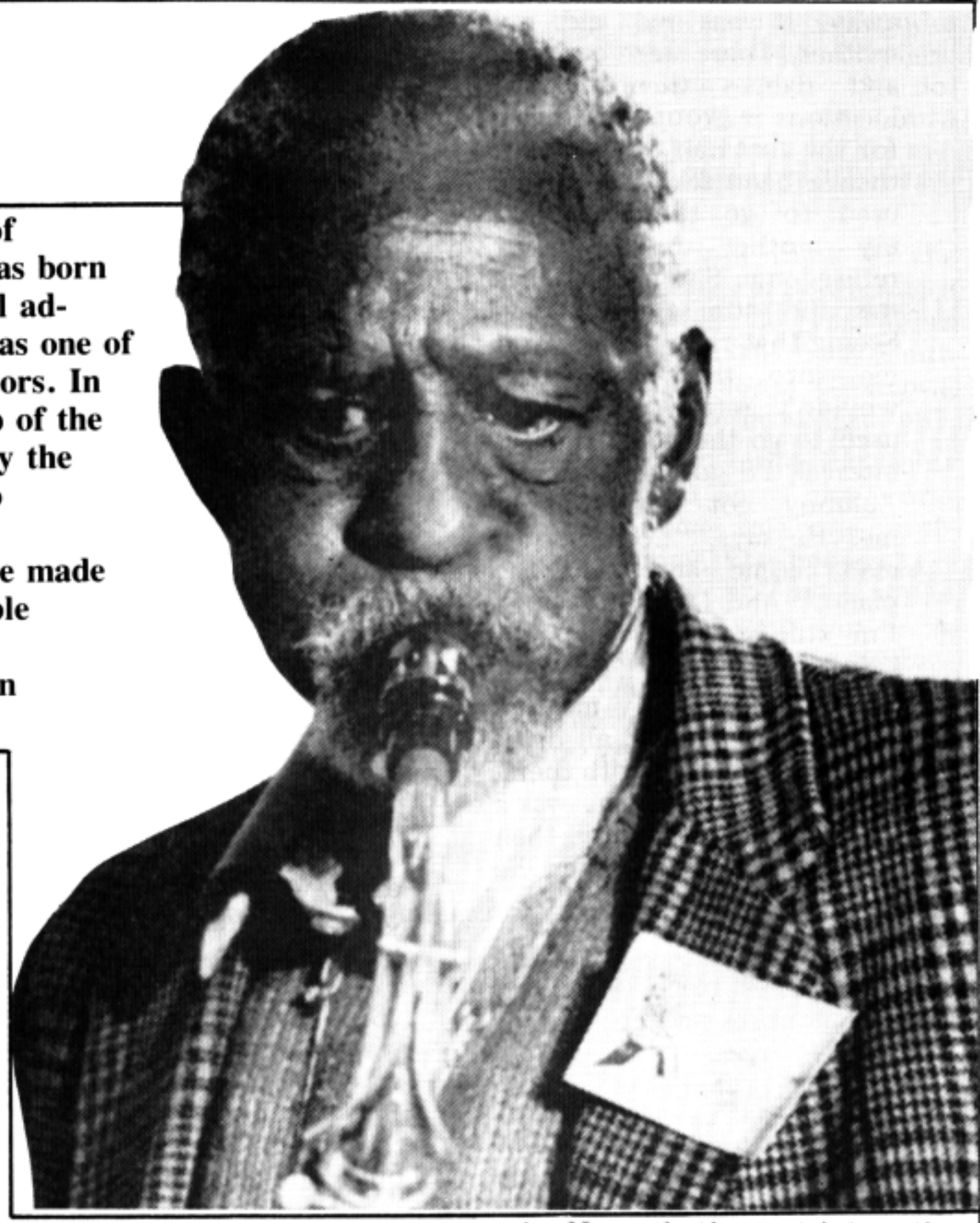
Interview

Known popularly as the Father of African Jazz, Kingforce Silgee was born 73 years ago. In terms of musical advancement in South Africa, he was one of the greatest pioneers and innovators. In 1944, he took over the leadership of the Jazz Maniacs. This means that by the time he died last year, he was no newcomer to the music scene. RIXAKA reprints an interview he made with MEDU during the memorable Culture and Resistance Symposium/Festival which was held in Gaborone in July, 1982.



