

A musical visit from Botswana - Shanti Lo with John Blackie Selolwane



The wonderful Afro - pop, soul and jazz singer **Shanti Lo** with world renowned guitarist John Selolwane from Botswana will perform together with Swedish jazzsinger Anna Christoffersson at TV4 – Nyhetsmorgon on Thursday August 4 and Stockholm Pride Festival at the Solidarity Gala on August 5 2011.

In this interview for Dumela webmagazine **Shanti Lo** talks about his coming visit to Sweden, his music and about the rights for homosexual, bisexual and transgendered people.

Good news! you are coming to Stockholm to perform - what does it mean for you and what expectations do you have?

- It means a great deal! First of all this marks my first ever trip to Sweden (to Europe in actual fact), and I am excited just to be given the privilege to visit in this capacity. As a young artist growing up, it was always my dream to crack the European market somehow, and I vowed to myself that whatever first opportunity came my way to do so or to perform I would embrace it! I would like to draw from its people the rich culture that I've heard a lot about and to just experience it for myself. I am expecting a very professional working environment as I believe some of the best professionals in music, journalism etc. have been hand-picked to work with me. I expect to learn a lot from this team of people and from my experience and stay there.

What do you know about Sweden and have you been to Europe before?

- Well I know that the group ABBA comes from Sweden (haha). I understand Sweden is a very liberal country and advanced in a lot of ways. I also know that Botswana has had long-standing bilateral relations with Sweden since the 1960's, and that we have a diplomatic mission set there. I'm planning to learn as much as I can about the country before my arrival there.

Your name is Shanti Lo - is that an artist name and what does it mean?

- Yes, this is an "artist" name. Very early on in my career I realised that I needed a name that would be easily pronounceable by people from other countries. But it also had to have relevance and meaning so it is actually derived from my birth middle name Kagiso, translated to Hindi which means "peace", and I believe it's a name that is encompassing of everything that I stand for. Lo is short for my family name "Loeto", which means "journey". Another reason is that I understood that the music industry can sometimes be marred by controversy and that my own career would be no exception, and I didn't want to drag my family name "in the mud", (so to put it)!

When did your first start to play music and where does your interest come from?

- I started to sing when I was about 9 or 10 years old. I believe it's mostly hereditary. A number of my family have been involved in music one way or the other at different stages in their lives. My mother was the first female artist in Botswana to record an album in the late 1990's. My maternal grandfather has recently told me that it's no mistake that I

became a musician - he was in a singing quartet in the 1940's and also used to be a ballroom dancer. So music has always been an important part of us.

How would you describe the music culture in Botswana - typical influences from Botswana and can you hear them in your music?

- Firstly the industry itself has grown in leaps and bounds in a very short space of time, to the point of recognition in other countries that are in some way exposed to it. This is a very good thing because now, we have a sound that is derived from our own folk music and is therefore quite essential to us as a people. We no longer just define ourselves through a regional sound. Typical influences are different sub-genres that are mostly determined by the minor differences in our sub-cultures as Botswana. Examples of that are Borankana, from the Bangwaketse, my birth tribe, Tsutsube, from Basarwa and Phatisi from the Bakwena.

What inspires you as an artist and musician?

- I get inspired by different things in life. I get inspired by different music, folk tales, and just life experiences in general. They could be first-hand experiences and/or otherwise.

How would you describe your music?

- My music is a blend of different elements of Botswana's folk music and jazz. A typical **Shanti Lo** song would have a heavy Tswana lyrical content, be rhythmic but have a combination of a typical Western and African arrangement.

On your new album "Lorato" you play with John Selolwane the famous guitarist that played with Paul Simon's album "Graceland". What does it mean for you to play with him and how would you describe him as a musician?

- He's extremely passionate about music and imparting his vast life experiences in music. He's a good teacher and a perfectionist. This therefore means that like me, he can be very stubborn (hahaha) – I wouldn't want it any other way. It's a great honour to work with him!

Your dreams and visions for the future as an artist?

- To continue to do music because it's what I love to do and what God's life's purpose is for me. There's still so much I want to share with the world. I also realize that because it's a gift I also have a responsibility my God, myself to my people to contribute to a cultural legacy that all can be proud of.

You are invited by the "Stockholm Pride Festival" to play on the Solidarity Gala in Stockholm "Kungsträdgården" on the Friday August 5. The festival started 1998 and aims to create a huge free zone for homosexual, bisexual and transgendered people, the LGBT community. In what way are you engaged in the LGBT issues?

- Not actively I'm afraid. This is not necessarily intentional or unintentional. So far I've only seen my role as a cultural activist and contributor in my community through music. I have always wanted to set trends and aspire to be a pioneer and as such I am very aware that this can and may sometimes lead one into certain paths and I am embracing of the fact that my responsibilities will grow and should! My motto in life is to carry out my work diligently, cautiously, graciously and with love and respect - and not to mention standing up for what I stand for or believe in because that's how I was brought up. So if my intuition tells me that any course is a worthy course for ME to pursue, then I WILL definitely support it!



