerges from a minority ethnic group, regardless of their chosen music style, the existing divisions tend to automatically hinder their creative endeavours, despite the dedication they invest in their production. Mawela's decision to delve into gospel music was not exempt from these pre-existing divisions. Her struggle to establish a noteworthy reputation among the predominant Black ethnic languages, especially with her *mbaqanga* music style, underscored the challenges she faced in transcending musical and cultural boundaries.

To achieve this goal, the colonial authorities systematically allocated jobs, opportunities, positions, political roles, and various forms of authority based on a hierarchy of cultures. Those cultures that were either deemed superior or represented the majority among the Black community within the colonial territories were favoured and granted preferential access to these resources and positions. This divisive approach essentially institutionalised and legitimised the concept of cultural and ethnic privilege, perpetuating inequalities and disparities. This systemic bias was a fundamental element of colonial governance and power dynamics. It entrenched and deepened divisions within the local populations, creating a stark contrast between the favoured

and marginalised groups. The ramifications of this discriminatory system reverberated long after the colonial era, exacerbating the challenge of reconciliation and unity in the post-colonial world.

Even as individuals hailing from linguistic or cultural backgrounds often classified as ‘minority languages’ attempt to accommodate and assimilate with those who are less inclined to embrace diversity, they frequently find themselves grappling with the harsh reality that they are engaged in an uphill battle. The struggle to bridge these cultural divides and mediate differences can be an exhausting endeavour. As they navigate this complex terrain, individuals are often confronted with a stark choice: they must either choose to align with the dominant cultural norms or opt to disengage from the intricate politics surrounding majority and minority Black cultures. For many, this realisation is akin to recognising the futility of fighting against ingrained biases and preconceived notions. In such circumstances, individuals may opt to join the mainstream culture, adopting its language, customs, and practices, often as a means of achieving greater acceptance and avoiding conflict and then slowly find the strength to assert their own musical identity after they have established themselves. Alternatively, some might choose to disengage from the divisive politics that underscore majority-minority dynamics, perhaps seeking a more harmonious existence outside the contentious boundaries of these cultural distinctions. This decision point reflects the challenges faced by individuals from so-called minority languages as they navigate the intricate terrain of cultural identity within a broader societal context. It underscores the complex dynamics of cultural integration and adaptation and the personal choices made in response to the prevailing cultural politics.

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Irene Mawela’s upbringing was a stark contrast to the perception of a traditional country girl. Having grown up in a racially diverse environment, she was consistently cognisant of the prevailing politics that marginalised specific ethnic groups. Hailing from a historically marginalised ethnic group herself, she intimately understood the challenges associated with navigating and thriving within these complex social dynamics. Born in a township, her early life was marked by the stark realities of witnessing the harsh and often brutal treatment of Black people at the hands of colonial forces. Her formative years were intricately connected to the struggles, inequalities, and injustices that characterised the lives of her community members. However, while Mawela did not have the longstanding recognition and iconic status of celebrated gospel artists like Deborah Fraser or Rebecca Malope, who had established themselves as prominent figures in the industry over the span of decades, her musical journey was significant in its own right. She emerged from this



challenging background to make her own unique mark in the gospel music world, using her voice as a vessel to address spiritual and moral themes while confronting the social issues she had observed in her youth. Mawela's narrative serves as a testament to the capacity of individuals to rise above adversity and draw inspiration from their experiences to create a distinct and impactful artistic legacy, even if they may not have the same level of recognition as industry veterans. Her story is a reminder of the power of resilience, passion, and the creative spirit to shape one's unique journey in the world of music.

Mawela's decision to appear on a show hosted by someone of the calibre of Malope was primarily motivated by her desire to promote her gospel album, rather than engaging in any form of political posturing or attempting to exacerbate the dynamics of cultural majority-minority disputes. Her focus was resolutely on sharing her music, delivering her spiritual messages, and connecting with her audience through the universal language of song. One distinct advantage Mawela possessed was her remarkable linguistic versatility. She had the unique ability to converse and express herself fluently in numerous languages, and her accent, when she spoke these languages, rivalled that of native speakers. This linguistic skill proved to be a significant asset in her music career. Not only could she sing and perform in multiple languages with an authenticity that resonated with diverse audiences, but she also found opportunities as a backing vocalist, collaborating with various musicians across different genres. Mawela's remarkable linguistic skills expanded her reach, allowing her to connect with a wide spectrum of listeners and engage in the collaborative tapestry of South Africa's rich and diverse music scene. Her vocal talents and linguistic agility served as instrumental tools in establishing her presence and influence in the realm of music.

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The complex issue of cultural divisions in the apartheid era prompts a thought-provoking question: which came first, the chicken or the egg? This analogy encapsulates the intricate interplay of factors that characterised this era. Many of the behaviours and divisions that emerged were deeply ingrained in the government policies of separate development, commonly known as apartheid (Hamm 1991). This divisive approach was an integral component of government policy, intentionally engineered to establish a system of segregated governance and social structure (Bethke 2012). It effectively cultivated a climate of divided rule, with the aim of perpetuating racial and cultural divisions as a means of preserving the existing power dynamics. The government's deliberate policies created a self-reinforcing cycle where cultural, ethnic, and racial divisions were amplified and institutionalised (Mlambo and Masuku 2023). The apartheid system functioned as a

catalyst, setting into motion a series of actions and reactions that further entrenched the cultural divides. It created a paradoxical situation where the divisive government policies and the cultural divisions mutually reinforced one another, resulting in a deeply fractured and polarised society. This multifaceted dynamic underscores the complexity of the apartheid era and its enduring legacy in South Africa's history.

The approach of emphasising linguistic and cultural distinctions among Black communities was a calculated strategy employed to amplify differences, perpetuate stigmas, and establish hierarchies of superiority and inferiority between various cultures. This divisive tactic was not confined to the apartheid era but continues to manifest itself even in the contemporary post-democratic dispensation period. The deliberate emphasis on differences aimed to foster a sense of division and separation among these communities, effectively instilling a deep-seated sense of cultural hierarchy that lingers to this day. This enduring legacy of inequality and discrimination is a stark reminder of the historical divisions that have shaped South Africa's complex social landscape. One manifestation of this divisive strategy was the establishment of the old Bantu radio system, which served as a medium for propagating and reinforcing these cultural and linguistic divisions. This system reflected the broader governmental policies that sought to maintain social control by fragmenting and categorising communities based on their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The legacy of these policies and their far-reaching impact endures as a powerful reminder of the need for continued efforts to promote unity and reconciliation in post-apartheid South Africa (Hamm 1991).

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In truth, the policies and actions of the apartheid government were, in many ways, mechanisms for the reinforcement of existing prejudices and biases among the diverse racial and cultural groupings within South Africa. It's important to recognise that these prejudices and divisions did not originate with apartheid but were deeply ingrained in the nation's history, forged over centuries of inequality in a world where Black populations were subjected to the rule of White authorities. Apartheid, rather than creating these prejudices, sought to intensify and institutionalise them as a means of asserting and maintaining control. The system tapped into existing prejudices, using them as tools to further entrench the hierarchy of racial and cultural supremacy. This historical context underscores the deeply rooted nature of the prejudices that the apartheid government manipulated, perpetuating a cycle of discrimination and division that had been present long before the official implementation of apartheid policies.

South Africa has grappled with a multitude of challenges that reflect the shortcomings of government policies in safeguarding its citizens. These issues encompass a range of deeply concerning situations, including instances of xenophobia, the misappropriation of financial resources, citizen-led shop looting, and strikes that frequently escalate into acts of vandalism targeting public and private property (Mlambo and Masuku 2023). The nation's tumultuous cultural history underscores the complexity of its social and political landscape. Perspectives on South Africa's trajectory can vary significantly, often hinging on the vantage point from which one approaches the issue. This nation's narrative is marked by a profound blend of diverse cultural experiences, and as such, the understanding and interpretation of its challenges are deeply influenced by one's position within this intricate equation. In the late 2000s, the issue of cultural differences in South Africa took a troubling turn, marked by a surge in xenophobic attacks that seemed to erupt in numerous townships. These distressing incidents served as disturbing reminders of the nation's unresolved historical conflicts and the deep-seated tensions that still simmer beneath the surface.

The recurrence of such cultural tensions is often a stark indication of history left unresolved. Tragically, a sombre parallel can be drawn to the heart-wrenching pages of history, such as the Rwandan Genocide, a chilling chapter driven by racial animosity that resulted in the loss of countless lives. This harrowing reference serves as a cold reminder of the consequences of unchecked prejudice and division. In these moments of turmoil and strife, music can emerge as a powerful force for solace and unity. It assumes the role of a healing balm when political leaders falter in addressing the social challenges created by governance shortcomings at the highest levels. Music, with its ability to transcend boundaries and evoke shared emotions, becomes a source of comfort and connection during these trying times.

Mawela's gospel album, while financed by Allingham, was actually a collaborative production effort involving not only him but also Lucky Monama. This co-production project was facilitated through a small record label, which happened to be Monama's production company. This venture transpired during the later stages of Allingham's association with Gallo, marking a notable point in the convergence of multiple talents and resources in the music industry.

Identifying specific recordings in which Mawela lent her vocals as a backing singer can prove to be a challenging endeavour. As Allen aptly points out, it was rather uncommon for backing

musicians to receive formal acknowledgment on a record label or sleeve, or even to be informally noted on the master tape box (Allen 2007: 269). This lack of credit documentation implies that to discern Mawela's contributions on a particular track, one would either need to possess the ability to recognise her distinctive voice or rely on the information conveyed by those in the know, expressly informed that the backing vocalist on a given recording was indeed Irene Mawela. This unique characteristic of not receiving formal recognition in credits is one of the key factors that contribute to the complexity of counting and cataloguing Mawela's extensive collection of songs and music. In some instances, she mentions that she was either designated as a backing vocalist or potentially served as the creative mind behind a song's composition. Her musical credit extended to crafting melodic contours, yet she might not have been acknowledged as the official composer, particularly when someone else assumed the role of the lead singer. This dual role as both a versatile vocalist and a melody architect often saw her contributions hidden beneath the surface, making the assessment of her musical output a nuanced and intricate undertaking.

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When Mawela identifies herself as a composer, she alludes to her unique talent for crafting melodies that either guide the lyrics or serve as the central musical motif for a tune. During her studio sessions, the band frequently presented her with two common scenarios: they would either initiate a harmonic progression, prompting her to conjure a melody that harmonised seamlessly with it, or they would request her to return home and independently devise a melody for the composition. In this capacity, Mawela functioned as a vital creative force, channelling her musical ingenuity into shaping the sonic landscape of the songs she contributed to. On occasions, Mawela assumed the role of the melodic architect, conceiving the fundamental melodic contours that would serve as the cornerstone of a song. In response, the band would then embark on the creative journey of identifying a harmonious progression that could harmonise effectively with her established melody. This collaborative process typically constituted the essence of song composition, and it was within this context that she often received due credit as a composer. Her contributions as the originator of these melodies were paramount, shaping the composition and sound of the songs she had a hand in crafting. Some of Mawela's remarkable recordings are:

1982: *Khanani Yanga*

1983: *Mme Anga Khotsi Anga*

1983: *Hao Nkarabe*

2004: *O Mohau*

2007: *Tlhokomela Sera*

2012: Africa 5

2016: *Pembelani*

2017: *Ari Pembele: Let's Rejoice*

2019: The Best of the SABC Years (1982–88)

Irene Mawela's invaluable contributions to the music industry have regrettably not received the recognition they truly deserve. Even record companies that she significantly bolstered with her talents, such as EMI, Troubadour and Gallo, have seemingly overlooked her achievements. In the roster of prominent artists celebrated by Gallo, including luminaries like Lucky Dube, Dorothy Masuka, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Stimela, Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse, and Mango Groove, whose platinum achievements are prominently lauded, Mawela's name remains conspicuously absent. Her role in shaping the South African music scene and her role in creating musical legacies often go untrumpeted, underscoring the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive acknowledgment of her remarkable contributions.

Remarkably, not one of these illustrious artists has received the distinction of an honorary Ph.D. from any institution. While it may be argued that Mawela's contributions, when measured in terms of financial returns, may appear modest when compared to the top-selling artists, her prolific output surpasses that of many of these celebrated figures. Adding the proverbial cherry on top, Mawela was honoured with the highest order of recognition from the current President of South Africa, Cyril Matamela Ramaphosa – the prestigious Order of Ikhamanga in 2023. Her extensive body of work stands as a testament to her enduring commitment to the music industry and her role in creating a substantial musical legacy that merits a deeper appreciation and recognition. Although Irene Mawela may not have achieved platinum status and other coveted accolades, her journey through the music industry was laden with formidable challenges. Singing primarily in a language initially classified as a minority tongue, and dedicating a significant portion of her career to group performances rather than pursuing a solo path, she navigated a unique trajectory. Nevertheless, her indelible voiceprint is an omnipresent and influential presence within an extensive discography, resonating across the diverse spectrum of South African languages. Her contributions have significantly enriched the country's musical heritage, reflecting an enduring commitment to her craft and an unwavering passion for song.

A worrying concern that has arisen pertains to the rich and invaluable early music styles that emanated from the 1950s through to the late 1980s. Regrettably, these foundational sounds, which are brimming with cultural significance, have begun to fade from the forefront of the music industry's collective consciousness. This eclipse can be attributed, in part, to the emergence of a new youth revolution characterised by modern music styles profoundly influenced by American musical traditions (Ballantine 1989, 1999; Coplan 1985; Vokwana 2007). As these contemporary sounds take centre stage, the historical and artistic legacies of earlier South African music are in danger of being overlooked and undervalued. Currently, there seems to be a conspicuous absence of popular recognition and imagination regarding the existence and significance of South African music before the youth revolution that unfolded post-1994. This revolution brought forth a wave of innovative and influential musical styles that rapidly dominated the industry. In the wake of these dynamic and contemporary genres, the rich sound of South Africa's musical history, replete with its profound cultural value, appears to have been largely overshadowed and disregarded. The vibrant and diverse musical legacy that predated the post-1994 era is at risk of fading into relative obscurity, further emphasising the need to rekindle appreciation for the country's earlier musical contributions.

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Commencing in the early 1990s, the South African music landscape witnessed the emergence of fresh and evolving styles, notably exemplified by the rise of *kwaito*, house, hip-hop, afropop and dance music. Over the years, a kaleidoscope of musical genres has sprung forth, each having its moment in the spotlight before gradually making way for the next wave of innovation. This perpetual cycle has prompted a considerable number of listeners to revisit and reengage with older musical styles. The enduring appeal of these vintage genres lies in their enduring content, encapsulated through profound messages and intricate instrumentation, which continue to resonate deeply with audiences seeking musical substance and artistic depth. Contemporary modern music has experienced a marked influx of foreign influences, commanding a prominent presence within the sonic landscape. Commercial radio stations of considerable reach, including YFM, Metro FM, Radio 2000, FIVE FM, and numerous others, often grant precedence to this foreign-inspired youth-centric music, given its immense popularity and impact on sales. Genres such as hip-hop, R&B, blues, rap, and various other contemporary styles have notably found their origins and primary influences in the African-American musical tradition. As a result, these sounds have become dominant forces in shaping the modern musical identity, contributing to their immense commercial success and pervasive presence in the industry.

When inquiring about the influences and musical preferences of the contemporary generation, one observes a conspicuous absence of local artists in their responses. Instead, the majority of influences and listening choices tend to gravitate towards African-American music. This inclination is significantly driven by the pervasive dominance of African-American musical styles in the airplay landscape, particularly on commercial radio stations. Consequently, local artists and their works often find themselves overshadowed by the global resonance and commercial success of the international sounds that pervade the airwaves, influencing the listening habits and preferences of current music enthusiasts. Mawela's music holds a profound and enduring charm for those fortunate enough to have encountered it, as well as for those who have had the privilege of collaborating closely with her. The sentiment expressed by Rob Allingham resonates with many admirers when he affectionately states, 'I love Irene. I mean, I love her not only as a person, but I hold her in the same regard as one of the legendary vocalists of the past. It's genuinely disheartening that her remarkable talent isn't more widely acknowledged and celebrated.' (personal communication, Rob Allingham 2020). Her music, brimming with artistry and emotional resonance, leaves an indelible imprint on the hearts of all who embrace it, making the lack of broader recognition a lamentable oversight.

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### **Preserving the history of South African popular music: The Rob Allingham archives**

Allingham's deep-seated passion for collecting and archiving historical records led him to South Africa in the early 1980s. His infatuation extended not only to the enchanting world of steam trains but also to the rich tapestry of musical archives dating back to the 1980s. It was this unyielding fervour for preserving the sonic legacies of the past that ultimately brought him to the country's shores. Allingham's dedicated pursuits led to a fortuitous turn of events in 1990 when he was welcomed into the folds of Gallo company. It was here that his distinctive talents and fervent archival zeal found a professional outlet, as he was entrusted with the vital role of an archivist, preserving the musical treasures of South Africa's bygone eras (Allen 2007: 268). Upon joining Gallo, Allingham brought with him a vast and eclectic collection of recorded materials gleaned from a multitude of musicians and studios. His role within the company was twofold, donning the mantle of archivist and librarian, with a fervent dedication to the restoration and safeguarding of master tapes. His commitment to the revival and preservation of these archival treasures made him an indispensable asset within the realm of music history, as he embarked on the noble mission of breathing new life into the sonic chronicles of South Africa's musical heritage.

Additionally, Allingham harboured the vision that, as he progressed through life, he would be well-equipped to thoughtfully and meticulously restore these master tapes, ultimately rendering the music accessible once more to the public. In his eyes, this reservoir of music represented the zenith of South African musical excellence, a treasure trove of artistic brilliance that deserved to be rediscovered, cherished, and celebrated by generations old and new. His unwavering belief in the intrinsic value of this musical heritage spurred him on his mission to rekindle the magic encapsulated within these masterful recordings. His fervent dedication to the archiving project stems from a profound belief that the preservation of this vintage music necessitates nothing short of a meticulous and comprehensive effort. In his view, the archiving process is a task that demands unwavering precision and thoroughness. He firmly contends that any archiving attempts conducted today, if not executed with absolute precision, risk falling short of the essential standards of accuracy and completeness. For him, the integrity of these historical musical artefacts hinges upon the fidelity and rigor with which they are preserved, and half-hearted efforts may never be able to rectify any lapses in the future.

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One of the significant challenges that has, candidly, been impeding Allingham from embarking on the archiving project is the staggering magnitude of South African recordings that span across a multitude of diverse genres. This issue becomes particularly pronounced when delving into the extensive musical archives of the 1970s and 1980s. The sheer volume and diversity of these recordings have presented a formidable obstacle, requiring a comprehensive and methodical approach to ensure that no musical gem is overlooked or underappreciated during the archival process. Allingham confidently asserts that he possesses a keen insight into what has endured through the years, and he can state with unwavering certainty that among the countless records he has amassed, he is the sole custodian of this particular musical treasure trove. As a result, he is ardently eager to initiate the meticulous process of dubbing and preserving this unique collection. However, much like his initial financial challenge when he embarked on recording Mawela's gospel album, he is confronted by the formidable obstacle of limited resources. Financial constraints pose a significant impediment, hampering his noble pursuit of safeguarding these invaluable musical relics (personal communication, Rob Allingham 2020).