Q: What were you feeling last night when playing with those other famous musicians at the opening of the Culture and Resistance Symposium?

A: What actually struck me was the reception I got from Hugh Masekela and Gwangwa the trombonist. When we met they just hugged me. Having not seen them for many years, it was a pleasant reunion. Oh, well — Hugh Masekela was leading the other musicians and he was so excited about my playing too — I had to refuse him giving me a lot of solos.

Q: Have you played with him before?

A: No. Actually, when he was a student at St Peter's in Johannesburg — when I had time on Saturdays I used to go there and show them little tips... Father Huddlestone had formed that band for them and bought them instruments.

Q: What about Gwangwa — have you played with him before?

A: It's the first time I've played with both.

Q: . . . was that like something you used to experience when you were playing in the old days?

A: Ooh, definitely — musician amongst musicians, the atmosphere is the same, moreso with people you haven't played with. It's more exciting.

Q: Kingforce, what do you think about this Symposium, the whole idea of the Symposium, the theme "Culture and Resistance" and so on?

A: It's a cultural — and mind-opening (incident) as far as I'm concerned. You get to the in-feeling of what's going on around you.

Q: It is remarkable that you are the only member of the Jazz Maniacs to have made it to Botswana. Can you tell us something about the atmosphere that the band carried with it, and the spirit of marabi?

A: Now, that's most interesting. Funnily enough, my father was a preacher and marabi was a down-and-out thing. We used to go to church in the morning, and at the 11.00 o'clock service and the 3.00 o'clock service in the afternoon. I used to go with him in the morning — in the afternoon he'd leave us at home. Then, when he's gone there was marabi dance as I may call (it). I used to go there, stand at the window and listen to the music. It got itself infiltrated in me. I used to go home (and) try these tunes on the piano — got them well, put in proper chords as a person who's been taught the theory of music. That's how we got on.

And then my father passed

away; it was me and my mother. There were concerts and dances then in the locations — groups of singers for the first half of the night, then a band for the dance. I used to go there — well, my mother usually never refused me. She used to give me the admission money. Seeing that they had brought me into the music, she wouldn't refuse actually. I used to go there and then at interval, I'd go on the piano. Zuluboy got interested in me. He says, "Come along, man, come and play the piano." And I says, "No, see I'm still young." He says, "No, come along."

So, talked to my mother; by now she agreed, all right. I went and played with them. We used to change, he was a pianist then, Zuluboy, then we'd change over. Then he took up playing sax.

Q: Zuluboy?

A: Yes. Now there were two saxophonists. They got another pianist.

Q: Who was that?

A: Chris, we used to call him. I just don't know what his surname was. They used to play. If they got two engagements, I'd go with one saxophonist and a drummer. The other would hire a drummer and go and play there. I got interested in the saxophone too — bought myself one at the pawnbroker's shop for £5, which is R10 these days. You can imagine how much: five pounds! Got myself a tutor, started practising. I wasn't taught the sax, just the tutor. It was right now.

I was reading overseas magazines, music magazines... enlightening this band. There had to be three saxes, you have two saxes already, I'm on tenor. So we agreed, we all could read music; arranged for getting orchestrations. We practised, practised, practised, but still doing the double-jobs until we had a good repertoire of what we could play, the three saxes. Now (that) we were okay, we didn't take on any double-jobs. Now the band was five people — three saxes, a piano, drums. We went along, kept on adding members on.

We were the most popular band. What made us popular: I knew marabi beat and Zuluboy was a marabi pianist. So we put that beat into our music. That's why we had a bigger following. The roots of the black people, we had them in our rhythm.

Q: This word "marabi" — where does it actually come from?

A: That I wouldn't know. But there's an old man who lived in that era that I can contact and ask... Marabi used to happen over weekends when the girls were off, the domestic servants were off. It used to take place from Friday night until Monday morning. Admission was only ten cents, which was a shilling those days. But you do not get out (of the dance hall). You get out, your shilling is gone. When you come back, it's another shilling again. A lot of drinks, these concoctions: skokian, skomfaan and all that. And methylated spirits. You pay for this, for this doesn't go with your admission. You get out of the place, you know, to get back again it's a bob. Well, the dancing was happiness. In marabi there was just happiness. Well, with the proprietor of the place, it was the money, making all concoctions there, a shilling a jam-tin, you pay a shilling for that which does not go with your admission.