On Thursday August 4 you will perform with John Selolwane and Anna Christoffersson at TV4 – Nyhetsmorgon. Do you often perform on tv-shows?

- Yes, I often perform at events, or ceremonies meant for television transmission, and sometimes they are live. I have recently performed at the Botswana Music Awards Ceremony, Botswana National Sports Council Awards Ceremony, Coca-Cola Sports Awards Ceremony, Be Mobile Sports Awards and Miss Botswana Beauty Pageant. My country is big on sport development and promotion!

Would it be possible to have a Pride Festival and Solidarity Gala for the rights of homosexual, bisexual and transgendered people in Botswana?

- I believe the environment is not very conducive at the moment, mostly because quite a considerable portion of the population is not ready, and therefore not necessarily embracing of a major change or shift in the current cultural set-up. However it must be noted that Botswana has a very active, informed and interactive LGBT community.

Is this something that you wish would happen? If so, why?

- But of course! As a citizen of a country that has embraced and exercised a sovereign democracy for the last 45 years I believe same should be a natural progression and that any solid constitution should be all encompassing and holistically protective of all communities.

In Sweden you will take part in discussions around the rights of homosexuals in Africa and in particular Botswana where it is against the law to live as homosexual. Why do you think it's still against the law to live as homosexual in Botswana?

- It is my personal view that culture, religious beliefs and public perception have a lot to do with this, and that in a situation like this where mindsets are modeled around such, it would be a challenge to change them easily, however prejudicial they might be to a community. It is also my view that a healthy living environment therefore should be embracing of culture as an evolving and ever-changing dynamic, prey of course to the different influencing elements specifically those that affect Botswana, particularly the LGBT community. However it should be noted that in terms of the constitution of Botswana, section 164 of the penal code says that:

"Any person who has carnal knowledge of an animal; or permits a male person to have carnal knowledge of him or her against the order of nature, is guilty of an offence and is liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding seven years."

So it is therefore my view that this law is non-specific and only implies the aforementioned (ie. That living as a homosexual is illegal).

How does the fact that homosexuality is against the law affect the society and the LGBT people?

- I believe it denies them the right to associate and express their sexuality and as a result therefore putting a limitation to the kinds of services they can access, especially those relating to health. It is why organizations like Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and

HIV/AIDS (BONELA), and in view of public perception and other factors, advocates for the de-criminalisation of this law.

What will it take to change this law and do you think it will happen?

- A collective approach by all stakeholders involved and affected, and recognising the constitution to be supreme above other factors and or structures and devoid of prejudice.

Is there a problem for you and other people from Botswana to speak open about the rights of LGBT people?

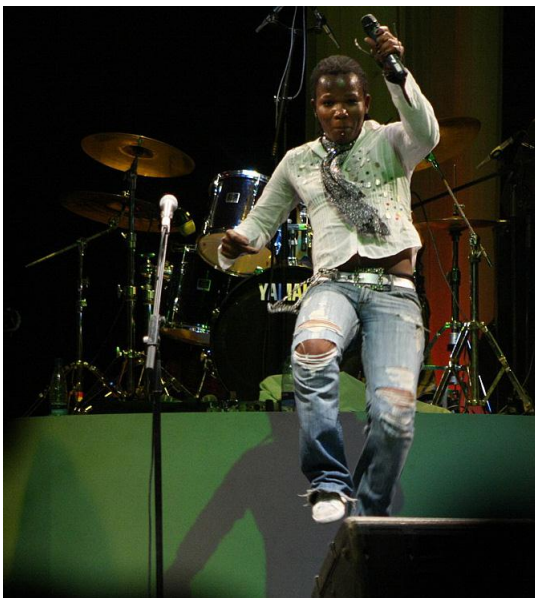
- I can only speak for myself but I believe that a lot of people would find it challenging to talk about the rights of the LGBT community and for different reasons, myself included. However it is my view that Botswana constitution condones and encourages freedom of speech.

Botswana is often called African star or African Switzerland - what is your comment on that?

- I would link associate this to having managed to maintain a steady and healthy developing economy and political climate.

When you come to Sweden you also represent the organization BONELA (the Botswana Network on Ethics, Law and HIV/AIDS). What do you do for Bonela?

- I WILL NOT be representing BONELA at the Stockholm Pride. After sitting in for a few meetings with officials of the organization, it was their collective view that I am not ready to represent them, and on this platform in whatever capacity. I am however a new member of BONELA and am looking forward to doing work for them in future.



Botswana already has a very good reputation when it comes to the fight against HIV and AIDS - would it be even better if homosexuality was legal?

- I believe as a country Botswana has done and continues to do very well in fighting the scourge of HIV/AIDS. I believe there's also room for improvement, and that one of the ways to ensure that would be to legalise, or at least decriminalise it.

(Interview by Mats Ögren Wanger)