The crux of the matter invariably boils down to the indispensable requirement of financial resources to execute a comprehensive and meticulous archiving process. Specifically, Allingham finds himself in need of a substantial sum, totalling 400,000 Rand at the time of discussion



(2020), for the acquisition of a specialised piece of equipment known as a strain gauge cartridge. This extraordinary apparatus, which has served as an alternative to the conventional high-end cartridge employed for playing grooved discs since the early 1960s, operates on the innovative principle of a moving coil cartridge system. The acquisition of this critical piece of technology is essential to ensure the highest quality of archival preservation. The strain gauge cartridge represents a highly specialised piece of equipment, distinguished by its operation based on an entirely distinct principle. Unlike conventional systems, such as the moving coil cartridge, this strain gauge cartridge employs a unique approach. As the stylus navigates through the grooves of a record, the cartridge excels in the conversion of physical energy into electrical signals. This process culminates in the generation of a pristine analogue electrical signal, a pivotal aspect in the meticulous preservation of vintage musical recordings.

The strain gauge cartridge operates by minimising mechanical resistance and excelling in its tracking of the groove. This unique design enables it to capture a significantly richer and more precise audio signal, ensuring the faithful preservation of the original recording's depth and nuance. Allingham's ardent desire is to commence this archival endeavour without delay; if the necessary funds were at his disposal, he would embark on the task of meticulously dubbing these precious recordings and subsequently sharing them with a global audience through online platforms. He emphatically expresses, 'If I fail to execute this task with absolute precision now, it may never receive the meticulous attention it deserves.' This steadfast commitment to exactitude is a crucial factor influencing the pace of progress in this endeavour. Allingham, like many others who share his passion, recognises the paramount importance of unearthing and preserving the multitude of recordings that languish within storage, largely un-digitised and awaiting archival attention to make them accessible to the public (personal communication, Rob Allingham 2020).

Nevertheless, this noble pursuit is confronted by a series of formidable challenges, including the complex realm of copyright considerations and the perennial issue of securing the necessary financial resources. The vast majority of vintage recordings, originally preserved on gramophones, vinyl, LPs, and tapes, necessitate the utilisation of specialised technology for seamless transfer to a digital platform. One noteworthy predicament that arises is the formidable financial requirement associated with digitising these collections. Regrettably, many individuals who possess extensive archives of South African popular music find themselves unable to secure the essential funding for this crucial endeavour. In this context, the South African Music Rights Organisation (SAMRO)

often stands out as the primary choice when collection holders contemplate a suitable repository for their invaluable collections. SAMRO's established role in safeguarding the legacy of South African music renders it an appealing prospect for those seeking a home for their cherished musical archives.

Nonetheless, while SAMRO boasts the distinction of possessing the largest sheet music collection archive in South Africa, its existing infrastructure is often ill-equipped to accommodate collections of this particular nature (Netshivhambe 2018). The meticulous transfer of content from gramophones, vinyl records, LPs, and tapes to digital formats necessitates specialised equipment imbued with the precise technology required for this purpose. Furthermore, the exigencies of proper preservation mandate not only the correct technology but also the implementation of appropriate storage solutions to ensure the lasting integrity of these invaluable musical archives. In 2016, Allingham embarked on an initiative to engage with the SAMRO archive with the aim of negotiating a possible arrangement for hosting his collection. However, this endeavour encountered an insurmountable hurdle: the SAMRO archive, despite its commitment to safeguarding South African musical heritage, lacked the essential storage infrastructure to accommodate a collection of this magnitude. Moreover, the cost implications associated with acquiring the requisite equipment and resources to render the collection usable posed a significant challenge.

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Intriguingly, this underscores one of the challenging dilemmas that confronts Allingham – an individual who has devoted himself to preserving South Africa's musical legacy (Allen 2007). As the years pass, he is compelled to confront the inexorable march of time, and the pressing need to secure a suitable repository for his extensive collection from Gallo looms as an unresolved concern, leaving him in a race against time to safeguard this rich cultural heritage. The collection in question holds immense value, and countless musicians who have had the privilege of recording at Gallo would undoubtedly relish the opportunity to access and appreciate it. However, the overarching dilemma that impedes the effective preservation of such archives extends beyond mere funding constraints. A conspicuous challenge lies in the scarcity of specialised equipment specifically tailored for the preservation of these cherished musical artefacts, a resource that remains conspicuously lacking within South Africa. This scarcity further underscores the formidable task of ensuring that the nation's rich musical heritage is safeguarded for future generations. now as an independent archivist he is not able to archive all his ambitions of preserving the enormous records of South African music.

The apparatus required for the intricate process of transferring aging magnetic tapes, vinyl records, and LPs to a digital format is not only exorbitantly priced but also predominantly confined to foreign shores, such as the United Kingdom or the United States. This unavailability of essential equipment within South Africa exacerbates the formidable task of safeguarding the country's musical legacy. As astutely observed by Lara Allen (2007), the absence of an effective preservation mechanism for both recorded master tapes and published recordings perpetuates a crisis that incessantly threatens to erode South Africa's invaluable music heritage collection. The urgency of establishing comprehensive preservation protocols becomes all the more evident, as the risk of irrevocable loss looms large over these cultural treasures (Allen 2007: 264).

Allen's (2007) astute observation highlights a glaring void within South Africa's cultural landscape: the absence of a dedicated institution equipped with the requisite resources to undertake the vital mission of preserving recorded materials, encompassing both the audio and video formats. This deficiency stands as a poignant reminder of the pressing need for a concerted effort to address this gap, ensuring the safeguarding of the nation's rich artistic and historical treasures. Without such a dedicated institution, the irreplaceable legacy of South African music and other recorded materials remains vulnerable to the ravages of time and neglect. Lara Allen astutely recognises that the existing repositories, though limited in number, play a crucial role in the preservation of South Africa's cultural heritage. These institutions include the International Library of South Africa (ILAM), primarily known for hosting the esteemed Hugh Tracey collection and select field recordings from various researchers; the National Film, Video, and Sound Archive, which operates under the auspices of the National Archives and boasts a collection comprising both video and audio materials, albeit not exclusively focussed on Southern African content; and the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), which houses a collection of published recordings (Allen 2007: 264).

While these institutions are valuable custodians of historical and cultural assets, their resources and scope remain constrained. Hence, the need for concerted efforts to expand and bolster the nation's capacity for the preservation of its extensive and diverse recorded materials is increasingly apparent. This imperative is essential to safeguard South Africa's artistic and historical legacies for current and future generations. Lara Allen underscores that, while the government has initiated measures to promote the establishment of a single storage facility capable of accommodating various existing archives, there remain apprehensions among collection holders regarding

potential loss of control over their invaluable assets. This trepidation stems from concerns that the government's implementation of these measures may not fully align with the intended policy framework, raising uncertainties about the protection and management of their collections. This highlights the need for transparent and robust policies, as well as open dialogue between collection holders and government bodies to ensure the proper safeguarding of South Africa's rich cultural and historical heritage.

A significant challenge that has plagued many Black musicians is their limited access to their own historic recordings, which are stored in diverse archives that often do not grant the artists themselves the ability to retrieve their own music. This predicament has led numerous musicians to abandon their pursuit of regaining control over their own creative works, as these recordings are scattered across commercial recording institutions, including the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), the Gallo archives, and various personal archives. The artists' inability to reclaim their own artistic output is a poignant and frustrating issue that continues to underscore the need for reform in the music industry, ensuring that musicians have ownership and access to their own recorded legacies. The situation is further exacerbated by the stringent contractual policies artists have agreed to in the past. These agreements often preclude artists from accessing the master copies of their own music. Complicating matters, the recording institutions and archive custodians are keen on digitising these historical records and releasing them online, with profits generated from this digital presence, potentially leaving the artists with meagre or no compensation. This complex web of legal agreements and profit-driven archiving practices creates a challenging environment for artists who wish to regain control of their creative works, preserve their legacy, and reap the benefits of their own musical contributions.

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Many artists, including Mawela, are acutely aware that their vast body of work is scattered throughout archives, but they remain in the dark about the precise locations and custodians of these collections. For the most part, these artists have no say in how their own works are preserved, and they often lack information about the whereabouts of their recorded legacy. Fortunately, in Mawela's case, her close relationship with Allingham provided her with some solace, as he safeguarded numerous records from the Gallo archive, preventing them from falling into obscurity or being lost to time. Yet, it remains a formidable challenge for artists or the general public to access these collections. Individuals like Allingham, who've amassed substantial archives, often view them as potential profit centres and consequently withhold access for educational or informational

purposes. The primary focus on financial gain can lead to an unfortunate circumstance where valuable cultural and historical resources are locked away, preventing their wider dissemination and use.

Gaining access to the majority of Mawela's material collection proved to be an arduous and intricate task, primarily because a substantial portion of the information was dispersed across various digital platforms, with minimal hardcopy material available for reference. The decentralised nature of her archive, coupled with limited physical documentation, made the process significantly challenging. Furthermore, the scarcity of academic papers pertaining to Mawela's work compounded the difficulty of amassing material for preserving her legacy. Her music is scattered across multiple repositories, with certain recordings housed in the archives of institutions like the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and Gallo, while additional collections are safeguarded within the archive maintained by Allingham. This dispersed nature of her musical legacy further complicated the preservation efforts. Despite the dispersion of her music across multiple collections in Johannesburg, Mawela's renown extended far and wide. She garnered a slew of honorific titles, with some dubbing her the 'Queen of Tshivenda Music', others recognising her as a 'Veteran of *Mbaqanga* Music', and many hailing her as a 'Legendary South African Vocalist'. These various appellations serve to underscore Mawela's lasting legacy and her profound contribution to the evolution of popular Venda music.

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## Conclusion

Irene Mawela's music career is a testament to her incredible vocal talent and versatility. She made significant contributions to the South African music industry, particularly in the *mbaqanga* genre, as a lead singer and backing vocalist. Her ability to harmonise and adapt to various musical styles showcased her exceptional vocal range and adaptability. Mawela's journey took her from performing with various groups, such as The Mahotella Queens and The Sweet Sixteen, to solo projects, including a venture into gospel music. While her gospel album aimed to convey a profound spiritual message, it faced challenges due to limited marketing and strong competition in the gospel music scene. The legacy of Irene Mawela's music extends beyond her recognition as a talented vocalist. It raises important questions about the preservation of South Africa's rich musical heritage. Archivists like Rob Allingham play a crucial role in preserving historical recordings, but challenges related to funding and access persist. Mawela's experiences shed light

on the broader issues faced by musicians and archivists in South Africa, emphasising the need for better preservation and accessibility of the country's musical legacy. It is evident that while many artists may readily switch between musical styles to stay relevant or cater to prevailing trends, Mawela's foray into gospel music was driven by a profound personal connection to the gospel message. She believed that this genre allowed her to convey her spiritual message in a way that other styles couldn't. It was also an exploration of a new avenue to reach a different segment of the market. During her gospel music venture, she was signed to an independent recording label under Allingham's guidance, who saw potential in her talent in this genre. Unfortunately, the project didn't meet its expectations due to insufficient marketing efforts, and Mawela was already a well-established figure in the *mbaqanga* genre. The gospel music scene was dominated by other prominent figures, making it challenging for her to establish a significant presence in that style.

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## Chapter 6

### Honorary Ph.D. and Order of Ikhamanga

For numerous individuals who have made significant contributions in their specialised fields, being bestowed with an honorary Ph.D. stands as a validation that their impactful work is acknowledged and esteemed by others. Among them, in the music industry, there exist several Venda musicians who have dedicated themselves to championing Venda music, bridging its cultural essence to the broader South African populace and on a global scale. The Order of Ikhamanga stands as one of the highest honours in South Africa, recognising the remarkable achievements of South African citizens who have showcased exceptional competence in arts, culture, literature, music, journalism, or sports. To receive this esteemed award symbolises a pinnacle of accomplishment in an individual's life, signifying their unparalleled dedication and excellence in their respective field. In 2023, Mawela was granted this distinguished award, further solidifying her exceptional legacy, following her reception of an honorary Ph.D. in 2019 by the University of Pretoria. This dual recognition not only highlights her outstanding contributions but also underscores the profound impact she has made in her field, solidifying her as a paragon of excellence in the realm of her expertise.

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Within the realm of accomplished Venda musicians, only a select few have been honoured with prestigious recognitions like a Ph.D. degree or the Order of Ikhamanga. Despite many accolades and numerous nominations, the conferment of an honorary Ph.D. and the Order of Ikhamanga stands out as the most eminent acknowledgments within Mawela's impressive array of awards. These accolades represent not only the pinnacle of her career but also serve as a testament to her exceptional contributions, marking her as a trailblazer among her peers in the world of Venda music. The magnitude of Mawela's musical catalogue surpasses easy understanding, and what is contained within this book only represents a fraction of the extensive repertoire she has produced. It's imperative to acknowledge that the documented records provided here merely scratch the surface of her prolific contributions. Mawela's artistic endeavours include an abundance of compositions and writings far beyond the scope of what is captured or noted within these pages. Her musical legacy, vast and far-reaching, spans well beyond the boundaries of what can be encapsulated within any singular documentation.

Numerous Venda musicians have indelibly marked their legacy within the music industry, yet only a handful have ascended to the esteemed heights of official recognition by a university for their profound contributions. Regrettably, many of these talented individuals departed from this world without the acknowledgment they deserved. Among the select trailblazers, Dr. Roxley Fhatuwani Masevhe emerged as one of the pioneering Venda musicians to achieve an honorary doctorate, a feat accomplished in 2016. Following his ground breaking recognition, Dr. Colbert Rudzani Mukwevho similarly attained this distinguished honour in 2018, marking another significant milestone in the realm of Venda musicians honoured by academia for their outstanding musical contributions. In 2019, Dr. Irene Matodzi Mawela achieved a significant milestone as the third Venda musician to be honoured with an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Pretoria. The sequence of her recognition as the third recipient does not diminish the magnitude of her contributions in comparison to those acknowledged before her; rather, it indicates the order of acknowledgment. In fact, she started the music industry before all of the popular Venda musicians.

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Beyond this academic accolade, Mawela holds another distinction in the realm of honours. Second only to Mbulaeni Tongai Mulaudzi, the celebrated South African Venda middle-distance runner and 2009 world champion in the men's 800 metres, Mawela became the second individual of Venda heritage to receive the prestigious Order of Ikhamanga. What sets her accomplishment apart is that she stands as the first from the music sector to receive this esteemed order, a resounding testament to her unparalleled achievements in the field of music and her distinguished contribution to Venda culture.





**Figure 6.1 Irene Mawela receiving the Order of Ikhamanga at a special occasion hosted by the honourable President Cyril Matamela Ramaphosa in 2023.**

Being honoured with the Order of Ikhamanga stands as a pinnacle achievement, representing one of the most esteemed recognitions for an individual's significant contributions to both their nation and the global community. This distinguished award not only carries an aura of prestige but also serves as a profound testament to the recipient's stature, signifying them as a towering figure among their peers. In the realm of South African music, the exclusivity of the Order of Ikhamanga becomes even more apparent, underscoring the rarity and exceptional nature of such recognition. The receipt of the Order of Ikhamanga not only acknowledges the person's unparalleled contributions but also places them in a select league of individuals who have made indelible marks on the cultural landscape of South Africa and beyond. The honorary Ph.D. was yet another milestone in Mawela's musical career which marked a new chapter in her life and music journey.



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**Figure 6.2 Irene Matodzi Mawela was conferred with an honorary doctorate during the graduation ceremony at the University of Pretoria on 12 April 2019 at the age of 79.**

This momentous occasion marked a pinnacle in recognition of her outstanding contributions, as the university bestowed upon her the esteemed title in acknowledgment of her remarkable achievements and influence. Mawela experienced an overwhelming sense of astonishment when she received the unexpected call notifying her of the University of Pretoria's decision to bestow upon her an honorary Ph.D. The news caught her entirely off guard, surpassing any expectation she had ever entertained, even in her most imaginative reveries. To her, this unforeseen honour stood as an unequivocal seal of recognition, validating and affirming the magnitude of her remarkable contributions to the music industry. This unexpected acknowledgment not only left her astonished but also served as a profound validation of her tireless dedication and invaluable impact on the world of music.

The honorary Ph.D. not only served as a validation of her impactful contributions within the

music industry but also marked a personal triumph in the prolonged battle she had waged for decades. Her struggle was not merely for personal recognition but for the acknowledgment and appreciation of singing in the Venda language. The conferment of this prestigious honour brought profound solace to her core, instilling a deep sense of reassurance and fulfilment. In the quiet depths of her heart, this acknowledgment became a source of belief – believing that her legacy would endure and resonate even beyond her time in this world. It symbolised an assurance that her cultural advocacy and musical influence, especially in preserving the Venda language through song, would persist, ensuring her indelible mark on the musical and linguistic tapestry for generations to come.

Numerous bands, among them the Adziambei Band, have made substantial contributions to the evolution and enrichment of Tshivenda music. However, regrettably, collective entities such as bands often remain unrecognised compared to individuals who receive prestigious accolades like honorary Ph.D.s. Tragically, at the time of chronicling this book, the Adziambei Band had already experienced the loss of two of its esteemed members, which might have contributed to their lack of formal recognition. In stark contrast, Irene Mawela stands as a recipient of numerous awards bestowed upon her by various institutions and organisations, acknowledging her invaluable role as a significant force in the advancement of Tshivenda music, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Notably, Mawela's journey commenced in the music industry earlier than the majority of her Venda contemporaries, contributing to her rich and extensive legacy within the musical landscape. Her individual recognition and accolades stand in contrast to the collective efforts of bands like Adziambei, highlighting the disparity in acknowledgment between individual artists and group ensembles within the industry.

In 2019, Mawela's longstanding commitment to promoting Venda language singing and her exceptional contributions to the music industry reached a pinnacle when she was bestowed with a well-deserved Ph.D. from the University of Pretoria. This honour not only validated her relentless struggle for the acknowledgment of Venda language in music but also served as an institutional seal affirming her significant impact on the music scene. The university's recognition represented more than a mere accolade; it stood as a robust testament, reinforcing the necessity for comprehensive documentation of Mawela's invaluable contributions. This acknowledgement not only solidified her legacy but also underscored the imperative need to properly document her substantial role in promoting and preserving the Venda language within the musical landscape.

The conferral of the Ph.D. was a watershed moment, substantiating the depth and importance of Irene's cultural advocacy and musical influence.

Earning an honorary doctorate is an arduous achievement for many musicians, considering the stringent selection process universities undertake. The conferral of each honorary doctorate hinges on a rigorous evaluation based on the substantial merits and exceptional contributions made by the recipient. It's not merely an honour bestowed lightly; rather, it reflects a profound acknowledgment of an individual's remarkable impact and distinguished accomplishments within their field. The stringent criteria and the rigorous evaluation process involved underscore the significance and prestige associated with such an honorary degree. Irene Mawela experienced a profound sense of astonishment upon receiving an honorary degree from the esteemed University of Pretoria. This unexpected recognition served as a moving affirmation, signalling to her that her contributions held significant educational value, having gained recognition from a prestigious institution of higher learning. This chapter is dedicated to dissecting and illuminating the profound special merits associated with Irene Mawela's honorary doctorate, a testament to her invaluable contributions to the realm of music and cultural preservation including her Order of Ikhamanga award. The significance of this honorary degree not only celebrates Mawela's personal achievements but also underscores the educational worth and societal importance of her impactful legacy within the broader context of cultural preservation and musical excellence.

