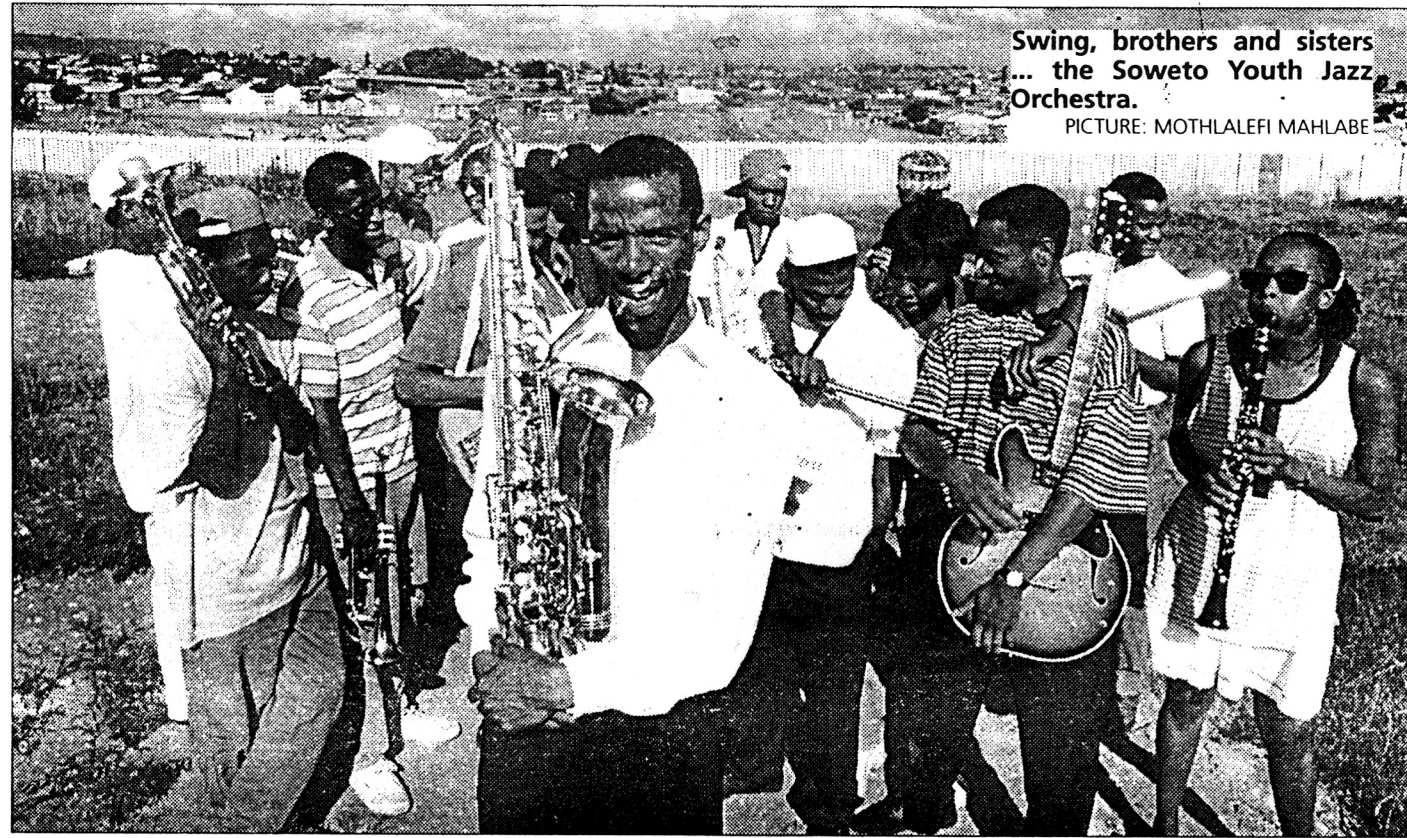


Building up great music from scratch



Swing, brothers and sisters ... the Soweto Youth Jazz Orchestra.

PICTURE: MOTHLALEFI MAHLABE

THE SOWETO Youth Jazz Orchestra (right) is a determined and talented group. Members spoke to Andile Xaba

It ain't exactly the rebirth of the blues, but there is a genesis of a similar kind at the Pelmama Music Academy down Dobsonville way.

The Soweto Youth Jazz Orchestra are newcomers to the music scene, but they are already a working band with regular gigs slotted for the Jazz Warehouse in Diepkloof.

Featured soloists will be trumpeter Prince Lengoasa, saxophonist Khaya Mahlangu and Mokale Koapeng on keyboards.

Making up the bulk of the band are eager students from Pelmama. While the band displays obvious talent, members are aware of the challenge ahead.

Says teacher and bandleader

Mokale Koapeng: "We rarely talk of 'excellence' or 'standards' at Pelmama. In most cases our students' background is practically non-existent, so we can't claim to be the best, but we've got something good here."

As proven by numerous top musicians, jazz has always been the music of the underdog.

And, at Pelmama there is plenty of determination to learn basic score reading, transcribing and, of course, playing with an ensemble.

For students at Pelmama music lessons are not some kind of distraction as is often the case in privileged middle-class society. Music is a means to a better life.

Take bassist Andile Ndebele,

who comes from a one-parent family. The Ndebele household is not by any stretch of the imagination well off. But a conviction in what he is doing compels him to find a way to pay his fees and to practise every day, despite shortages of sheet music and lack of money to buy strings.

"Generally students don't have instruments or space to practise at home," says Koapeng.

"But we are luckier than most because we have a hall to rehearse in and equipment to perform with."

Like the majority of the students Andile started playing his instrument relatively late (he is now 22 years old). One may wonder if the whole process is worthwhile.

The music industry is tough to

crack even for seasoned performers. Will he be able to make a career as a musician? "Sure," is the answer.

Having heard him in performance I would not disagree with him, but sadly, he is an exception.

Says Koapeng: "Most of our students drop out, mostly because of pressure to start earning money. Music is not the type of profession that happens immediately. Training takes time."

"Some find that they are caught in a trap. Most people go to college to learn to play, only to find that because there aren't performance venues in the township they have to go back to the classroom as teachers to make a bit of money."

Soweto has approximately 3 mil-

lion residents, but there are two live music venues which operate on a regular basis - the Blue Fountain Tavern and the Jazz Warehouse - and there are two music schools - Pelmama Academy and the Madimba Institute of African Music at Funda Centre.

"Our programme is like a drop in the ocean. What we are trying to do is redress the balance as regards to music education in general and jazz education in particular."

"People like Sibongile Khumalo and the Soweto String Quartet came out of tradition that was in place during the 1970s era."

"Now that those structures are gone we have to start building from scratch."