

## MAJOR ZULU AT FOUNDRY 616

by Eric Myers

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Major Zulu  
Foundry 616, Ultimo, Sydney  
November 4, 2022

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*Major Zulu in performance at Foundry 616, with drummer George Greenhill in the background... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO*

One of the closing concerts of the 2022 Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival, celebrated at Foundry 616 with the performance by singer Major Zulu, was a reminder of how best to hear jazz-related musics in today's world – in the small, intimate jazz club, where one can be close to the action, and feel the music in one's bones. Long may this sort of precious venue survive.

The women's festival had a massive program, but I was present at two concerts only: the October 27 opening at the Seymour Centre, featuring the Melissa Aldana Quartet, (which I reviewed for *Limelight*\*); and this closing concert on November 4 at Foundry.

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\*Eric Myers, "Sydney International Women's Jazz Festival Opening Concert" at this link <https://ericmyersjazz.com/limelight-2>

Major Zulu's gig was sold out. It was such an immaculate performance that it leaves a reviewer somewhat speechless. What can one say about a performance that has so much going for it, and ticks so many boxes? Here is a real artist, who was good enough last year when - owing to covid and international participation was light - she headlined the 2021 festival.

Resplendent in a wide-brimmed black hat and long dreadlocks, Zulu opened with the powerful Nina Simone signature tune *Ain't Got No, I Got Life*. Other songs associated with Simone followed, such as *I Put a Spell on You*, *Please Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*, and - in a strong version which brought her first set to a close - *Feeling Good*, her treatment of which was so much better than the famous Michael Bublé version.



*Nina Simone: unlike some other 20<sup>th</sup> century hits, her tunes don't seem to date; they always sound contemporary...*

Unlike other popular hits of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it's interesting that those Nina Simone tunes don't seem to date; they always sound contemporary, as heard on Fine Music Sydney's "Urban Jazz Lounge", Leita Hutchings' popular Saturday program.



Hutchings plays Simone's anthem *My Baby Just Cares for Me* regularly, and I was very glad that Zulu included it in her program. When it came to the famous piano solo, there was a subtle but at the same time very effective electric piano solo from Roshan Kumarage - a salutary reminder of how good Zulu's backing band is.

That band includes a number of brilliant young jazz musicians, part of an outstanding new generation which has emerged in Sydney over the last few years. I know Kumarage and Dave Quinn (electric bass) best as members of Tom Avgenicos's innovative quartet Delay 45. The outstanding Zulu band is completed by Harry Tompsett (guitar), George Greenhill (drums), and Charles Casson (trumpet), with accompaniment that sounds just right for Zulu's music. My strong feeling was that all of them were exceedingly well educated jazz musicians.



*Major Zulu (right) with guitarist Harry Tompsett, in performance at Foundry...  
PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO*

While listening to Major Zulu I felt connected to many precious moments in the history of black music. I'm old enough to remember hearing Sammy Davis Jr doing *Mr Bojangles* at the old Chequers nightclub in the 70s. That was a moving

experience, and it was good to hear that, in her version of *Mr Bojangles*, Zulu was able to capture the deep sadness inherent in that immortal song.

Similarly with *Trying Times*, the great Donny Hathaway composition with which Zulu opened her second set. Since Roberta Flack presented this on her debut album *First Take* (1969) her YouTube version has apparently been updated to take account of very recent events, such as the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

In turn Major Zulu's YouTube version of *Trying Times*, an anti-racism document filmed beautifully in black and white, is in my view a masterpiece, effectively connecting Zulu to current social issues, such as Black Lives Matter. While the element of preaching in Zulu's delivery at Foundry was always subtle, she was still able to deliver a potent message to a captive audience, as expressed in *Trying Times*: "What're you trying to do, to make this a better land?"



*Major Zulu as she appears in her YouTube clip "Trying Times": a black & white masterpiece... PHOTO COURTESY YOUTUBE*

Up close the nuances in Zulu's artistry were fascinating: as a singer she knows when to speak, rather than sing, the words; when to raise the volume of her voice for effect; when to move to the music; when to dance. Like all great singers, she understands understatement; she has stage presence; and, like a skilled actor, she knows how to sell a song. Add to that her now well-known story – born in Zambia, then to London, and on to France, where she found freedom in the late-night jazz clubs of Paris, and arrival in Australia in 2017 with her Australian partner. It's an intoxicating narrative.

Add to that her considerable talent as a composer. While she appears to be not a prolific songwriter, her excellent songs such as *Broken* and *Shine Your Love Lights* considerably spiced up her program, and gave her an opportunity to bring the audience, ever so sparingly, into her private life.



*L-R, Roshan Kumarage (electric piano), Harry Tompsett (guitar), Major Zulu, George Greenhill (drums), Charles Casson (trumpet)... PHOTO CREDIT SHANE ROZARIO*

In an era when lines between musical genres are disbursing, I feel the pedantry about who is a jazz singer and who is not, is now outdated. While some are undoubtedly pure jazz singers – Ella, Sarah, Carmen, Betty Carter, Sheila Jordan – there are others who have a foot, not only in jazz, but also in R & B, soul, rock, pop and whatever else. Consider an artist like the above-mentioned Roberta Flack, whose music I’ve always loved. It’s never occurred to me to ask whether Roberta is a jazz singer or not; she’s simply a great singer who supersedes genre. I would put Major Zulu in much the same category.

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*Major Zulu’s “Trying Times” video is at this link on YouTube*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmLIZiRkDKI>

*Major Zulu’s live performance of her composition “Broken”, recorded at the Art Gallery of NSW, is at this link on YouTube*  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OELPyZBamfI>