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A comprehensive examination of Mawela's impactful contributions to the South African music industry demands a reflection on some of her most illustrious achievements, notably her reception two special awards that are the Order of Ikhamanga and an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Pretoria in 2019. Among the myriad accomplishments nestled within her illustrious career, Mawela stands as one of South Africa's most revered singers and accomplished songwriters in the domain of Tshivenda music. Her accolades and honours form a constellation of recognition, a testament to her unparalleled excellence, with numerous awards adorning her career's expansive timeline. As a distinguished figure in the realm of Tshivenda music, her name resonates among the luminaries, embellished with accolades and acknowledgments that underscore her exceptional talent and enduring impact within the industry. Mawela embodied a multifaceted musical identity, defining herself as a composer, adept arranger, versatile backing vocalist, and a standout lead singer, cementing her status as a notable musical figure. Her extraordinary gift as a composer and lyricist has birthed some of the most enduring and cherished *mbaqanga* songs witnessed over the last few decades. Her creative expertise transcends linguistic boundaries, eloquently crafting

unforgettable melodies not solely within the Tshivenda language but across the rich tapestry of South African languages. Mawela's music traverses time, showcasing an illustrious career that spans over seven decades, a testament to her enduring influence and remarkable impact on the South African musical landscape. Her extensive career not only underscores her versatility but also stands as a testament to her unparalleled dedication and artistry in the realm of music.

Mawela's music has endured across a significant expanse of time, weathering through the ebbs and flows of various music styles that have risen and fallen. In an era marked by the ascendancy and subsequent decline of music styles like *marabi*, bebop jazz, *simanje-manje*, *kwela* and many others, Mawela's music maintained a magnetic appeal that transcended the tides of changing musical trends. During the emergence and dominance of these diverse and popular styles, Mawela's music retained an enduring allure, persisting as a captivating force that resonated beyond the confines of a particular trend or fashion. Her ability to remain not only relevant but also captivating across these stylistic shifts stands as a testament to her musical versatility, adaptability, and the timeless quality of her artistry. Mawela's music didn't just survive; it thrived, weaving its way through an ever-evolving musical landscape while retaining an undiminished charm and appeal. Mawela's musical journey starting from 1957 and actually taking flight during the vibrant 1980s when she started to sing in her Tshivenda language, an era when the *mbaqanga* music style reigned supreme in the South African musical landscape, her music kept her audience dancing and longing for more.

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The prevalent dominance of *mbaqanga* within the industry inevitably led to the classification of her music under this distinct genre. While Mawela herself did not adhere to a specific label for her musical expression, she naturally embraced the classification of her work under the umbrella of *mbaqanga*, recognising its aptness in capturing the essence of her sound. This classification was not a limitation but rather an acknowledgment of the prevailing musical milieu, where the *mbaqanga* style served as an emblematic representation of her artistic creations during that era. even though this style was associated with Zulu musicians Mawela continued to assert her own Venda identity through this music style (Titus 2013; Coplan 2007; Meintjes 2003; Madalane 2014). The *mbaqanga* style, while embraced by Mawela, was a musical distinction that subsequent Venda musicians often avoided associating with due to its cultural connotations. The style was symbolic, primarily recognised for its unique approach to playing the guitar – a method deeply entrenched in Zulu musical traditions (Titus 2013; Meintjes 2003). This particular guitar style, emblematic of the *mbaqanga* genre, carried a distinct association with Zulu music, a cultural tie that some Venda

musicians sought to distance themselves from as they crafted their own musical identities. The symbolic significance of the guitar playing style, with its roots embedded in Zulu musical heritage, became a defining factor that subsequent Venda musicians deliberately veered away from, as they sought to carve out their own unique musical pathways apart from this historical association.

The Adziambei Band, comprising four closely related members, including many other popular Venda musicians shared a common experience of the migrant lifestyle, having journeyed to Johannesburg. Their collective experience, coupled with a deliberate musical direction, led them to a distinct decision early on in their musical journey: to consciously dissociate their musical expression from the *mbaqanga* style. Despite the cultural significance and prevalence of *mbaqanga* music within the South African musical fabric, the members of the Adziambei Band deliberately opted against aligning their sound with this particular genre. Their intentional divergence from the *mbaqanga* style served as a testament to their determination to forge a unique musical identity, diverging from the prevailing norms and embracing a path that reflected their own artistic inclinations and individuality.

176 Mawela stood apart from numerous Venda musicians who migrated to Johannesburg in the wake of the 1980s, an era that saw the rise and recognition of Venda music under distinct labels. What set her apart was her early integration into the urban lifestyle of Johannesburg and its surrounding townships. This distinction stemmed from the fact that she was born and raised in these urban environs, setting her apart from the wave of Venda musicians who arrived in the city during the peak of Venda music's recognition. Her familiarity with the urban landscape and its cultural nuances granted her a different perspective, having already acclimated to the city's rhythms and ethos from an early stage of her life. This unique upbringing and immersion in the urban milieu set her apart from the influx of Venda musicians who arrived later, contributing to her distinctive approach to music and life in Johannesburg. What set Mawela apart from her contemporaries among the prominent Venda musicians was her distinct advantage in language acquisition. Unlike many who arrived in Johannesburg as adults and had to grapple with learning the prevalent urban languages, Mawela had already immersed herself in these languages from an early age. This early exposure allowed her to effortlessly incorporate urban languages into her musical expression, making it second nature for her. In contrast, musicians who migrated to Johannesburg later in life often found themselves dedicating substantial time to mastering dominant languages to survive and make ends meet, thereby potentially delaying the promotion of their music.

Mawela's linguistic proficiency not only expedited her integration into the diverse linguistic landscape of music recording but also positioned her uniquely in the industry. While many Venda musicians of her time were confronted with the prevailing preference for *mbaqanga* music, Mawela strategically aligned herself with the *mbaqanga* music style instead of *muzika wa sialala* with which most popular Venda musicians aligned themselves. This deliberate choice not only showcased her artistic independence but also contributed to carving out her niche in a rapidly evolving musical landscape while singing in her language even though she would every now and then mix with other dominant languages. This also further distinguished her from her peers in the vibrant realm of Venda popular music (Kruger 2006; Netshivhambe 2023). Her remarkable proficiency in various languages and mastery of different accents lent her music a distinct quality, transcending the typical regional delineations of Venda, Sotho, or Zulu linguistic characteristics. The fusion of these linguistic nuances in her music created a sound that defied easy categorisation within any singular cultural or linguistic boundary. Recognising the evolving music landscape in South Africa, Irene realised her career was taking shape within the vibrant ambiance of *mbaqanga* music, a thriving and influential style within the country. This realisation proved pivotal as it offered her a platform in a musical genre that was gaining widespread popularity. The resilient trend of *mbaqanga* provided an accessible and recognisable avenue for her music to garner attention and visibility in a musical milieu that was increasingly becoming the pulse of South African music culture. Embracing the *mbaqanga* style provided an effective conduit for her music to gain notice and foothold within a style that was rapidly establishing itself as a prominent force in the country's musical landscape.

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Numerous prominent musical ensembles and widely recognised South African artists had already forged a strong affiliation with the *mbaqanga* music style, solidifying their presence both domestically and internationally through frequent overseas tours. Distinguished musical acts, including the Mahotella Queens, Ezintombi zesi Manje-Manje, Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, Dark City Sisters, and a host of Zulu-oriented musicians, seamlessly integrated the rhythmic and melodic elements of *mbaqanga* into their repertoire. The allure of *mbaqanga*, characterised by its distinctive fusion of traditional Zulu rhythms with modern influences, resonated not only with local audiences but also captivated global listeners. As these musical maestros embraced the genre, their artistry became a powerful cultural export, earning them widespread acclaim on the international stage. The Mahotella Queens, in particular, emerged as trailblazers, transcending geographical boundaries and becoming synonymous with the

infectious sounds of *mbaqanga* on a global scale. In the dynamic landscape of South African music, the prevalence of *mbaqanga* among these iconic acts not only contributed to the genre's enduring popularity but also underscored its role as a cultural ambassador, fostering cross-cultural exchanges and appreciation for the rich musical tapestry of the nation (Meintjes 2003; Coplan 2001; Titus 2013).

178 Although Mawela was acclaimed as the trailblazer – the inaugural figure in the promotion of popular Venda music – and held the distinction of being the first *mbaqanga* artist to secure a record deal with a commercial label for Venda songs, she remained resolute and undeterred in her pursuit for the liberty to sing in her native language. Her recognition as the 'first lady' of popular Venda music and her ground breaking contract in the realm of *mbaqanga* didn't sway her from her unwavering commitment. Despite the recognition and success, she tenaciously adhered to her mission: the preservation and elevation of her cultural heritage through singing in her own language. This unyielding dedication to retaining her linguistic identity stood as a testament to her profound commitment to preserving Venda culture and ensuring the prominence of her language within the musical landscape, defying any pressures to forsake her heritage in pursuit of commercial success. During an era when Black popular music predominantly circulated through limited avenues such as airplay on what was then known as Radio Bantu and through the distribution of LPs or 45s, Mawela persistently challenged the constraints and restrictions placed on artists. She tirelessly pushed against these boundaries, steadfastly advocating for the freedom to express herself fully in her native language (Hamm 1991).

Despite the prevalent norms that limited singers to certain languages or formats, Mawela tenaciously continued to press forward. Her relentless efforts and unwavering determination ultimately led to a significant breakthrough: the opportunity to record and release an entire album in her own language. This triumph marked a pivotal moment, signifying her success in navigating through the established industry barriers and realising her aspiration to present her music in its true cultural and linguistic essence. Mawela's persistence and perseverance were instrumental in reshaping the landscape of musical expression, clearing a path for artists to authentically represent their heritage and linguistic identity. After arduous efforts, Mawela successfully conveyed to the studio executives that singing in Venda held substantial market potential. However, despite this breakthrough, she faced a lingering limitation: she was only granted the allowance to sing a mere



single song or occasionally two, in an album. This constraint persisted until she could secure the coveted permission to release an entire album sung entirely in the Venda language; this became a realisation in 1982.

The studio's conditional approval marked a significant step forward, acknowledging the commercial viability of Venda music. Yet, the restrictive clause remained, compelling Mawela to persist in her endeavour for the coveted opportunity to express her artistry and cultural heritage in a comprehensive and cohesive manner. Mawela's ground breaking decision to record a full album in Tshivenda at Gallo Records had a profound ripple effect on the South African music landscape, sparking a surge of enthusiasm among aspiring Venda musicians eager to showcase their craft in their native language. This pioneering move not only broke new ground for linguistic diversity in commercial recordings but also acted as a catalyst for a wave of Venda artists seeking to professionally record their music. In the wake of Mawela's Tshivenda album, a steady stream of talented Venda musicians flocked to Gallo Records, aspiring to emulate her success and present their cultural expressions through music. Recognising Mawela's expertise, these emerging artists sought her guidance, resulting in her being inundated with requests for assistance. Many of these musicians sought not only her vocal skill but also her invaluable input in crafting arrangements that resonated commercially while staying true to the authenticity of their Tshivenda musical heritage.

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Mawela thus found herself assuming a pivotal role as a mentor and collaborator, providing backing vocals and lending her expertise to ensure that the musical endeavours of these emerging talents met the standards of commercial appeal. This symbiotic relationship not only reinforced Mawela's influence but also marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of Venda music within the broader South African music industry. This prolonged journey toward securing the liberty to produce a full album in Venda encapsulated Mawela's unwavering dedication and the arduous struggle she underwent to establish a platform for her music, all while contending with industry norms and limitations. Her unwavering pursuit of this goal stood as a testament to her commitment to preserving and showcasing the richness of Venda language and culture in the musical landscape. This restriction had adverse repercussions on Mawela's musical career in Johannesburg, particularly in comparison to other *mbaqanga* musicians predominantly singing in Zulu. Unlike her contemporaries, she faced limited recognition beyond the scope of the Black urban communities.

The constraint of only being allowed to sing a minimal number of songs in Venda before she could sing a complete album posed a significant challenge. As her peers predominantly embraced Zulu in their music, enjoying wider recognition and appeal, Mawela's allegiance to Venda became a barrier in expanding her reach beyond specific urban enclaves. The distinctiveness of her cultural choice, while deeply authentic and meaningful to her, unfortunately limited her prominence and visibility within broader South African music circles. This limited exposure outside urban Black communities stands as a testament to the challenges she faced in reconciling her dedication to Venda culture with the prevailing industry dynamics and preferences, which significantly impacted her reach and recognition. Mawela quickly discerned that her primary audience comprised Venda music enthusiasts, including those open to appreciating music regardless of language barriers. Within the studio, she collaborated with adept band members, most of whom had prior engagements playing for respected bands – frequently immersed in the *mbaqanga* style of music. Consequently, her music naturally acquired a distinct *mbaqanga* vibe due to the collective musical backgrounds and stylistic inclinations of the skilled musicians she collaborated with. This amalgamation of talents and influences inherently infused her music with the essence of *mbaqanga*, aligning with the prevalent style attributed to the collective experience and expertise of the musicians involved.

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Mawela's enduring spirit, unwavering perseverance, and remarkable resilience defined her illustrious music career. Her tenacity, coupled with a relentless commitment to persist until achieving victory, became hallmark qualities that set her apart in the competitive realm of South African music. It was this steadfast attitude that not only propelled her to remarkable heights but also endeared her to a generation of emerging Venda musicians. Mawela's willingness to extend a helping hand to fellow Venda artists seeking recognition and success further distinguished her in the industry. Beyond her own artistic pursuits, she dedicated herself to nurturing and supporting the aspirations of new talents to this day, contributing significantly to the flourishing Venda music scene. Her mentorship and collaborative efforts with emerging artists reflected a generosity of spirit that went beyond personal achievements. These exceptional qualities did not go unnoticed, ultimately earning Mawela prestigious accolades such as the Order of Ikhamanga. This esteemed recognition was a testament to her indomitable spirit, exceptional contributions to the cultural landscape, and her role as a guiding force for the next generation of musicians. Additionally, her receipt of an honorary Ph.D. underscored the profound impact she had on the music industry, solidifying her legacy as a trailblazer and mentor whose influence extended far beyond her own artistic achievements.

Mawela's music enjoyed wide popularity across diverse cultural groups, especially the songs sung in languages beyond Venda. Her collaborations with numerous bands and musicians played a pivotal role in this cross-cultural appeal. Her songs in Tshivenda resonated strongly within the Venda community and even resonated with some Sotho individuals due to frequent airplay on stations such as the former Radio Venda and the longstanding Radio Lesotho. The beauty of Mawela's musical cross-pollination lay in her extensive collaborations. Working with a variety of bands and musicians allowed her music to transcend cultural boundaries. This multifaceted approach not only resonated within the Venda community but also garnered recognition and appreciation among Sotho listeners, courtesy of consistent airplay on influential radio stations. Mawela's music acted as a bridge between cultures, enriching the musical experiences of different communities through the powerful medium of radio programming. This widespread exposure significantly contributed to her music's acceptance and popularity among diverse cultural groups.

Mawela's repertoire extended beyond Tshivenda, encompassing songs in Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa, and numerous other languages, she has more than 1000 songs recorded under her name. These multilingual songs enjoyed widespread recognition particularly in Johannesburg, expanding her reach beyond the confines of the Venda community. However, her use of various stage names, as instructed by studio executives to conceal her true identity, inadvertently contributed to a degree of obscurity in her public recognition. The versatile multilingual nature of her music enabled her to capture the attention of diverse audiences in Johannesburg and beyond. However, the use of different stage names imposed upon her by studio management, although intended to cater to a wider audience, inadvertently obscured her true identity. This enforced anonymity curtailed the broader public's awareness of her true persona and hindered the acknowledgment she rightly deserved for her diverse musical contributions. Despite her expansive reach through multilingual music, the veiling of her true identity under different names inadvertently restricted her widespread recognition and appreciation.

When Mawela resolved to uphold her artistic integrity and sing in her native language, she made a firm decision to use her real name, discarding the array of stage names she was previously compelled to adopt. However, the transition back to her real name posed a challenge for those who were familiar with her under aliases such as Irene Nhlapo or Sarah Ngwenya. As Irene Mawela, her return to singing in Venda caused a discontinuity in her fan base, making it difficult for existing followers to track and connect with her music. This shift from stage names to her real identity symbolised her unwavering commitment to singing authentically in her native language. However, it inadvertently created a disconnect among her existing audience, making

it challenging for those who knew her by previous names to follow her artistic journey. This transition highlighted the complexities artists face in balancing their artistic authenticity with the necessity of maintaining a consistent and recognisable identity in the music industry.

Alongside her solo endeavours, Mawela significantly contributed as a member of several prominent bands from the 1960s to the 1980s. Her multifaceted involvement included collaborations with illustrious groups like the Dark City Sisters, the Telegram Specials, Izintombi Zomoya, and the Mahotella Queens. Within these collective musical ensembles, she passionately lent her voice to songs performed in various South African vernaculars, including Zulu and Sotho. Embracing a dynamic and diverse musical career, Mawela's participation in these iconic bands underscored her versatility and adaptability across different South African languages and musical styles. Her invaluable contributions to these groups not only showcased her vocal talent and adaptability but also represented a significant chapter in the rich sound world of South African music history. This collaboration allowed her to explore and express her artistry in multiple vernaculars, enriching her musical repertoire and leaving an indelible mark in the diverse soundscape of South African music.

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Mawela's recognition with the Order of Ikhamanga and the conferment of an honorary Ph.D. was not solely a tribute to her resilience and endurance, although these qualities were undoubtedly integral to her success. Equally noteworthy was her extensive collaborative endeavours, spanning over four decades, and her invaluable role as a backing vocalist for numerous musicians. These aspects added layers of distinction to her multifaceted and enduring music career. Mawela's collaborative spirit shone through as she seamlessly intertwined her musical ability with a diverse array of artists. Whether through harmonious collaborations or providing backing vocals, she became an indispensable force, contributing to the sonic heritage of countless musical compositions. Her versatility as a collaborator not only showcased her adaptability across genres but also highlighted her ability to enhance the work of fellow musicians. Being a backing vocalist for over four decades underscored Mawela's sustained impact and enduring relevance in the dynamic landscape of South African music. Her ability to lend her vocal artistry to the creations of others not only demonstrated her generosity within the artistic community but also served as a testament to her enduring commitment to the craft. In essence, it was this collaborative spirit and musical camaraderie that further solidified Mawela's deserving place among the distinguished

recipients of the Order of Ikhamanga and her receipt of an honorary Ph.D., marking her as a luminary figure with a rich and multifaceted musical legacy.

Within these musical groups that she collaborated with, Mawela often assumed the mantle of the lead singer, contributing her vocal competence and skill. However, her identity during these collaborative ventures was consistently under the pseudonyms Irene Nhlapo or Sarah Ngwenya. Despite this, a significant juncture in her journey materialised when she spearheaded 'Irene and the Sweet Melodians'. This leadership role marked a significant pinnacle in her career, signifying her ascendancy and recognition within the musical landscape, with her name now front and centre in the title of the ensemble. This leadership position showcased her growing prominence and her increasing influence as a musical figure in the industry.

During this phase of her career with Irene and the Sweet Melodians, Mawela gained considerable recognition, particularly for hits like *Phelaviki* and *Nqonqo*. Despite the array of musical accomplishments, her true passion resided in singing in her native language, Tshivenda. It was only during the 1980s that she unveiled what would be revered as her signature tunes – *Nditsheni Ndi Digede* and *Mme Anga Khotsi Anga* while using her real name Irene Mawela as her stage name. These tracks epitomised her musical journey, showcasing her profound connection to her cultural roots and cementing her legacy as an influential figure in Tshivenda music.