Q: There must have been another side to this happiness, that people almost out of necessity wanted that exciting lifestyle because of their normally very, very sad lifestyle, because there was so little money and people were living in such bad conditions?

A: Actually, marabi was a relaxation, getting out of boredom and all that. You felt, "I should be happy at some stage in my life." There was dancing, rollicking. It was all happiness, even when you have troubles in the heart, you get out having forgotten about them. There was happiness and mixing of people. You find friends that you haven't seen for a long time. You meet them there, they treat you to a scale of skokiaan or skomfaan, you get happy there, start dancing. And there was no ruffians during those days. If you have a quarrel, you get out, you go and fight it out with your fists. No knives were used or anything like that. But when you have finished your fight, whoever wins, when you come back, bob again. Pay a bob.

Q: In the era of the Jazz Maniacs, who were ther other musicians that you most admired?

A: None other than the members of the Jazz Maniacs. They were *the* guys. And I got into them, well, the flame grew bigger, when I joined them. Played with them, used to have double shows at times. I split the band, got extras that we can fill up, one group goes that way, another group goes that way. Well, I was more conversant musically than the rest of the members, but all of us could read.

It was when Zuluboy passed away, I think it was February 1944 —

Q: There were strange circumstances surrounding his death, wasn't that so?

A: I was coming to that. We had a job at the Stardust Club. It was Tuesday evening. We'd last seen him on Sunday morning after his

show. Waited, waited, waited at the club, no Zuluboy comes. We decided we will carry on, we'd see what happens. We'd carry on. We'll see how to close up, we'll have to use our heads to cover up his part. Which we did. Finished up at the nightclub, we left. We checked up where he worked, hadn't been seen Monday, Tuesday, it's Wednesday today. We had to go and tell his wife, yesterday he was supposed to be playing, he wasn't there. We checked up at work, he hasn't been there since Monday. So the wife took it up, only to find him at the mortuary.

According to where he was found, he was found next to a railway line in Pimville, which means he was run over by a train, train driver. Which is still unbelievable to me.

Q: How do you think he died?

A: He may have been murdered and then put next to the line.

Q: Why would anyone have wanted to murder him?

A: (The only way I can put it). The wounds were not in line with having been run over by a train.

Q: After his death you took over as the band leader?

A: Yes.

Q: And how was that, was it a quite frightening experience, or were you quite used to the idea of being a band leader?

A: Actually, it was nothing new to me. I was actually in charge of the rehearsals, so after his death we had a meeting and, unanimously, I was appointed the leader by the members. During Zuluboy's time he was the leader on stage and I was a backroom boy, as I may put it. So it wasn't a task. I used to do that task. He used to conduct, so it wasn't very difficult to me.

Q: The Jazz Maniacs went through from the thirties to the sixties, isn't that —

A: No, the fifties, mid-fifties, I can say.

Q: Why did it dissolve?

A: It's this trend of mbaqanga. That's the thing. Actually, I think we are to blame too, because some Sundays we'd allow so-and-so to get a gig.

Q: So you were actually splitting the group into smaller groups?

A: Ja, then they got into this mbaqanga. And it was catching up, a lot of bands broke up. Harlem Swingsters broke up through all that. So we called it a day. Tried it in 1960 and it didn't work. We gave it up altogether. Although I made some recordings after that: well, not with all the Jazz Maniacs — I used to choose suitable men then we'd record under the name of Jazz Maniacs. That's one thing I'll do. I'll keep that name until I die. It's been a lot to me. Through them I've been very famous.

Q: What do you think of the top musicians in South Africa now? What do you think of top musicians from South Africa like Jonas Gwangwa, Hugh Masekela and so on?

A: Well, they bring happiness to me, to show the world that we've got the stuff here today. You know what? I'm sorry to say, whites are, they always put us in the back. We know nothing as far as people abroad know about black man. So now they are a showcase, to show the world that there is stuff and I'm sure they tell the people overseas we've still left a lot of goods behind.

John Coltrane — Pen and ink drawing by MILES PELO