Irene Mawela shared creative ventures with numerous artists, either as a collaborator or co-composer throughout her career. In 1988, she was featured in a local film titled *The Rain Queen*, where she appeared alongside established *mbaqanga* vocalists like Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Lynette Leeuw, and Hilda Tloubatla. This film was a heartfelt tribute to the Modjaji (Rain Queen) of Balobedu. During the film, Mawela showcased her enduring Sotho hit *Hao Nkarabe*, a song that still resonates deeply with her admirers. Her performance in the film not only highlighted her musical talent but also served as a platform for the rejuvenation of her beloved Sotho composition. This act of recognition extended beyond the cinematic realm as she was later reciprocally honoured by Queen Mokohe Modjaji, the reigning Rain Queen. This collaboration not only illuminated Mawela's musical versatility but also underscored her cultural significance and the profound impact of her music, further solidifying her legacy as an esteemed figure in South African music.

## **Battling for Tshivenda recognition: Mawela's triumph and ongoing struggle for media recognition**

For Mawela, the pursuit of singing in her native Tshivenda language and having it recognised within the domain of established recording studios marked a personal triumph after an arduous 23-year struggle. This milestone victory was realised when she initiated her journey in the 1980s. However, as significant as this achievement was, it represented only the first phase of a larger battle that lay ahead. The subsequent challenge – securing recognition for Tshivenda-language music across all South African radio stations and within the realm of prestigious award ceremonies – loomed as an immense endeavour. Mawela acknowledged the daunting scale of this second phase, recognising that the battle extended far beyond her individual efforts and influence. Mawela swiftly recognised a significant triumph in her musical journey – the hard-fought battle for the acknowledgment and acceptance of singing in the Tshivenda language. This achievement marked a pivotal moment, signifying that the persistent efforts she dedicated throughout her music career to elevate her native language had borne fruit. With the successful penetration of Tshivenda into the musical mainstream, Mawela found solace in knowing that this aspect of her struggle had reached a fulfilling conclusion.

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Moreover, she foresaw a promising shift in the landscape, understanding that the ongoing challenges she faced, such as securing equitable competition for Tshivenda-language music on various Bantu and commercial radio stations and attaining nominations in prestigious music awards, were poised to be taken up by the emerging generation of vibrant and talented Venda musicians. Mawela, having paved the way with her linguistic contributions, embraced the notion that the baton of advocacy and representation in the music industry would be passed on to these young trailblazers. This foresight not only acknowledged the progress achieved but also cast an optimistic gaze towards the future, envisioning a musical landscape where the linguistic diversity she championed would continue to thrive through the efforts of the upcoming musical talents from the Venda community.

While she had successfully navigated the initial obstacle, this new frontier presented a formidable obstacle that extended beyond her personal control. It was a collective challenge that required the industry's recognition and a shift in broader societal attitudes toward indigenous language music, a feat that transcended her individual capabilities (Wa Thiong'o 1986). Despite the considerable

strides made in establishing Tshivenda-language music within recording studios, the struggle for its broader acceptance and acknowledgment across the national radio and awards landscape remained a larger, systemic challenge that she felt she couldn't surmount single-handedly. Her acknowledgement of this limitation reflected the complexities inherent in transforming industry and societal perspectives, underscoring the need for collective efforts beyond her individual endeavour.

Mawela harboured a profound sense of optimism, believing that the torch she carried in advocating for Tshivenda music's recognition within prominent recording studios was a baton she could pass on to the generations that followed. She envisioned these musicians continuing the struggle for wider acceptance and recognition of their indigenous music within the industry. For Mawela, her battleground for change was centred primarily within the confines of the recording studios, because this is the place she spent a considerable amount of her youth and adult time. It was in these spaces that she wielded her influence and engaged directly with decision-makers. Her continuous presence and involvement in the studios allowed her to relentlessly advocate for the inclusion of Venda music and this is where her contribution became unmatched. It was in this domain that she dedicated much of her life, recognising it as the key arena where she could drive substantial change. With her perseverance and unwavering dedication, she had laid the groundwork and initiated a pivotal transformation, opening doors for the recognition of Venda music within the studio spaces. She firmly believed that the musicians who followed her would carry forward this fight and expand the scope of acceptance for indigenous music, ultimately altering the industry's landscape and paving the way for wider acknowledgment on a broader societal scale. Her confidence in the musicians to carry the mantle forward spoke to her enduring commitment to fostering change and acceptance within the music industry.

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The second phase of her struggle, aimed at securing acknowledgment for Tshivenda music on radio stations and within prestigious award ceremonies, stood as a formidable challenge beyond Mawela's direct influence. Her lack of direct access to music programmers across diverse radio stations and her absence of personal connections with the inner circles of award organisations rendered this battle more complex for her. The realms of radio programming and award nominations, she realised, were highly competitive spaces tightly controlled by a select few elites who still did not see Tshivenda music as gold. The processes dictating whose music gets airtime or nominations were not merely about talent but were intricately woven into a web of politics

and influence (Andersson 1981). As Anderson (1981) aptly notes, the entire process is steeped in politicisation, rife with power struggles and decisions often governed by a select, influential few. Mawela recognised that this was not her battle to fight and these spaces were beyond her immediate reach and personal control. The mechanisms determining which music gets spotlighted on radio stations and receives nominations at prestigious award ceremonies were cloaked in a complex web of power dynamics and influence. Her understanding of these entrenched systems highlighted the systemic challenges facing indigenous language music, challenges that extended far beyond her individual sphere of influence.

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The apartheid system, entrenched in South Africa, had laid out a predetermined path for the treatment of minority languages. This was executed through the implementation of separate development policies, which systematically marginalised certain ethnic groups based on their smaller populations. The discriminatory policies were underpinned by a prejudiced perspective that viewed these minority languages as inconsequential in the economic landscape, lacking the perceived potential for significant financial contributions. The apartheid regime, with its insidious policies, exacerbated the socio-linguistic disparities, relegating minority languages to the peripheries of societal consideration. This exclusionary approach not only undermined the cultural richness inherent in these languages but also perpetuated a harmful cycle of neglect, wherein the economic viability of a language became the yardstick for its recognition and sustenance within the system. In essence, the apartheid regime's separation policies not only aimed to isolate certain ethnic groups but also strategically devalued their languages by associating economic worth with linguistic prominence. This intersection of language, ethnicity, and economic considerations within the apartheid framework underscores the systemic injustices and challenges faced by minority languages in the quest for equitable treatment and recognition. While Mawela had made significant inroads in recording studios, the broader battle for recognition within these larger platforms posed a more complex, systemic challenge – one that required not just individual effort but a collective push for industry-wide change.

In the context of song programming across diverse radio stations, the observations of Anderson (1981) shed light on an industry riddled with challenges. Her assessment reveals an unsettling truth: in many cases, the positioning of songs on playlists isn't solely determined by their merit or quality. Instead, a concerning trend exists where certain individuals or artists resort to paying or



engaging in clandestine arrangements to secure a prominent spot on these playlists. Andersson (1981) highlights the pervasive issue of political influence in the selection of songs played on radio stations, recognising it as a global challenge that extends beyond being just a problem but a plague of some sort within the music industry. The acknowledgment of this problem underscores its widespread impact on numerous radio outlets globally. Anderson's insight underscores a disconcerting reality, indicating that achieving placement atop these playlists is often not solely about musical excellence. Instead, it involves a system where financial transactions or dubious 'handshakes' hold sway, potentially influencing the visibility and exposure of songs on radio. This practice deviates from a merit-based approach and instead leans on favours or under-the-table dealings, raising serious concerns about fairness and the integrity of the selection process (Andersson 1981: 48). Such revelations paint a troubling picture of an industry where artistic merit can be overshadowed by financial influence or personal connections. This revelation highlights a systemic flaw that compromises the potential for fair representation of diverse music, including indigenous language music, further complicating the uphill battle for visibility and recognition within the radio broadcasting domain.

In the intricate world of promotions and distributions managed by large record labels, Mawela found herself positioned in a role that offered her limited influence over the crucial process of placing songs on radio playlists, as this was largely done by promoters and managers of artists but not artists themselves. The mechanics of promotions and distributions were predominantly controlled and executed through internal channels within these significant labels, often excluding direct involvement or input from the musicians themselves. Assigned by a major label to handle the promotions and distribution of her music, Mawela's role was primarily confined to utilising the label's existing internal pathways and strategies. These methods, largely detached from the artist's direct control, were constructed and overseen by the label, operating under its own set of protocols and structures. As a result, Mawela, like many artists under major labels, found herself in a situation where the decisions about promotional strategies and song placements were largely dictated by the label's internal mechanisms and preferences. This lack of direct involvement in these crucial determinations significantly reduced her ability to influence or shape the trajectory of her music within the competitive radio broadcasting landscape. The prevailing system operated within the label's parameters, potentially limiting the scope for personal advocacy or intervention in ensuring heightened visibility and recognition of her music within radio programming.

Typically, the musician's direct involvement in the process of radio exposure is often confined to specific moments within the larger promotional framework, unless the musician uses platforms such as live radio interviews to assert the programming of their music on radio stations. These instances primarily revolve around scheduled interviews or bookings on selected radio shows, where the artist participates in discussing their music. The musician's active participation usually comes into play when an interview has been successfully arranged with a specific radio station. During these interviews, the artist engages in discussions about their music, offering insights into their creative process, new projects in the pipeline, inspirations, and the stories behind their songs. These moments serve as valuable opportunities for the musician to directly connect with the audience and present a personal narrative about their artistry. Additionally, the musician's active involvement extends to occasions when they are specifically booked for appearances on selected radio programmes. In these instances, they participate in dedicated radio shows that focus on their music, providing a platform to share their work with a targeted audience and further establish a more intimate connection with listeners. These interactions represent pivotal moments where the musician takes a more hands-on role, using their voice and personal insights to directly engage with audiences, share their artistic journey, and create a more profound connection with their fan base through the airwaves. Mawela did a few of these radio interviews and they did not yield much influence in many commercial radio stations.

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The intricate process of securing radio exposure and promotional opportunities is profoundly entrenched in politics within the music industry. Recording studios typically prioritise musicians who they believe can effectively enhance and represent their brand image. This selection process involves strategic considerations about an artist's potential to serve as a brand ambassador, influencing the studios' decision-making in offering promotional opportunities. For Venda music, which faced an extended trial period when it initially emerged, the landscape was notably challenging. Musicians like Mawela encountered substantial difficulty in securing interviews or promotional programmes on urban radio stations. The prevailing focus of these stations had long been fixated on established, heavily promoted languages, sidelining emerging languages like Tshivenda (Coplan 2007). The dominance of certain languages in the promotional realm significantly hindered the visibility and representation of lesser-known or emerging linguistic music. As a consequence, musicians representing languages beyond the mainstream faced hurdles in accessing radio exposure and interview opportunities, creating an uphill battle for recognition in the broader industry. This reality underscores the systemic bias and the prevalence

of entrenched norms within the industry, making it arduous for diverse linguistic music, such as Venda, to gain a foothold in the highly competitive and favour-driven environment of radio promotions and interviews (personal communication, Irene Mawela 2021).

During the latter part of the 1980s, a notable shift emerged in the radio landscape for Mawela, as Radio Venda, Tsonga, and Thobela FM emerged as the first stations to express genuine interest in promoting and featuring her music. These stations were categorised as Bantu radio stations, dedicated to advancing and showcasing music in specific vernacular languages. The distinct character of these stations, established to champion particular linguistic communities, became a pivotal turning point for Mawela's musical journey. Their focussed mission on promoting and representing diverse vernacular languages provided a significant platform for artists like Mawela to gain exposure and access to public interviews, discussing their music, even though these platforms did not translate to an increase in her music sales. For Mawela, these public radio stations proved to be a valuable avenue, offering her the best opportunity to secure public interviews to discuss her music. The shift to these stations marked a crucial step in enabling her to directly engage with audiences, share insights about her artistry, and connect with listeners who were eager to explore and appreciate music in their native languages. These stations played a vital role in providing a platform for the promotion and recognition of linguistically diverse music, fostering an environment that celebrated and celebrated linguistic and cultural diversity within the realm of music.

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Commercial radio stations, serving as the pulse of urban life, boast a diverse listener base comprised of individuals from various cultural backgrounds. Unlike specialised vernacular stations, these commercial channels are not designed to cater to a particular language preference, allowing them to appeal to a wider demographic. Their primary mode of communication is typically English, rendering them more accessible and inclusive for a multitude of listeners. Nevertheless, the linguistic biases ingrained by the apartheid regime persistently hinder the promotion of certain ethnic-based music, despite the expectation of inclusivity in commercial radio stations operating within urban spaces. The allure of these commercial stations lies in their ability to bridge cultural divides and transcend linguistic barriers. By predominantly using English as the mode of communication, they create a space where diverse communities can converge and engage (Alexander 2001). This linguistic neutrality enables these stations to draw in a broader audience, reaching out to individuals irrespective of their native language, fostering a

sense of unity among listeners with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The widespread accessibility and appeal of these commercial stations lie in their capacity to transcend language barriers and connect with a vast and varied audience. Their choice of English as the primary communication medium serves as a unifying force, offering a platform where cultural diversity converges, providing a shared space for a multitude of listeners. This linguistic inclusivity sets these stations apart, fostering a sense of connectivity and shared experience among a wide spectrum of communities.

Musicians striving to secure interviews and airplay on these commercial radio stations hold a significant advantage in reaching a broader audience. The exposure and promotion garnered through these channels represent a critical opportunity to make a substantial impact, given their expansive and diverse listener base. However, this particular battle was one that Mawela couldn't singularly champion. It necessitated a transformation in mindset within the industry – a shift away from the notion that certain languages inherently possess a smaller market for their music. Overcoming this perspective demanded a collective effort and a systemic change in the industry's approach to recognise and celebrate linguistic diversity (Bracknell 2019; Mashau 2019; Alexander 2001). Mawela recognised that changing this long-standing mindset wasn't a battle she could single-handedly conquer. It required a concerted effort to alter the entrenched beliefs that favoured certain languages over others in the music industry. The challenge was in breaking the preconceived notions that limited the perceived market potential of non-dominant languages, creating barriers for artists representing diverse linguistic backgrounds. Achieving this transformation would necessitate an industry-wide evolution in mindset, fostering an environment that celebrates and values the diverse cultural and linguistic expressions in music. It became clear that this battle demanded a collaborative effort to break the barriers constraining the market potential of non-mainstream languages, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and diverse music industry landscape.

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In the context of commercial radio stations, the prevailing paradigm shouldn't be shaped by cultural inclinations. These stations ideally function as platforms not bound by any specific cultural agenda, allowing them the freedom to take a chance on playing any high-quality music that resonates with the urban pulse. Their unique strength lies in their adaptability to tap into the diverse urban vibe, embracing a mix of musical genres and styles without allegiance to a particular cultural or linguistic bias. Unlike public radio stations, which are engineered to cater to specific

language preferences, commercial radio stations operate in a more universal sphere. They are positioned to serve a diverse audience by prioritising music's universal appeal over cultural affiliations. Their autonomy to curate content based on its quality and its ability to connect with a wide-ranging urban audience is a distinctive trait. By operating without the confines of any cultural influence, these stations have the potential to introduce a broad spectrum of music, enabling them to align with the dynamic and multifaceted tastes of urban communities. Commercial radio stations possess the unique liberty to transcend cultural limitations, serving as an ideal platform to present a diverse array of music that reflects the eclectic urban atmosphere. Their flexibility to showcase music based on its merit rather than cultural predisposition signifies their potential as trendsetters, influencing the tastes and preferences of a diverse urban audience. This paradigm makes them a promising space for the exploration and promotion of a wide variety of music styles, irrespective of cultural or linguistic boundaries.

In the context of Bantu radio stations, a unique emphasis is placed on embracing and promoting the local vernacular languages (Hamm 1991). Unlike commercial stations, these Bantu stations are deliberately tailored to cater to specific cultural and linguistic communities. Their programming primarily involves conversations and content predominantly delivered in the native language, with minimal to no usage of English. These specialised stations focus on fostering a space that celebrates and upholds the richness of local linguistic and cultural heritage. They curate their content to resonate deeply with the targeted community by prioritising conversations and music presented in the specific vernacular language. The intention is to immerse their audience in the authentic essence of their culture and language, fostering a strong sense of identity and pride. By emphasising more native language conversations and predominantly featuring music that aligns with the cultural identity they aim to promote, these Bantu stations serve as vibrant hubs where the local community can intimately connect with its language and cultural heritage. Their dedicated commitment to indigenous languages and cultures creates an environment that fosters a deep appreciation for the distinct traditions and artistic expressions of the community they serve.

In this particular context, Mawela had a pivotal realisation that recording her music in the Tshivenda language would serve as a precise and effective way to connect with the Venda-speaking audience, particularly through Radio Venda. Recognising the profound impact of language in conveying her message, she understood that communicating in her native tongue was the most potent means of ensuring her message resonated deeply with those who understood her

language and culture (Wa Thiong'o 1986). This deliberate choice to produce music in Tshivenda was an intentional strategy to directly engage with the Venda-speaking community, a decision that held a profound significance in her artistic journey. By aligning her music with her native language, she aimed to create an intimate connection, knowing that her message would reverberate more powerfully among those who shared a common linguistic and cultural heritage. For Mawela, the decision to craft music in Tshivenda wasn't merely about linguistic preference; it was a strategic approach to ensure a more profound and authentic connection with her audience. By choosing to communicate in the language spoken by her community, she sought to ensure that her music conveyed not just melodies but a deep sense of understanding and shared identity, fostering a more heartfelt and meaningful connection with her listeners.

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Facing limited success in gaining traction within the bustling and vibrant environment of commercial urban radio stations when singing in her mother tongue, Mawela made a deliberate choice to redirect her musical endeavours toward a more intimate and personally significant audience – the community within which she was born. Recognising the challenges of breaking through the competitive urban markets, she decided to refocus her efforts by channelling her music and message in the Venda language, prioritising a direct connection with her roots and local community. This strategic shift in her approach was an intentional move to pivot away from the broader urban markets, choosing instead to hone in on the place of her origins, the community that held deep personal significance. By recording in the Venda language, she aimed to create a more profound impact and establish a stronger bond with the community where she was raised. This deliberate redirection in her musical path wasn't a concession of defeat but a strategic decision to reconnect with her authentic roots. By crafting her music in Venda, Mawela endeavoured to create a more heartfelt and genuine connection, ensuring that her message was not only heard but deeply felt within the very community that formed the essence of her identity and heritage. This shift represented a purposeful move to prioritise authenticity and intimacy, fostering a stronger, more meaningful connection within her community.

Mawela embarked on a diverse musical journey, experimenting with recording songs in various South African languages. However, her experiences revealed a disheartening reality: these multilingual endeavours faced significant barriers in securing airtime on radio stations that specifically promote those languages. Despite her earnest efforts to create music in diverse languages, the stringent programming practices of these stations proved

to be an insurmountable obstacle. Mawela's sole gospel album, despite its incorporation of various languages, including English, fell short of the anticipated success. Regrettably, Rob Allingham views it as an investment loss, deeming the project ultimately unsuccessful (personal communication, Rob Allingham 2021). Most Bantu radio stations were primarily inclined to select and air songs sung in their designated languages, sidelining the rotation of songs in other languages. Moreover, even on Radio Venda, where Mawela was hoping to share her varied linguistic creations, she encountered a similar challenge. The station's preference leaned toward songs sung specifically in the Tshivenda language due to their potential to attract a larger audience base – deeming them more favourable for increasing listenership. This stark realisation led Mawela to understand the industry's predilection for certain languages, influencing the selective programming practices of various radio stations. Her diverse repertoire, spanning multiple South African languages, encountered significant obstacles in securing regular airplay due to the stations' preferences for songs sung in specific languages, particularly those that aligned closely with their target audience's linguistic preferences. This revelation underscored the industry's prevailing bias toward certain languages, ultimately impacting the exposure and recognition of music sung in less commonly promoted linguistic variations.

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Mawela discovered a remarkable trend among Venda musicians, including herself – they were achieving recognition and building their reputations predominantly outside of South Africa. The realisation was profound: the audiences abroad, unburdened by the historical cultural divisions stemming from South Africa's politically driven policies of separate development, approached Venda music with a fresh and unbiased perspective (personal communications, Nick Lotay 2021 and Irene Mawela 2021). In exploring and engaging with audiences outside the borders of South Africa, Mawela observed a stark contrast in the reception of Venda music. These international listeners lacked the cultural and historical baggage that had been ingrained by the country's policies of segregated development. Unfettered by the prejudices and divisions sown by these political actions, they approached Venda music with an open and untainted ear, appreciating it solely based on its artistic merit and cultural richness. The understanding that Venda musicians found greater acceptance and appreciation beyond the confines of their homeland shed light on the transformative impact of cultural perceptions shaped by historical divides. Audiences outside South Africa, unencumbered by the nation's politically motivated cultural divisions, embraced Venda music in its purest essence, appreciating its artistry without the distortions of

historical biases. This realisation underscored the significant influence of historical legacies on cultural reception, affirming the importance of transcending these barriers for a more genuine and unbiased appreciation of diverse musical expressions.

The music produced by Venda musicians found a receptive audience in other African countries, driven by an appreciation for the music itself rather than the divisive political history that historically disadvantaged certain cultures. This allowed for a more genuine and unbiased evaluation of the music's artistic quality and cultural richness, unencumbered by the prejudices and divisions created by historical circumstances. An illustrative case in point was the remarkable popularity of musicians like Daniel Ndivhiseni Tshanda, also known as Dan Tshanda, in countries such as Zimbabwe, Lesotho, and Botswana. Interestingly, his music achieved far greater recognition and acclaim in these neighbouring African nations than within his home country of South Africa. This anomaly highlighted the contrasting receptions and the impact of the historical context in shaping the perception of cultural expressions. The phenomenon illuminated the profound impact of historical and political narratives in shaping cultural reception within South Africa. Despite the rich musical contributions of Venda musicians like Dan Tshanda, the weight of historical divisions led to a less enthusiastic reception within their own country. However, outside the boundaries of South Africa, their music found an audience appreciative of its merits, transcending the burdens of historical biases and political constraints.

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The disparity in reception between South Africa and neighbouring African countries underscored the broader impact of history on cultural perceptions, emphasising the need to appreciate and value cultural expressions based on their inherent artistic and cultural significance rather than the historical narratives that often overshadow their reception. This preference for singing predominantly in Tshivenda also reflected Dan Tshanda's deliberate choice to align his music closely with his cultural roots. Despite the potential to use other languages that might have concealed his cultural identity in light of the South African political policies that enforced cultural separation, he opted to predominantly utilise Tshivenda in his music. The decision to anchor his music in Tshivenda, despite the possibility of using other languages, represented a conscious commitment to preserve and celebrate his cultural heritage.

Despite the challenges and the potential anonymity that other languages might have provided in circumventing the historical divisions caused by South African policies, Tshanda chose authenticity and cultural pride over camouflage. His deliberate use of Tshivenda conveyed a deep-



seated commitment to his cultural origins, showcasing a determination to uphold and champion the identity and richness of Venda culture through his music. In doing so, Tshanda exemplified a profound allegiance to his heritage and a refusal to dilute or compromise his cultural identity, even in the face of historical circumstances that might have encouraged otherwise. Mawela courageously championed the use of Tshivenda in her music during the early years, laying the foundation for linguistic boldness. When Tshanda entered the scene in 1986, he not only embraced this legacy but also perpetuated it by predominantly featuring Tshivenda in his songs, even though he occasionally incorporated other languages.

## Conclusion

Throughout Irene Mawela's illustrious journey in the music industry, her numerous accolades and extensive career spanning over seven decades unequivocally attest to her remarkable achievements. With an unwavering dedication, she has left an indelible mark on the musical landscape, spending the better part of her life crafting, singing, and producing music that resonates with quality and entertainment. Despite more than 70 years in the industry, Mawela's passion for her craft remains undiminished. Her music, time and again, garners significant airplay on numerous radio stations, reaffirming the enduring relevance and appeal of her work. Her journey symbolises an unwavering dedication to her cultural heritage and an unyielding commitment to musical excellence. As she continues to receive accolades and her music reaches new audiences, it is evident that Irene Mawela's musical legacy is not just a fleeting success but an enduring, irreplaceable contribution to the music industry. Her story is not just one of talent but also of resilience, dedication, and an unwavering commitment to her art that transcends time and resonates with generations, making her a true icon in the realm of South African music.

Irene Mawela's musical career stands as an enduring testament to her remarkable contributions to the world of South African music. Over seven decades, she has dedicated her life to crafting, performing, and producing music of exceptional quality and entertainment value. Mawela's awards and recognitions, including the prestigious Order of Ikhamanga and an honorary Ph.D., underscore her profound impact and enduring influence. Her journey has been marked by unwavering commitment to her Tshivenda heritage, with her music serving as a cultural beacon. Mawela's role as a backing vocalist and collaborator with various artists highlights her versatility and ability to harmonise with diverse voices and musical styles. Despite the passage of time, Irene Mawela's music remains relevant and widely celebrated, receiving extensive airplay on numerous

radio stations. Her story encapsulates not just a musical career but a testament to resilience, dedication, and a profound connection to her cultural roots. As an icon of South African music, her legacy continues to resonate with audiences across generations, reaffirming her enduring impact on the industry and her status as a true musical luminary.

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## Chapter 7

### Accolades and honours showered upon Irene Matodzi Mawela's musical journey

In this comprehensive chapter, we will meticulously catalogue the myriad accolades that have been bestowed upon Irene Matodzi Mawela throughout her illustrious music career. Each award serves not only as a symbol of her outstanding achievements but also stands as a testament to her elevated stature in the musical realm. As we delve into the array of honours she has garnered, this chapter aims to present a compelling narrative, illuminating the impact of these awards on Mawela's journey and underscoring their enduring significance in shaping her legacy within the music industry and beyond. These accolades, carefully chronicled and explored, reveal a remarkable trajectory of success, providing insight into the profound and lasting imprint she has left on the musical landscape. Mawela's extraordinary musical expertise finds its most striking testament in the array of well-deserved awards she has garnered throughout her illustrious career. Her accolades include a multitude of prestigious recognitions.

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I will start with some of her early awards dating back to the 1970s. Mawela received several 'Best Song' awards, including the esteemed SARIE awards, affirming her songwriting and musical excellence in the 1970s. In the 1980s, she was honoured with the notable 'Best Leading Venda Artist' award by the SABC, solidifying her standing as a pioneering figure in Venda music. Her recent acclaim continued as she earned distinguished recognition from the National Department of Arts and Culture, marking her enduring impact on the South African music landscape. These accolades stand as a testament to her unwavering dedication, outstanding talent, and the enduring influence of her musical contributions. The consistent acknowledgment and honours received across several decades affirm Mawela's indelible mark in the music industry and her significant role in preserving and advancing Venda music. There was a hiatus in Mawela's music career when she temporarily stepped away from recording to concentrate on raising her children. Despite this break from new recordings, she persisted in performing her existing catalogue of songs.

In 2012, Irene Mawela was honoured with a prestigious ‘Lifetime Achievement Award’ for her monumental contribution to Venda music, recognising her invaluable and enduring impact on the musical heritage of her culture. Despite these remarkable achievements and what might be perceived as a capstone moment in her career, Mawela’s passion for music has remained undiminished. She continues to grace the stage, lending her extraordinary voice and talent either as a featured artist or as the primary performer in her own musical endeavours. Her commitment to music persists, illustrating an unwavering dedication to her craft and a profound love for the art form, affirming that her story in music is far from reaching its final note.

Mawela’s musical influence transcends traditional boundaries, seamlessly navigating through various genres. In the late 2000s, her music gained prominence in contemporary styles like rap, hip-hop, *amapiano*, house music, and traditional music. Her versatility and adaptability allowed her compositions to resonate across different musical landscapes, capturing the attention of diverse audiences and affirming her relevance in evolving music trends. Notably, her son, Belafonte Mawela, has taken inspiration from his mother’s legacy, following in her footsteps within the music industry. While embracing a distinct music style that appeals more to the younger generation, he carries forward the musical essence instilled by his mother. Despite diverging in style, the younger Mawela’s music embodies a contemporary appeal that resonates with today’s youth, forming a bridge between generations while honouring the musical legacy established by his iconic mother. This continuation of musical influence within the family illustrates the enduring impact and legacy of Irene Mawela’s versatile and influential musical journey.

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Belafonte has paid homage to his mother’s musical legacy by featuring her in one of his songs, a remarkable tribute that involved remixing one of Irene Mawela’s classic tunes. This collaborative effort as discussed in Chapter 2, stands as an emotional intersection of past and present, as her son’s music, rooted in rap, reflects the evolving landscape of popular Venda music styles. Rap has progressively emerged as a dominant force within contemporary Venda music, influencing and shaping the musical preferences of the current generation. Irene Mawela’s enduring influence reverberates through her son’s innovative work and within the evolving Venda music scene. Her career spanning over 70 years serves as a beacon of inspiration for aspiring musicians, attesting to her extraordinary achievements and the unmistakable quality of her unique voice. Her indelible mark on the music industry continues to motivate and guide aspiring artists, highlighting her profound impact and unwavering legacy in the realm of South African music.

Mawela's profound impact on the rich achievements of South African music, evident through her substantial involvement in over 1000 studio recordings and radio transcriptions, solidified her as an incredibly deserving Order of Ikhamanga and an honorary doctorate in music. Her immense contribution to the diverse landscape of local South African popular musical genres stands as a testament to her exceptional musicality, artistry, and deep-rooted influence on the nation's musical heritage. The recognition of her outstanding achievements in the music industry underscored not only her remarkable talent but also the sheer breadth and depth of her influence within the country's musical heritage. Her extensive involvement in an extensive array of studio recordings and radio contributions reflected a career marked by unwavering dedication, extraordinary talent, and an enduring legacy that resonates profoundly within the realm of South African music.

Mawela's recorded musical repertoire exceeds an impressive 1000 songs, with a significant number of her early recordings challenging efforts to trace and catalogue. Despite this vast catalogue, she persists in adding to her musical legacy, continuously crafting new compositions. Her unwavering determination and triumph in advocating for the liberty to sing in her native language became a pivotal moment in her career. Since overcoming this hurdle, she steadfastly remained committed to composing solely in the Tshivenda language. This steadfast dedication underscores her unwavering commitment to her cultural heritage and the significance she places on preserving and promoting the Tshivenda language through music. Her refusal to compromise on this cultural stance has solidified her reputation as a torchbearer for her language and culture within the musical landscape. Her extensive catalogue, coupled with her ongoing commitment to composing exclusively in Tshivenda, accentuates the profound impact of her musical legacy within the South African music industry.

Mawela's journey in the music industry could be likened to that of an unsung or unrecognised hero, a sentiment echoed by many. This sentiment was further reinforced when she received an award specifically titled the 'Unsung Legend Award'. This accolade seemed to symbolise the industry's acknowledgment of the oversight in fully recognising her exceptional contribution. For over 70 years, she dedicated herself to crafting her own music history, yet it appeared that the broader industry failed to give her the widespread recognition her immense talent and dedication truly deserved. Despite her immense contributions and the indelible mark, she left on the music scene, Mawela's story seemed to be obscured or overshadowed, prompting the acknowledgement of her legendary status within the Unsung Legend Award. This award, in its

bittersweet way, served as a late but important recognition of her remarkable musical legacy that had, for too long, gone uncelebrated within the broader industry narrative. Her decades-long journey and profound musical contributions, though somewhat overlooked, were nonetheless impactful and instrumental in shaping the cultural and musical heritage of South Africa.

The esteemed Ntombi Mekwe, former speaker of the Gauteng Provincial Legislature, initiated the Vita Basadi Awards to honour and acknowledge the invaluable contributions of women within Gauteng. Commencing in 2014, these awards have evolved into an annual tradition, a distinguished event dedicated to celebrating the exceptional achievements of women across Gauteng. Under the visionary guidance of Ntombi Mekwe, the Vita Basadi Awards represent a significant platform to highlight the remarkable accomplishments and influence of women within the region. The event not only serves as a commendation of their achievements but also stands as a powerful tribute, recognising and amplifying the diverse roles and contributions made by women in various sectors throughout Gauteng. This annual celebration underscores the indelible impact and immeasurable significance of women's contributions in the region's societal, cultural, and economic fabric.

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**Figure 7.1 Mawela's Vita Basadi Award under the category 'Unsung Legend Award' which she received on 29 August 2019**

During Women's Month, the Gauteng Provincial Legislature dedicates this period to honour and pay tribute to the significant and commendable contributions made by women in their diverse fields of expertise. Marking its fifth anniversary since its establishment in 2014, the Vita Basadi Awards aimed to celebrate outstanding women who have made profound impacts in their respective areas. In 2019, Irene Mawela was nominated as one of the distinguished women deserving of the prestigious Vita Basadi Award. This event, held as part of the Women's Month festivities, recognised the exceptional achievements and influence of women like Mawela, who have left an indelible mark in their specific fields. With an impressive 1031 women nominated across various sectors and diverse categories, this celebration symbolised the collective recognition and appreciation for the diverse and invaluable roles that women play in shaping and enriching society. The event not only highlighted individual accomplishments but also underscored the collective strength and influence of women across a wide spectrum of endeavours.

Mawela was honoured in the distinguished category of 'Unsung Legend' during the Vita Basadi Awards. These awards, specifically designed to honour the exceptional achievements of women residing in Gauteng, served as a significant platform to acknowledge and celebrate their outstanding accomplishments. This specific category aimed to pay tribute to women whose significant contributions often go unnoticed or underappreciated, despite their unparalleled and incomparable impact in their respective fields. Mawela's recognition in this category was a testament to her enduring influence and remarkable achievements that, although possibly overlooked previously, were undeniably ground breaking and immeasurable within her career. The 'Unsung Legend' award not only highlighted Mawela's exceptional talent and dedication but also shed light on the often unheralded yet remarkable contributions of women whose work shapes and enriches our society.

Mawela's accolades stand as a profound testament to her immense impact on the Venda music industry. While she might not have gained widespread recognition through the South African Music Awards (SAMA), her receipt of other prestigious awards is so substantial that it merits consideration akin to the Order of Ikhamanga and an honorary Ph.D. These awards unequivocally recognise her outstanding and substantial contributions to the music landscape of the Venda population, underscoring her invaluable influence and talent, which transcend the parameters of conventional accolades. Mawela has consistently prioritised personal values over the allure

of fame and unyielding publicity. Her unwavering commitment to her religious beliefs has been a guiding force in navigating life's hurdles. This steadfast devotion is a key reason she never compromised her integrity to attain notoriety within the industry. Unlike many female singers for whom the music business becomes a pivotal, potentially decisive factor, Mawela's stance has been resolute: she steadfastly adheres to her principles, understanding that preserving her essence outweighs the transient allure of industry acclaim. This steadfast dedication to her beliefs has fortified her against compromising her values merely for industry recognition, establishing her as a paragon of integrity within the music world.

The entertainment industry frequently dangles the tantalising prospects of fame and fortune as a trade-off for personal well-being. Regrettably, some female singers succumb to the allure of leveraging their physical appearance to ascend the precarious rungs of fame within the industry. For Mawela, this trajectory was never a path she desired for her career. She staunchly opposed compromising her principles by exploiting her body to scale the ladder of stardom. This unwavering stance becomes even more crucial when those in positions of power, such as influential figures within the industry, utilise such tactics to manipulate and entice female singers into compromising situations for their own gain. In his insightful analysis, Mbembe (2005: 75) posits that the significance of the body in the post-industrial era extends far beyond its physical presence. According to Mbembe, the body plays a central role in asserting ideologies and serves as a dynamic tool for accomplishing various objectives in the lives of individuals residing in urban environments. This assertion becomes particularly apparent when examining the multifaceted role of the body within the realm of multimedia, specifically in industries such as music and beyond. In the intricate tapestry of the music industry and other sectors, the body emerges as a multifunctional instrument, not merely confined to its biological essence. Mbembe contends that the body becomes an archive, a repository of favours, job opportunities, coveted positions, and the elusive currency of fame. Its transformative power lies in its ability to navigate and negotiate the complex networks of influence, creating a synergy between physicality and intangible aspirations. Mawela has always respected herself and never wanted to get favours through the exploitation of her body.

Within the dynamic landscape of multimedia, the body is not just a vessel for artistic expression; it becomes a medium through which individuals navigate the intricate web of relationships, opportunities, and recognition. In the music industry, for instance, artists strategically utilise their physical presence to transcend the boundaries of sound and lyrics. The body, through its



movements, gestures, and overall presentation, becomes a canvas upon which artistic narratives are painted, and simultaneously, a key asset for garnering support, securing professional opportunities, and ascending to elevated positions within the industry hierarchy. Mbembe's argument underscores the transformative nature of the body, not only as a site of individual expression but also as a dynamic tool for social negotiation and advancement. The body becomes a repository of lived experiences, aspirations, and the tangible outcomes of one's journey within the urban landscape. In this context, the body acts as a living testament to the multifaceted roles it plays in shaping personal destinies, as individuals strategically employ their physical presence to archive and manifest a spectrum of desires, ranging from career progression to the attainment of fame.

Moreover, the body's role as an archive within multimedia extends beyond the individual level to encompass broader societal dynamics. It becomes a vessel through which collective ideologies are embodied and communicated, shaping cultural narratives and influencing societal perceptions. In the music industry, for example, artists may employ their bodies to challenge societal norms, convey political messages, or champion social causes, thus utilising their physicality as a powerful medium for cultural expression and activism. In conclusion, Mbembe's assertion regarding the central role of the body in the post-industrial era finds profound resonance within the dynamic landscapes of multimedia, particularly in the music industry. The body transcends its biological confines, emerging as a multifunctional instrument that archives not only personal experiences but also favours, opportunities, and fame. Its transformative power lies in its ability to navigate the complex web of social, professional, and cultural dynamics, shaping individual destinies and contributing to the broader narratives that define contemporary urban living. Mawela's steadfast refusal to engage in such practices stands as a testament to her unwavering dedication to her craft and her staunch commitment to maintaining her integrity in an industry often fraught with such compromising propositions. Her principled approach serves as an inspirational standard, demonstrating that true success need not be achieved at the expense of personal dignity or ethical boundaries.

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From the outset of her association with EMI, Mawela decisively steered clear of the allure of compromising her principles merely to chase fame. She adamantly rejected becoming a casualty of the relentless pursuit of stardom at any cost. Her staunch refusal to engage in the unsavoury aspects embedded in the industry underlines her commitment to ethical conduct. Mawela's unwavering ethics, profoundly rooted in the teachings of her religious background, have invariably

served as her guiding compass, instilling in her an unyielding dedication to what is morally right. Her values and convictions were not mere fleeting inclinations but rather deeply ingrained beliefs that fuelled her resolve to remain untainted by the darker aspects of the industry. Embracing her talent as a conduit for imparting lessons, issuing cautions, delivering admonitions, and providing entertainment, Mawela embodied a higher purpose in her musical endeavours. Her mission extended far beyond personal gain; it was an impassioned commitment to harness her artistry as a force for positive influence, utilising music as a medium to enlighten, guide, and uplift her audience.

Her staunch adherence to ethical principles is evident in her unwavering refusal to incorporate vulgar language within her music. Irene Mawela maintained a dignified and principled approach to her stage presence, consciously avoiding the portrayal of a half-naked or revealing image. Her commitment to upholding a sense of modesty extended to avoiding the exposure of certain areas of her body, including her breasts, buttocks, or stomach, during public performances. Mawela's choice of attire reflected not only her personal values but also her dedication to presenting herself in a manner that respected cultural norms and upheld a sense of propriety. In her performances, Mawela prioritised showcasing her musical prowess and artistic expression without resorting to overtly provocative or revealing displays. This deliberate decision underscored her dedication to preserving her womanhood with a sense of dignity and modesty. In an industry often marked by flamboyant and provocative stage personas, Mawela's choice to prioritise her musical talent over sensationalised imagery spoke volumes about her commitment to authenticity and respect for cultural sensitivities.

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By eschewing the trend of exposing certain parts of her body for public attention, Mawela demonstrated a steadfast adherence to her values and cultural beliefs. Her stage presence became a testament to her unwavering commitment to presenting herself in a manner that transcended mere aesthetics, emphasising the substance and integrity of her musical artistry. In a world where sensationalism often takes centre stage, Mawela's conscious decision to avoid such displays became a defining aspect of her artistic identity, setting her apart as an artist who prioritised substance over sensationalism. Furthermore, Mawela's choice of attire became a statement within the broader context of female empowerment, challenging societal expectations that often pressure women to conform to specific standards of physical appearance. Her refusal to succumb to the pressures of revealing attire while performing conveyed a powerful message about embracing one's femininity with confidence and strength, not reliant on external displays

of the body. In doing so, Mawela exemplified a nuanced and empowering form of self-expression that celebrated both her cultural identity and her womanhood. Mawela's intentional avoidance of half-naked appearances on stage and her conscious decision not to expose certain areas of her body during performances reflected a commitment to cultural respect, artistic authenticity, and a distinctive form of female empowerment. Her approach served as a reminder that true artistry could shine through without compromising personal values, creating a legacy that transcends mere entertainment and stands as a testament to the enduring power of authenticity in the world of music.

This deliberate choice is not only a personal stance but a reflection of the values she upholds and the standards she instils in her son, Belafonte. Passing down her teachings, Mawela has guided her son along a similar musical path, nurturing his passion for music while emphasising the significance of maintaining integrity and upholding artistic quality. In her wisdom, she has imparted to her son the importance of shunning the trappings of fame pursued by those who compromise the quality of their music for the mere sake of amassing a larger following. This guidance serves as a testament to her commitment to the craft and the belief that true success in music transcends fleeting popularity. Mawela's dedication to musical authenticity and her transmission of these values to her son elucidate a legacy deeply rooted in artistic integrity and a steadfast commitment to maintaining the purity and substance of musical expression.

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She imparted this wisdom to her son after recognising that the music genre he had chosen resonates deeply within the vibrant sphere of youth culture and swift trends. Understanding the pulse of this genre, she comprehended that the prevailing culture thrives on following what's in vogue, where the current trend swiftly becomes the sought-after novelty pursued by musicians craving rapid fame. The realisation dawned upon her that this music domain often witnesses a continuous ebb and flow, with artists hastily adopting the latest trends in a fervent quest for immediate acclaim. Recognising the allure and pull of this culture, she felt compelled to caution her son against succumbing to the pressure to compromise his artistic integrity for the sake of transient popularity. Her advice was grounded in a profound understanding of the industry dynamics, aiming to shield her son from the potential pitfalls of compromising authenticity in pursuit of fleeting trends. She encouraged him to focus on creating music with lasting substance, underlining the importance of artistic sincerity and originality in a landscape often driven by the ephemerality of trends.

Mawela has consistently embodied a spirit of contentment, finding fulfilment in the blessings and achievements she has garnered throughout her musical journey. Her outlook on success resonates with a genuine appreciation for what she has received, reflecting a deep sense of gratitude for the opportunities and recognition that have come her way. In 2012, Radio Phalaphala took a ground breaking step by introducing a category that celebrated lifetime achievers during its *Tshima* Awards event. This distinctive accolade was created as an avenue to honour individuals who have made substantial and lasting contributions to the music landscape, particularly within the context of Tshivenda culture. The name *Tshima* itself is a fusion of three significant words – Tshivenda, and Music Awards – symbolising the core essence of the event. This ground breaking event plays a pivotal role in championing various music genres while prioritising and promoting the richness of the Tshivenda language and traditional music. The diverse categories featured in the *Tshima* Awards serve as a platform that not only recognises exceptional talent but also actively encourages the preservation and elevation of indigenous music and cultural heritage. By embracing and spotlighting the linguistic and cultural diversity of Tshivenda, this event becomes an influential force in fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of traditional music, thereby ensuring its enduring legacy in the ever-evolving musical heritage of South Africa.

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Out of the numerous deserving artists within the music sphere, the *Tshima* Awards committee meticulously selected four nominees, namely Paul Mualidzi, the Thrilling Artist, Daniel Ndivhiseni Tshanda, and the revered Irene Mawela. However, the exclusions of several other highly notable artists from the nomination list were conspicuous. In response to this scenario, Mawela, in her wisdom and experience, advocated for a perspective grounded in contentment and positivity. Addressing the apparent absence of many deserving artists from the nominee list, Mawela emphasised the significance of embracing whatever life presents. She passionately conveyed the message that individuals should not perceive non-nomination as a setback or view it through a negative lens. Instead, Mawela ardently advocated for cultivating a positive outlook, emphasising the need to find contentment in the recognition and opportunities received, rather than dwelling on the absence of acknowledgment. Her words echoed the importance of appreciating one's journey and the achievements along the way, regardless of formal accolades or nominations. Mawela's stance exuded a sense of resilience and a profound understanding that success isn't solely defined by external validation, but rather by the inner satisfaction derived from one's contributions and personal growth. Her perspective served as a guiding light, urging individuals to embrace a positive outlook and find fulfilment in the diverse experiences and opportunities life presents.

Mawela graciously expressed her deep contentment with the accolades she has amassed throughout her illustrious music career. In a display of profound humility, she gracefully acknowledged the possibility that the current phase might indeed be the time for others to shine and receive their well-deserved recognition. Her humble perspective reflected a genuine understanding that each individual's journey holds its own timing and opportunity for acknowledgment. Her words resonated with a humility that exemplified a profound lack of self-centredness. Mawela's attitude reverberated with a profound belief in the fairness of the journey – understanding that recognition and success have their own timing and individual rhythm for each person within the industry. Furthermore, Mawela's demeanour highlighted a stark contrast to individuals solely focussed on personal gain. Her grounded nature underscored a firm commitment to ethical conduct, shunning any semblance of manipulating situations to cater to her own desires or altering the recognition process in her favour. Her stance epitomised a genuine dedication to the purity of the art form, steadfastly refusing to compromise her integrity or taint the authenticity of her musical journey for the sake of self-centred pursuits.

Mawela ardently guarded the sanctity of her private life, desiring to shield it from the invasive spotlight of public attention and the glaring headlines. Her preference for privacy stemmed from an earnest wish to lead a tranquil existence, free from the intrusion of media scrutiny. The very notion of her personal life becoming a subject of public discourse, or headlines filled her with discomfort that prompted her to fiercely protect her privacy. She harboured a strong aversion to the prospect of her life story being shaped predominantly by news reporters or unauthorised biographers. It wasn't that she was averse to documenting her life as a musician; rather, her unease stemmed from the disproportionate focus on her personal affairs over her noteworthy accomplishments within the music industry. Mawela's discontent stemmed from a desire to see her musical journey and achievements rightfully recognised and not overshadowed by undue emphasis on her personal life. She cherished the notion of her legacy primarily reflecting her musical contributions and the impact she made within the industry, rather than becoming a tabloid spectacle or a subject of sensationalised storytelling.

Mawela vehemently opposed the intertwining of her personal life, notably her marital affairs, with her distinguished music career. She expressed a deep-seated aversion towards the idea of her private relationships becoming fodder for public consumption, particularly when these details were entirely irrelevant to her musical journey. Her intense disdain for these personal intrusions

was a sentiment she adamantly carried with unwavering conviction. A pivotal example of her stance was vividly demonstrated when she adamantly insisted that any literature or biographical accounts about her explicitly exclude any mention of her personal life. This deliberate omission was a result of her strong plea to keep the focus solely on her musical legacy, completely divorced from her private experiences. Her reluctance to have her personal life publicised stemmed from a profound concern regarding the misrepresentation and lack of balance in such reports. Mawela expressed her sheer disdain for the often one-sided, distorted, and sensationalised portrayal of her personal life by the media. She recognised that these stories rarely incorporated her perspective or presented an accurate, balanced version of the truth, which was a significant reason why she staunchly rejected their inclusion in any form of public documentation or media representation of her life and career.

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Mawela's strong insistence on keeping her marital life private stemmed from her union with a highly influential music scout, a pivotal figure during an era when the inclusion of Black musicians in the music industry was a significant focal point. During this period, the landscape of the music industry presented a formidable challenge for numerous Black musicians aiming to secure deals with major recording labels like EMI or Gallo. The scarcity of opportunities for Black musicians within these prominent recording companies was evident. The talent scouts, acting as gatekeepers for these labels, were keenly focussed on selecting only the very best, adding to the struggle and obstacles faced by Black artists trying to break into the industry. Mawela's association with one of these influential scouts, operating at the crux of the industry's decisions, highlighted the complexities and challenges faced by Black musicians during that pivotal time. Given the complex dynamics and struggles Black musicians encountered in gaining recognition and opportunities, Mawela was acutely aware of the delicate balance between her personal life and the industry's challenges. Her decision to keep her personal life away from public scrutiny, particularly her marriage to a prominent figure in the music scouting realm, was a deliberate attempt to separate her personal experiences from the larger industry dynamics, ensuring her career was evaluated based on her merits as an artist rather than through the lens of associations or connections within the music industry.

In the music landscape of that time, being crowned as the best singer held substantial promise – a validation that could significantly secure a prosperous deal encompassing crucial aspects like marketing and widespread distribution of one's music. Mawela recounted the intricate and

somewhat intricate process of talent scouting during those days. She vividly described how she astutely harnessed her talent as a tool to captivate and persuade the discerning panel of judges. The audition process was a meticulous affair, where any aspiring musician seeking a recording deal would be accompanied by a dedicated band to support their performance. The panel of judges, comprising at least four to five seasoned experts, held the crucial responsibility of evaluating and adjudicating the singers' performances. Mawela's recollection of this process highlighted the significance of not only talent but also the ability to navigate and impress this panel, pivotal in shaping an artist's future in the industry. Success in these auditions could effectively open doors to a realm of opportunities, yet the path was fraught with the necessity to not just exhibit talent but to resonate with the subjective judgment of the judges. Her insights offered a glimpse into the intricate workings of the music industry of that era, where a singer's fate often hinged on not just vocal competence but on the ability to sway the discerning minds behind the panel of judges.

In the rigorous evaluation process, each musician was tasked with selecting a preferred song, a tune they were intimately acquainted with, only to face an unforeseen challenge. This demanding trial involved the band abruptly altering the song's key, a test designed to gauge the musician's adaptability and proficiency. Mawela emphasised that this particular test stood as a formidable hurdle for many musicians to overcome. For the performers, this unexpected alteration posed a significant challenge, separating the exceptional from the average. Mawela recounted how her acute understanding of music proved to be a game-changer during these assessments. The judges were genuinely taken aback by her remarkable skill – an ability to seamlessly modulate her voice in tandem with the shifted musical key. This unexpected adjustment demonstrated her innate musical aptitude and an extraordinary ear for music, setting her apart from many of her contemporaries. Her capacity to harmonise her voice effortlessly with the altered musical key underscored her exceptional talent and musical prowess. It exemplified not just a knack for singing but a profound understanding and mastery of music theory, showcasing her as a versatile and adept musician capable of meeting the industry's stringent standards with finesse.

Within Mawela's array of accolades and recognitions, standout achievements underline the profound impact of her musical contributions. In 1974, she secured a notable position as the second-place recipient of the Best Song award, a significant milestone attributed to her single *Abakhulu*. This recognition validated her skill, artistry, and musical prowess, acknowledging the profound impact of her work within the industry. Moreover, her illustrious journey in music was

embellished by the conferral of an honorary doctorate, an esteemed accolade that attests to the profound respect and admiration for her musical contributions. This distinguished recognition bestowed an aura of reverence, honouring her legacy and influence within the music sphere. Furthermore, the Order of Ikhamanga, a prestigious honour presented by the country's president, added a crown jewel to her collection of achievements. This prestigious award symbolises her remarkable dedication and invaluable contributions to the cultural and artistic landscape, reflecting a profound national appreciation for her role in enriching South Africa's musical heritage. These accolades collectively stand as testaments to Mawela's extraordinary talent, unyielding dedication, and the undeniable impact she has had in shaping the musical landscape, earning her a place of reverence and honour within the annals of South African music.



**Figure 7.2 *Nambi ya Dzinambi* award won by Irene Mawela in 1983.**

Following her remarkable achievements, Mawela's journey in amassing prestigious accolades continued with a distinctive honour in 1983. She was bestowed with an award from a specialised programme integrated within Radio Venda, known as *Nambi ya Dzinambi*, a platform that sought to promote and uplift the development of traditional music. This recognition as the 'Best Artist' further cemented her status as a luminary in the realm of traditional music and contributed



to her revered standing within the musical landscape. The award served as a testament to her exceptional talent and commitment to preserving and advancing traditional musical forms. Mawela's ability to captivate audiences and preserve the rich heritage of traditional music garnered her this esteemed accolade, which underscored her pivotal role in the development and promotion of traditional musical artistry. This honour not only acknowledged her musical excellence but also positioned her as a vital advocate and torchbearer for the preservation of Venda's traditional musical legacy.



**Figure 7.3 *Nambi ya Dzinambi* award won by Irene Mawela in 1984.**

During the burgeoning era of high demand for popular Venda music in 1982, a pivotal time marked by a growing surge in bands and musical groups recording music in the Tshivenda language, Mawela achieved a significant milestone. Her exceptional talent and contribution to this musical landscape were recognised with a prestigious award from SABC/Radio Venda, a noteworthy honour she secured for three consecutive years, spanning from 1982 to 1984. This continuous recognition underscored her unparalleled influence and the consistent quality of her musical prowess. Subsequently, in 1984, she further solidified her standing as a musical luminary by clinching the award for Best Song. The song *Hao Nkarabe* was the masterpiece that earned her

this distinguished accolade, affirming her musical brilliance and her ability to create compositions that resonated profoundly with audiences and critics alike. These successive accolades from Radio Venda and the prestigious Best Song award stand as significant milestones, marking Mawela's exceptional and enduring impact during a pivotal era of Venda music's rise to prominence. Her consistent recognition across multiple years speaks volumes about her sustained excellence and the indelible mark she made within the Venda music landscape.



**Figure 7.4 University of Pretoria award conferred on Irene Mawela in 2019, April 26.**

During her tenure at Gallo at Mavuthela in 1974, Mawela's remarkable musical achievements shone brightly in several notable categories. She notably emerged as a runner-up in a category recognised for the prestigious Best Song Award, an achievement that placed her in the esteemed company of the renowned Brenda Fassie. Her exceptional entry for this award was the song *Abakhulu*, a Zulu composition that showcased her remarkable talent and versatility in navigating multiple languages within her musical repertoire. This commendable achievement represented not only her musical finesse but also underscored her ability to excel in diverse linguistic and cultural expressions, positioning her as a versatile and accomplished artist. Being recognised in the same category as Brenda Fassie, a prominent figure in South African music, spoke volumes

about Mawela's musical prowess and the depth of her contribution to the industry, particularly in delivering resonant compositions across various languages and cultural contexts.

In 1983, Mawela once more stood as a runner-up, trailing the celebrated Brenda Fassie in the highly esteemed category of the Best Song Award. Her exceptional entry titled *Hawonkarabi*, sung in the Sotho language, placed her in a formidable position in the music industry. This achievement spotlighted her remarkable musical versatility, showcasing her ability to craft impactful and resonant compositions across different languages and cultural dimensions. Moreover, Mawela's consecutive triumphs in the Best Singer category at the SABC Radio Venda's *Nambi ya Dzinambi* Awards for three consecutive years from 1982 to 1984 solidified her status as a leading figure in the musical landscape. Her consistent victories in this prestigious category not only emphasised her exceptional vocal talent but also affirmed her enduring influence and prominence within the domain of traditional and cultural music development. Mawela's continued success in these awards reflected her unwavering commitment to preserving and advancing traditional music, earning her rightful recognition as the foremost artist and advocate in this sphere.

In the year 1983, Mawela's excellence in music was celebrated through the reception of two prestigious awards in both the Sotho and Venda categories. This recognition underscored her remarkable versatility in creating music that resonated deeply within diverse cultural and linguistic communities, further solidifying her status as a multifaceted and influential artist. Moreover, her impactful contributions to the musical landscape were honoured by the South African Department of Arts and Culture. In 2005, she was honoured with the distinguished Night of the 50s Award, a recognition that highlighted her significant role in preserving and advancing the cultural heritage of the 1950s era. This accolade celebrated her pivotal contributions to the musical legacy of that period, emphasising her lasting impact on South Africa's cultural heritage. Continuing her legacy of musical excellence, Mawela was bestowed with the Night of the 60s Award by the Department of Arts and Culture in 2007. This prestigious honour further acknowledged her profound influence on the music of the 1960s, paying tribute to her enduring contributions and commitment to preserving the cultural richness and musical heritage of that era. These awards represented not only recognition for her musical talent but also celebrated her role in safeguarding and commemorating South Africa's cultural and musical history across different periods.

In the year 2010, Mawela received esteemed accolades for her exceptional contributions to music and society. The Department of Arts and Culture acknowledged her invaluable influence by presenting her with the distinguished Women Contribution Award, recognising her significant impact on the cultural and musical landscape. This recognition not only celebrated her musical prowess but also highlighted her broader societal influence as a woman shaping the cultural narrative of South Africa. Furthermore, her commitment and influence within the music industry were honoured by the Calvary Christian Church in the same year. The award bestowed upon her underscored her profound impact on the realm of music, emphasising her role as a luminary in the industry, inspiring and guiding aspiring musicians. In 2017, the Mapungubwe Arts Festival marked yet another occasion for celebrating Mawela's achievements. The festival's acknowledgment of her contributions underscored her enduring influence and immeasurable impact on the arts and culture landscape. This recognition showcased her lasting legacy as an artist dedicated to preserving and elevating South Africa's cultural heritage, affirming her position as a distinguished figure within the artistic community.

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In the remarkable span of the same year, Mawela's illustrious career was further adorned with the prestigious National Living Treasure Golden Shield Heritage Award, a distinguished honour held in Kimberly. This award accentuated her invaluable role as a custodian of cultural heritage, recognising her as a national treasure and honouring her significant contributions to the preservation and propagation of South Africa's rich cultural legacy. The year 2019 stands as a pinnacle in her career, where she was bestowed with an array of remarkable awards, underscoring her profound impact on various facets of society.

Vita Basadi honoured her with the Unsung Legend Award, acknowledging her often overlooked yet monumental contributions to the musical and cultural landscape. Additionally, the Women of Destiny South Africa Award celebrated her enduring influence as a woman of remarkable significance in society, acknowledging her leadership and impact in empowering and inspiring others. The acknowledgment by the Live Giving Assembly Church further highlighted Mawela's extraordinary influence and contributions, recognising her not only as a distinguished musician but also as a figure shaping and impacting the wider community. Lastly, the conferral of an honorary doctorate from the University of Pretoria served as a crowning achievement, solidifying her status as an esteemed cultural figure. In the significant year of 2023, Irene Mawela's illustrious music career reached a pinnacle as she was bestowed with the prestigious Order of Ikhamanga.

This distinguished honour served as a resounding validation of her unparalleled contributions to the musical landscape, encapsulating the essence of her lifetime achievements. The conferment of the Order of Ikhamanga not only acknowledged Mawela's exceptional musical competence but also marked a symbolic crowning moment, affirming her enduring impact and legacy within the realms of South African music.

The recognition through the Order of Ikhamanga encapsulated the profound resonance of Mawela's artistic journey, celebrating her as a trailblazer who had left an indelible mark on the cultural and musical heritage of South Africa. This accolade, a testament to her unwavering dedication and extraordinary talent, elevated Mawela to a distinguished position among the luminaries of the Order of Ikhamanga, an honour that resonated far beyond her individual accomplishments. The Order of Ikhamanga, with its deep cultural significance, served as a formal acknowledgment of Mawela's exceptional commitment to her craft and her substantial impact on the evolution of South African music. It underscored the enduring influence of her work, recognising her as a cultural custodian who had significantly enriched the nation's musical heritage. Mawela's name became etched in the annals of the Order of Ikhamanga, affirming her status as a beacon of inspiration and a luminary within the dynamic and diverse spectrum of South African musical expression.

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The conferment of this esteemed order not only marked a personal triumph for Mawela but also held broader implications for the cultural narrative of South Africa. It symbolised the acknowledgment of her as a cultural ambassador whose musical journey had transcended boundaries, resonating with audiences across generations and genres. The Order of Ikhamanga served as a recognition not only of her individual achievements but also of the transformative power of her artistry in shaping and enriching the cultural heritage of the nation. The year 2023 stands as a watershed moment in Irene Mawela's extraordinary career, as the Order of Ikhamanga became a tangible emblem of her lasting impact on the South African music landscape. This honour affirmed the enduring legacy she had crafted through decades of unwavering dedication, artistic brilliance, and a commitment to preserving and advancing the rich cultural tapestry of her homeland. Through the bestowal of the Order of Ikhamanga, Irene Mawela's contributions were enshrined as an integral part of South Africa's cultural heritage, ensuring that her influence would resonate for generations to come. These prestigious recognitions celebrated her vast contributions to the arts and music, affirming her legacy as an influential and respected personality in the realms of culture, academia, and society at large.

## List of musicians Mawela worked with

Throughout her illustrious career, Mawela collaborated with a myriad of talented artists, leaving an indelible mark in the music industry. Although the sheer breadth of her collaborations makes it impossible to enumerate them comprehensively, she shared noteworthy partnerships with a range of exceptional musicians. Notably, during her tenure at EMI, she collaborated with acclaimed groups such as the Dark City Sisters, led by the influential Francisca Mngomezulu. Notably, Joyce Mhathusi became a part of the group in 1959, contributing her talent to their collective musical prowess. Her collaborative endeavours extended to include significant musical groups such as the Killingstone Stars, the melodic artistry of Suzan Gabatshane, and the captivating sound of the Black Sea Giants. Additionally, her musical journey intertwined with the exceptional talents of Isilwane se Mbazo, the resonant melodies of Dalsie Luthuli, and the enchanting voice of Alice Dasa. This array of collaborations encapsulates Mawela's versatility and her ability to harmonise and create musical magic with a diverse range of artists. Her collective work with these remarkable talents not only exemplifies her adaptability but also underscores her pivotal role in shaping and enriching the musical landscape with a wide spectrum of artistic expressions and influences.

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Upon her arrival at Troubadour in 1962, Mawela seamlessly integrated into the vibrant musical scene, becoming an integral part of the revered group known as the Sweet Sixteens. This collective bore a resemblance to the Dark City Sisters, her former group at EMI, exhibiting a similar musical allure and influence within Troubadour. During her tenure at Troubadour, Mawela's vocal ability resonated alongside esteemed artists and groups, reflecting her versatility and ability to harmonise with a diverse range of talents. She lent her voice to enthralling collaborations such as The Telegram Special, the melodious harmonies of Brits Sweetheart, and the captivating melodies of the Straight Hair Girls. Notably, she shared her talent with revered artists including Mable Mafuya and Dorothy Masuka, each collaboration reflecting her ability to blend her voice harmoniously with varied styles and influences. These collaborations within Troubadour's musical ecosystem were under the discerning eye of the talent scout, Cuthbert Matumba, a pivotal figure in the studio. This period marked a phase of musical exploration and collaboration for Mawela, where her voice became an integral part of an array of celebrated ensembles and partnerships, contributing to the rich sound world of Troubadour's musical legacy.

Mawela's journey into the realm of recording Tshivenda music began before the advent of

a dedicated radio station for the Venda community as said before. Her foray into recording Tshivenda songs commenced at the SABC studios, where she laid the foundation for sharing her cultural heritage through music. This early recording phase became a vital precursor to her official commercial studio recordings at Truetone, which formally commenced in 1968. Even prior to her ventures at Truetone, Mawela had already embarked on recording Tshivenda music at the SABC, marking her initial steps in the exploration of her native language through song. It was only in 1982 that she was allowed to record a complete album in Tshivenda. However, it was her sessions at Truetone that solidified her commitment to capturing and sharing the essence of Tshivenda through more formal and commercially oriented studio endeavours. This transition from SABC to Truetone not only marked a significant shift in her musical career but also symbolised her dedicated efforts in preserving and promoting the cultural richness of Tshivenda through the expressive and universal language of music. Her recordings at Truetone represented a pivotal milestone in her musical journey, providing a platform for her to deliver her cultural heritage to a broader audience in a more structured and professional capacity.

Despite being informed that her Tshivenda music recorded at SABC would remain exclusively within the confines of the broadcasting station and wouldn't be distributed to commercial outlets, Mawela found solace in this arrangement. The assurance that her Tshivenda music would have a home solely within SABC brought a sense of contentment, primarily because it provided her with the invaluable opportunity to record in her native language. Acknowledging the limitations placed on the distribution of her music didn't deter her enthusiasm. The ability to express herself in Tshivenda through her music held profound significance for Mawela. The assurance that her cultural expression would at least find a platform, even within the confines of the broadcasting station, validated her commitment to preserving and showcasing her heritage through music. This acceptance of limited reach and distribution echoed her determination to prioritise her cultural identity and language, showcasing a deep reverence for her roots and the essence of her artistic expression.

Subsequently, despite the initial restriction that confined her Tshivenda music solely within SABC's broadcasting sphere, a new chapter unfolded for Mawela. Her artistry gradually transcended the limitations, finding its way onto other SABC radio stations that programmed Black music, like Radio Lebowa. As the winds of change swept through the radio landscape, the advent of Radio Venda provided an avenue for her Tshivenda music to flourish further, granting her compositions a

platform among her own people. Following the success of recording at Truetone, where her native language found resonance in commercial studio recording, Mawela's influence expanded. This newfound recognition led to prominent studios such as EMI and Mavuthela (Gallo) expressing a keen interest in her Tshivenda music. The shift in perception marked a turning point, as these influential studios sought to harness her musical talent in Tshivenda, recognising the value and richness her cultural expressions brought to the broader musical landscape. Mawela's journey, from initial limitations to garnering wider attention and acceptance for her Tshivenda music, underscored her pivotal role in breaking barriers and fostering appreciation for her cultural heritage within the music industry. The expansive trajectory traced by Mawela through numerous studios and recording companies serves as an unequivocal testament to the richly deserved nature of her awards and accomplishments.

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Within the prolific environment of Mavuthela, a hub of musical brilliance, numerous esteemed artists and groups left an indelible mark alongside Irene Mawela. Among these luminary acts were Izintombi Zomoya, the soulful harmonies of Mgababa Queens, and the compelling musical renditions by Irene and the Zebra Queen and Irene and the Sweet Melodians. The Mahotella Queens, known for their vibrant performances, also shared this vibrant musical space alongside artists such as Mac Mathunjwa, and the versatile Jacob Radebe, fondly recognised as 'Mpharanyana,' who lent his vocal talents as a backing vocalist. The line-up of talent extended further to encompass the skilled contributions of William or Vusi Mthethwa, Mahlazi Emelo, the captivating Patience Africa, and the enchanting melodies of Alice Dasa and Dalsie Luthuli. Additionally, the music world witnessed the evocative sounds of Susan Gabatshane and the iconic ensemble Ladysmith Black Mambazo, originally known for their signature Pennywhistle style. Notably, Zeph Nkabinde, a pivotal figure at Mavuthela, commenced their musical journey before achieving fame at Gallo Records under the leadership of Joseph Tshabalala. Walter and the Beggars were among the esteemed acts that added to the vibrant musical fabric that defined the illustrious legacy of Mavuthela. These diverse and influential artists collectively contributed to a rich history of musical brilliance, each leaving an indelible mark within the esteemed corridors of Mavuthela.

Mavuthela Studios emerged as a pivotal launchpad for numerous Black artists, particularly those performing in groups, propelling them towards widespread fame before they transitioned into their own solo careers. Among these noteworthy transformations, the renowned artist



'Mahlathini' made a significant journey from his origins as *Isilwane se mbazo* during his tenure at EMI. His birth name, Simon Nkabinde, resonated as he established his early music career, earning the moniker *Isilwane se mbazo* based on one of his songs that served as a cautionary tale, warning children about societal perils. As his musical prowess expanded and evolved, the transition to Gallo Records marked a significant shift for him. It was at Gallo where he transformed into the iconic figure known as Mahlathini. This name change not only marked a significant moment in his career but also symbolised his evolution into a legendary figure in South African music. The Gallo period became synonymous with his rise to prominence, embracing the charismatic and authoritative presence for which he became globally recognised. Mavuthela Studios, with its nurturing and transformative environment, played a pivotal role in shaping the careers of artists like Mahlathini, providing a launching pad for their eventual individual acclaim. The studio served as a springboard for artists transitioning from group performances to establishing themselves as influential solo musicians in the vibrant South African music landscape.

In the realm of Tshivenda music, Irene Mawela's influence extended far and wide, collaborating with a spectrum of esteemed artists and musicians. She worked in tandem with talented figures such as Eric Mukhesa, Albert Mundalamo, Elvis Mandiza, the Sibasa Pirates, Christopher Mathogo, Alpheus Ramavhea, and the ensemble Auwa. Within these collaborations, Mawela's role primarily centred on providing her exceptional talents as a backing vocalist, contributing her mesmerising voice to elevate the musical compositions of these artists. Notably, her vocal prowess didn't merely stop at supporting these artists. In conjunction with Alpheus Ramavhea, Albert Mundalamo, and Christopher Mathogo, as well as Auwa, Mawela assumed a multifaceted role, singularly managing and harmonising various vocal parts, seamlessly transitioning between soprano, alto, and tenor ranges. Her remarkable versatility allowed her to add depth and richness to their musical compositions, contributing to the intricate layers of melody and harmony within their albums. Mawela's involvement as a backing vocalist and her multifaceted vocal contributions underscored her ability to infuse diverse musical pieces with depth and dimension, amplifying the overall richness and complexity of these Tshivenda musical collaborations. Her remarkable vocal abilities not only supported but elevated the musical artistry of these accomplished artists, cementing her as an essential figure within the history of Tshivenda music.

## Notable Mawela tracks



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**Figure 7.4** One of Mawela's old records in 1976 which was released under the Sotho language music.

1. *NDIALA* – THE SWEET SIXTEENS (1972)
2. *SELEMO SEKENE* – THE ZEBRAS (1976)
3. *INSIZWA* – THE TELEGRAM SPECIALS (c.1962)
4. *ARIYENI MURALENI* – IRENE MAWELA (1982)
5. *LALA KAHLE* – THE SWEET SIXTEENS (1971)
6. *ABAKHULU* – IRENE AND THE SWEET MELODIANS (1974)
7. *MME ANGA KHOTSI ANGA* – IRENE MAWELA (1983)
8. *BAJIKI BEJIKILE* – IRENE AND THE SWEET MELODIANS (c.1976)
9. *ANGILALA* – MGABABA QUEENS (c.1973)
10. *JULY HANDICAP* – KILLINGSTONE STARS (c.1957)
11. *TAP TAP NTSHEBE* – DARK CITY SISTERS (c.1961)
12. *MAMORWESI* – KILLINGSTONE STARS (c.1961)
13. *BUYA KUNZIMA* – THE SWEET SIXTEENS (c.1962)
14. *OUR LOVE SO GREAT* – THE PRETTY DOLLS (c.1962)

15. ROSE – DARK CITY SISTERS (1962)
16. *THULA THULA* – THE ZEBRAS (1976)
17. *MALUME LEBELLA* – IRENE AND THE SWEET MELODIANS (c.1976)
18. *SIDL’IMALI ZETHU* – MGABABA QUEENS (1973)
19. *TSHIWANYANA* – IZINTOMBI ZOMOYA (1974)
20. *MOGADIBO* – IZINTOMBI ZOMOYA (1974)
21. *UZWILE NA?* – MGABABA QUEENS (1972)
22. *NTSHWARELE NTATE* – MAHOTELLA QUEENS (1975)
23. *LOVA NGIYEKELA* – IZINTOMBI ZOMOYA (c.1975)
24. *RE BASADI KAOFELA* – MAHOTELLA QUEENS (1979)
25. *EMARABINI* – IZINTOMBI ZOMOYA (c.1975)
26. YOU PROMISE – IRENE AND THE SWEET MELODIANS (1978)
27. *THABA TSWEU* – IRENE AND THE SWEET MELODIANS (1982)
28. *MPULELE* – MAHOTELLA QUEENS (1979)
29. *HAO NKARABE* – IRENE MAWELA (1983)
30. *OITSHWARE HANTLE* – IRENE MAWELA (1983)

## Conclusion

The array of awards and recognition Mawela’s amassed stands as a testament to her enduring impact. These accolades reflect not just the breadth of her talent but also the depth of her commitment to preserving and sharing the beauty of Tshivenda music. Mawela’s extraordinary journey through the realms of South African music is a tale of unparalleled talent, unwavering commitment, and enduring impact. From her formative years at Gallo at Mavuthela in 1974 to the pinnacle of her career marked by the prestigious Order of Ikhamanga in 2023, Mawela’s trajectory is a testament to her multifaceted brilliance and cultural stewardship. Her early recognition, including a runner-up position for the Best Song Award in 1974 alongside Brenda Fassie, heralded the arrival of a luminary in the making. As Mawela traversed the evolving landscape of Venda music in the early 1980s, her consecutive triumphs at the SABC/Radio Venda awards affirmed her as a consistent force, earning the Best Song Award for three consecutive years and further claiming the Best Singer category from 1982 to 1984. These accolades underscored her musical versatility, spanning languages and cultural dimensions, solidifying her prominence in traditional and cultural music.

The subsequent decades witnessed a cascade of honours, with dual awards in both Sotho and Venda categories, Night of the 50s and 60s Awards, and recognition from the Department of Arts and Culture, showcasing Mawela's enduring influence across diverse periods and genres. Her contributions expanded beyond music, earning her accolades such as the Women Contribution Award and the National Living Treasure Golden Shield Heritage Award, highlighting her societal impact and cultural custodianship. The crowning moments in 2010 with the Women Contribution Award, 2017 with the National Living Treasure Golden Shield Heritage Award, and 2019 with a spectrum of honours set the stage for the pinnacle recognition in 2023 – the Order of Ikhamanga. This esteemed honour encapsulated Mawela's exceptional commitment, cultural ambassadorship, and transformative impact on South African music. It positioned her among the luminaries of the Order, affirming her legacy as a beacon of inspiration and a custodian of the nation's musical heritage. In this grand collection of achievements, Irene Mawela emerges not just as a celebrated artist but as a cultural icon whose melodies transcended linguistic, cultural, and generational boundaries. Through the conferment of the Order of Ikhamanga, her name is forever etched in the annals of South Africa's cultural heritage, ensuring that her influence resonates for generations to come. Irene Mawela's story is not just one of personal triumph but a celebration of the enduring power of artistry to shape and enrich a nation's cultural narrative.

## Conclusion

Dr. Irene Mawela's exceptional upbringing and life journey distinctly distinguished her from numerous musicians of her era who sought to advocate for the Venda community through music but encountered formidable challenges. Being raised in Gauteng bestowed upon her a remarkable advantage of multilingualism, empowering her to adeptly navigate the intricate landscapes of the music industry, which predominantly favoured more commonly spoken languages. This linguistic versatility not only set her apart but also provided her with a unique edge in breaking through barriers that many other musicians faced in the pursuit of representing their cultural heritage through music. Her immersion in diverse musical styles played a pivotal role in shaping her musical growth, affording her the opportunity to craft her distinct artistic identity. The advent of Radio Bantu served as a critical platform for the promotion of vernacular languages, marking a notable milestone. Nevertheless, this milestone was not impervious to the convoluted political intricacies and bureaucratic hurdles imposed by the era's separate development policies. Despite these challenges, this period provided an avenue for Dr. Irene Mawela to hone her unique musical voice, utilising the platform to both preserve and innovate within the rich cultural landscape while navigating the complexities that were deeply entrenched within the political framework.

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Throughout Mawela's journey, she encountered a multitude of hurdles and obstacles, each presenting its own unique challenge. However, her indomitable resilience and unyielding determination stood as unwavering pillars that ultimately triumphed. These qualities highlighted her profound dedication to not only singing in her native language but also fervently advocating for and elevating the cultural heritage of her community. Her unwavering commitment was a testament to her relentless pursuit, navigating the intricate terrain of the music industry and societal norms, steadfast in her mission to preserve and celebrate her community's cultural essence through her music. Her resilience not only symbolised her personal strength but also served as an inspirational beacon for others facing similar adversities, showcasing the power of determination in overcoming barriers to preserve cultural identity and musical expression.

Mawela's career stands as a compelling testament to the strenuous path taken by Venda musicians within the vibrant urban landscape of Gauteng, particularly Johannesburg. The journey for many

aspiring musicians from the Venda community has been marked by formidable hurdles, which, for some, proved insurmountable. Tragically, this arduous pursuit led to the abandonment of dreams for some, while others, in their passionate pursuit of a music career, met untimely and heartbreaking ends. The struggle of these musicians in navigating the music industry within the city's bustling environment underscored the immense challenges they faced challenges that not only hindered artistic aspirations but, in some tragic instances, resulted in the loss of lives. Mawela's career, amidst this backdrop, illuminates the resilience and determination required to overcome these obstacles and serves as a touching reminder of the sacrifices and struggles endured by many in the pursuit of their musical dreams.

Mawela, against considerable odds, not only forged her unique path but also extended a guiding hand to her fellow Venda musicians who traversed a similar journey. Her benevolence and mentorship were far-reaching, going beyond mere words, as she actively took on the role of a backing vocalist for numerous emerging Venda musicians who ventured to Gauteng in pursuit of recording their music. This act of generosity and support wasn't just a symbolic gesture; it was a tangible demonstration of her commitment to uplifting and nurturing talent within her community. Mawela's assistance as a backing vocalist wasn't merely a musical collaboration but a heartfelt investment in the success and representation of budding Venda artists. Her selflessness not only cleared a path for her own success but also paved the way for others, setting a remarkable example of how one's accomplishments can be used to empower and bolster the aspirations of those following in her footsteps.

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Pioneering the recording of an album in the Tshivenda language was just the beginning of Mawela's impactful journey. Recognising the significance of her own breakthrough, she actively extended crucial support and invaluable guidance to those who sought to emulate her pioneering steps. In a highly competitive landscape within the South African music industry, Mawela served as a guiding beacon, ensuring that aspiring musicians not only had a shot at success but were equipped with the necessary tools and wisdom to navigate the intricate pathways of the music world. Her mentorship wasn't merely an act of passing on knowledge; it was a strategic effort to fortify the dreams and potential of emerging artists, providing them with the essential support and insight needed to navigate and thrive in an industry that often-posed numerous challenges. Mawela's actions exemplified her commitment to fostering a community of empowered musicians and cemented her legacy as more than just a trailblazer but also a dedicated mentor shaping the future of Tshivenda music within the broader South African musical landscape.

The captivating stories recounted by both Ramavhoya and Lotay stand as exceptional experiences and compelling testaments to Irene Mawela's extraordinary triumph in the vibrant history of the South African music industry. Faced with substantial challenges, Mawela showcased not only unwavering determination but a profound commitment to advocating for the right to express herself through song in her native language. For those who have been steadfast followers of her musical journey, Mawela's indomitable spirit and unyielding love for her art form resonate as defining elements of her legacy. Her resilience not only shattered barriers but also served as a beacon, illuminating the path for aspiring artists who sought to assert their cultural identity through music. The narratives shared by Ramavhoya and Lotay echo the powerful narrative of Mawela's unrelenting dedication, encapsulating the essence of her remarkable success and the enduring impact she has made within the intricate landscape of South Africa's music scene.

Irene Mawela's musical journey has woven an enduring heritage that has touched the lives of numerous individuals, leaving an indelible mark that resonates across generations. Her legacy, standing strong after an incredible seven decades in the music industry, remains an awe-inspiring testament to her profound influence. What's truly remarkable is her unyielding commitment to recording music, even at the age of 84, defying the conventional constraints of time. Her resilience and unwavering dedication not only keep her music alive but also serve as a living testament to the enduring strength and captivating power of her voice. Mawela's ongoing contributions in the industry not only symbolise her passion but also embody an unwavering commitment to her craft, reinforcing her status as an icon whose music continues to transcend time, leaving an everlasting imprint on the hearts and souls of her listeners.

The depth of Irene Mawela's influence is vividly evident in her son, who has embraced music as a lifelong career, undoubtedly influenced by her profound musical legacy. The resonating accounts shared by Ramavhoya and Lotay unequivocally underscore the far-reaching impact of Mawela's music. It becomes abundantly clear that her musical artistry goes beyond cultural boundaries, surpassing the limitations of historical confines. Her music serves as a unifying force, binding individuals together through the universal language of melody and emotion. Mawela's ability to traverse cultural divides and historical barriers is a testament to the remarkable power of her music, which acts as a bridge, connecting people regardless of their backgrounds, uniting them through the sheer emotive power of her melodies. The stories shared by her admirers illuminate the compelling truth that her musical resonance is not confined by borders, but instead, acts as a harmonious thread weaving together hearts and souls across diverse landscapes.

Irene Mawela's music stands as an unwavering beacon of solace and strength for countless individuals who ventured into their musical paths during an era of profound oppression in South Africa. This significant period was marred by the apartheid government's insidious tactics, which deliberately utilised discrimination based on language and culture to systematically segregate and suppress the populace. Mawela's musical contributions amid this tumultuous time carried a weight far beyond the lyrical and melodic; they were a form of resistance against the oppressive systems that aimed to silence voices and stifle cultural expression. Her songs echoed as anthems of resilience, resonating within the hearts of those yearning to break free from the suffocating confines of apartheid, providing not just melodies, but a source of courage and unity in the face of deep-seated institutional injustices. In a time when linguistic and cultural diversity were exploited as tools of division, Mawela's music served as a unifying force, a source of empowerment, and a testament to the unbreakable spirit of a people determined to transcend the oppressive barriers imposed upon them.

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During these challenging adversities, Irene Mawela encountered significant losses that extended beyond her musical repertoire to financial setbacks. The complexities of her situation were deeply rooted in the fact that a substantial portion of her extensive catalogue was registered under multiple pseudonyms, posing a formidable obstacle in establishing her true identity. This intricate web of aliases not only obscured her rightful recognition and attribution but also created a labyrinthine challenge in terms of managing and reclaiming her rightful artistic legacy. Consequently, this obscured identity not only affected her musical achievements but also led to substantial financial hurdles, complicating the pursuit of just compensation for her creative contributions. The intricate nature of her predicament, intertwined with the complexities of false attributions, posed a daunting barrier, hindering the rightful acknowledgment and recompense due to her for her immense musical contributions. In the midst of such adversity, Mawela faced not only the loss of her artistic identity but also financial strains, underscoring the profound impact of this convoluted situation on her life and career.

As a result, her obscured identity under various pseudonyms posed a significant barrier, impeding her ability to rightfully claim the royalties and compensation she deserved, thereby amplifying the injustices she faced. Confronted by these formidable challenges and enduring hardships, Irene Mawela's music still shines with an unwavering brilliance. Her musical contributions not only earned her numerous prestigious awards but also, despite the adversities, granted her the



invaluable recognition and deep reverence from society at large. This recognition is a testament to her enduring impact, demonstrating how her music transcends the hurdles placed upon her, radiating a profound cultural and artistic resonance that is revered and celebrated by audiences, showcasing the remarkable resilience and enduring influence of her musical legacy.

Irene Mawela's musical journey stands as a testament to the enduring spirit and resolute determination of a trailblazing artist. As the inaugural Venda Black female artist in an industry predominantly oriented towards Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho music, she confronted formidable obstacles. Her path was one that she forged through uncharted territories, breaking barriers and creating opportunities for future Venda musicians to follow suit in recording and celebrating their heritage in their native languages. In a landscape where representation was scarce, Mawela's pioneering efforts not only defied the norms but also became a pioneering force, inspiring a wave of cultural recognition and acceptance within the music industry. Her tenacity and unwavering resolve set the stage for a new era, leaving an indelible mark by showcasing the rich cultural diversity that exists within South Africa's musical landscape. Mawela's courageous journey not only empowered her own artistic expression but also served as a catalyst for change, opening doors for a more inclusive and diverse representation within the industry.

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Irene Mawela's musical odyssey was intricately woven into the fabric of significant historical events that defined an era, where pivotal moments like the Sharpeville Massacre and the establishment of Radio Bantu marked a transformative phase in the socio-economic and political landscape of South Africa. Amidst the tumultuous backdrop of these critical events, Mawela's journey unfolded, intertwined with the unfolding chapters of the nation's history. The Sharpeville Massacre, a tragic event that brought international attention to the injustices of apartheid, and the emergence of Radio Bantu, a platform dedicated to promoting indigenous languages, both symbolised the shifting tides within South Africa's socio-economic and political framework. Mawela's musical endeavours, against this historical canvas, not only reflected the pulse of the times but also served as a subtle yet powerful commentary on the socio-political climate, echoing the hopes, struggles, and aspirations of her people within a changing and often turbulent society. In navigating this landscape, Mawela's artistry became a vital thread in the music of South Africa's history, capturing the essence of an evolving nation through the soulful expressions of her music.

Persistently throughout her career, Irene Mawela tirelessly sought out recording studios that

would authentically embrace her language and culture. Her unwavering determination bore fruit when she successfully secured her first recording in Tshivenda at the Radio Venda studio, a profoundly pivotal moment that signified the breaking of barriers within the commercial recording industry. This achievement not only granted her the opportunity to sing in her mother tongue but also opened doors for representation of underrepresented languages within the broader music landscape. Mawela's tireless efforts not only marked a personal triumph but also represented a significant milestone in the industry, paving the way for more diverse linguistic and cultural expressions in South African music. This landmark recording not only validated her cultural identity but also stood as a ground breaking moment, signalling the industry's readiness to embrace linguistic diversity, setting the stage for future artists to express themselves in their native tongues.

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Irene Mawela's legacy transcends the realms of her musical ability. Her enduring imprint is not only etched in her melodies but is deeply intertwined with her unyielding courage and fervent dedication to what she believed was just and righteous. These qualities have elevated her to the status of a revered figure in the music sphere, positioning her as an emblematic champion of not just cultural expression but also equality and freedom. Her unwavering commitment to singing in her native language and advocating for the representation of underrepresented communities cemented her as a beacon of change within the music industry. Mawela's legacy embodies more than just musical excellence; it stands as a testament to the power of resilience, determination, and a relentless pursuit of justice, making her an inspirational figure revered for her unwavering stand for equality and freedom through the universal language of music.

Irene Mawela stands as a courageous and unwavering trailblazer, whose steadfast determination not only cleared pathways for others but also significantly enriched the cultural history and diversity of South African music. Her resolute spirit and unyielding commitment were not merely personal attributes but served as guiding lights that illuminated the way for emerging artists seeking to express their cultural heritage through music. Her influence extended beyond her own success, as she fearlessly championed for representation, making invaluable contributions to the expansive spectrum of South African music. Mawela's legacy is one of fortitude and cultural advocacy, leaving an enduring mark that transcends her own achievements, resonating as a testament to her profound impact on the vibrant, diverse musical landscape of South Africa.

The introduction of Radio Bantu served as a watershed moment for marginalised languages that had long been sidelined within the commercial music domain, grappling with limited access to studios and airplay. There existed a prevailing notion that these languages lacked substantial followings, consequently justifying their exclusion from recorded music. Irene Mawela, however, defied this prevailing argument by achieving a significant breakthrough – her decision to sing in her native Venda on Radio Bantu. This courageous move not only shattered the imposed barriers but also stood as a bold assertion of the cultural richness and significance of languages like Venda. In doing so, Mawela not only demonstrated the viability and significance of representing underrepresented languages but also played a pivotal role in challenging and reshaping the narrative, paving the way for the recognition and celebration of linguistic diversity within the music industry. Her ground breaking step on Radio Bantu stood as a beacon, signalling a shift towards inclusion and representation, creating a platform where linguistic diversity could flourish and be celebrated within the expansive realm of South African music.

The establishment of Radio Bantu not only served as a platform for Irene Mawela's breakthrough but also reignited a sense of hope among numerous musicians who had long grappled with the daunting challenge of getting their music recorded and heard. This pivotal radio station didn't just mark a turning point in Mawela's career; it represented a collective turning point for artists navigating similar struggles. Beyond just broadcasting, the advent of the Radio Bantu mobile studio presented an extended opportunity, a beacon of hope for these musicians. This portable recording setup not only provided them with a chance to preserve their music but also offered a means to share their cultural expressions on a broader scale. Its introduction represented a crucial moment of inclusivity and accessibility, facilitating the recording and dissemination of music that had previously been marginalised and underserved within the commercial recording landscape. The Radio Bantu mobile studio became a symbol of empowerment, rekindling optimism among struggling musicians, extending a vital platform for their voices and melodies to be preserved and shared, thus propelling a wave of cultural representation within the broader musical collection of South Africa.

This represented a momentous leap forward in recognising and embracing the immense cultural diversity and richness inherent in South Africa's music landscape. The advent of the Radio Bantu mobile studio not only offered a pivotal opportunity for musicians but also signified a powerful shift towards acknowledging the multiplicity of cultural expressions. While this chance to record

through the Radio Bantu mobile studio marked a crucial turning point in fostering inclusivity, it's noteworthy that many musicians still indicated a preference for commercial studios. Despite the invaluable opportunity provided by Radio Bantu, some artists continued to seek avenues within the established commercial recording sphere, possibly driven by a desire for wider exposure, better resources, or a perception of greater legitimacy associated with these mainstream studios. This nuanced preference underscored the complexities within the music industry, wherein artists navigated between opportunities for cultural representation and the allure of established commercial platforms, balancing the desire for cultural authenticity with the pursuit of wider recognition and resources. The existence of these preferences highlighted the intricate dynamics at play within the music industry, showcasing the diverse paths artists traversed in their quest for representation and success.

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The recordings made by artists for Radio Bantu were frequently assimilated into the radio's archives, effectively becoming the property of the station. Ideally, these artists would have favoured recording in commercial studios, where established copyright and distribution structures between musicians and recording companies could offer a clearer pathway to ownership and royalties. This inclination towards commercial studios stemmed from the desire for a more structured and transparent system governing ownership and profits from their music. The preference for commercial studios hinged on the familiarity and established frameworks these spaces provided, ensuring a more comprehensible arrangement regarding ownership rights, royalties, and a structured method for the distribution of earnings from the music produced. Artists sought these established avenues, hoping for a fairer and more transparent process that ensured their rights as creators were preserved and recognised, thereby affording them a more defined and equitable standing in the realm of music ownership and financial compensation.

This underscores the persistent challenge faced by musicians who aim to share their voices and cultural heritage through their music while striving for fair recognition, compensation, and control over their artistic output. The opportunity to record her music with the radio studio marked a crucial and transformative turning point in Irene Mawela's career, showcasing the complexities and hurdles that many musicians encounter in their pursuit of artistic expression and fair compensation. In the broader context of the music industry, Mawela's experience highlights the ongoing struggle faced by artists striving for a balance between artistic expression and fair

remuneration, an ongoing challenge in the quest for equitable recognition and control of their creative works. The ability to record with Radio Bantu represented an important milestone in Mawela's journey, showcasing both the opportunities and the persistent difficulties that musicians encounter in the endeavour to assert their cultural heritage while navigating the intricacies of ownership, compensation, and control over their musical creations.

This opportunity served as a crucial launching pad, offering Irene Mawela both the platform and the confidence to fully commit to recording in her native language, Tshivenda, without making any compromises. As the recording studios began to recognise the viability and market potential demonstrated by the establishment of the Venda radio station, Mawela's trajectory towards preserving her linguistic and cultural heritage through her music became more defined and attainable. The pivotal role of this platform allowed Mawela to authentically express herself without diluting the essence of her cultural identity, providing a robust foundation for her to embrace and celebrate her native language in her musical expressions. As the industry recognised the demand and potential through the presence of the Venda radio station, it not only validated Mawela's artistic choices but also provided a clearer pathway for her and other artists to unreservedly embrace and express their linguistic and cultural heritage, leading to a more resolute and confident pursuit of their creative endeavours.

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## Glossary

***Mafhuwe*** – *Mafhuwe* stands out as a captivating form of artistic expression, primarily practiced by women during their domestic activities like grinding meals or performing washing rituals by the riverside. This distinctive technique involves the skilful art of crafting music through the ethereal means of humming or singing without the use of explicit lyrics. In the midst of these personal and routine moments, women effortlessly blend their chores with the spontaneous creation of melodies, resulting in a unique fusion of music and daily life.

***Mbaqanga*** – is a musical style that originated in South Africa during the early 1950s, and has not only stood the test of time but has thrived as a vibrant and influential genre, largely driven by the artistic contributions of Zulu musicians. Its distinctiveness lies in a sound that blends the soulful resonance of lead singers with harmonious backing vocals. What sets *mbaqanga* apart is its unique instrumental arrangement, marked by the rhythmic pulse of guitars, the foundational depth of bass, the propulsive force of the kick drum, and occasionally, the textured tones introduced by a keyboard, sometimes utilised as a synthesiser.

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***Muzika wa sialala*** – *Muzika wa sialala* stands as a musical genre that embodies a widely embraced Venda musical style, skilfully intertwining traditional elements deeply ingrained in the cultural heritage of Venda music. It effortlessly integrates cherished components such as children's songs, *malende*, *tshigombela*, and the distinctive rhythmic patterns of *tshikona*. The melodic and motivic structures intricately woven into the tapestry of this music are artfully drawn from the rich reservoir of Venda's musical heritage, resulting in a captivating expression of the cultural vibrancy and musical ingenuity of the Venda people.

***nuñu-nuñu*** – The term *nuñu-nuñu* encapsulates a poignant and enchanting melody that captivates the listener, evoking a sense of melancholic beauty. This musical allure has the power to enamour one's ears and instil a deep appreciation for the harmonies being played. It represents an indescribable quality in music that compels individuals to sing along, dance, or express any form of admiration. Often associated with a delightful sweetness, *nunu-nunu* is occasionally paired with the term *mutoli*,<sup>1</sup> meaning honey, creating the expression *nuñu-nuñu ya mutoli* to signify the sweetness akin to that of a honeybee.

**Phalaphala FM** – formerly recognised as Radio Venda, holds a central role as a cultural cornerstone, pulsating with the essence of Venda through its broadcast. Originating in 1965 as Bantustan Radio Venda, the station has undergone a transformative journey, emerging as a dynamic and influential force that led to its rebranding as Phalaphala FM in 1998. This change not only signalled a shift in nomenclature but also stood as a testament to the station’s dedication to championing and preserving the cultural music and language of the Venda people.

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# THE MUSIC LEGACY OF IRENE MATODZI MAWELA

FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT TO SING  
IN THE TSHIVENDA LANGUAGE

EVANS NTSHENGEDZENI  
NETSHIVHAMBE

In every society, brave women like Dr. Irene Matodzi Mawela are not only essential—they are transformative forces of change. Our world needs courageous women who dare to challenge norms, standing firm in the face of adversity. Dr. Mawela exemplified this bravery, especially during the oppressive apartheid era when women were expected to remain silent, accept diminished rights, and adhere to a patriarchal system that tried to dictate their place. In the face of laws and expectations designed to suppress her voice, Dr. Mawela fearlessly fought for the right to sing in her own language, undeterred by the potential loss of her recording contract and music career. She understood that her expression was not only a personal right but also a broader symbol of resistance. Her unwavering stance became a powerful testament to the strength of women and the resilience needed to confront a male-dominated society that sought to silence her.

This book celebrates Dr. Mawela's life as a beacon of hope, pride, and resilience—a source of inspiration for young women who may face similar struggles. It tells the story of a relentless battle for self-expression and the right to share her culture, fought by a woman determined to succeed against all odds. Her journey serves as both a tribute to her bravery and a rallying call to other women who have, in their own ways, confronted and overcome personal and societal battles. More than a narrative of one woman's victory, this book honours the collective power of women who strive for change in male-dominated spaces. It is a testament to the unbreakable spirit of women like Dr. Mawela and to the enduring power of those who, with determination and courage, pave the way for a more equitable world.

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