

Netsayi

Biography

April 2009



The voice hits you, then the personality does, and they're as unexpected and refreshing as each other.

Netsayi is sitting in a recording booth at the celebrated RAK Studios in north London. For a second, listening from the control room, her vocals are disembodied, as she completes work (with ever in-demand producers Jonathan Quarmby and Kevin Bacon) on 'Punch Drunk,' the first single from 'Monkeys' Wedding'. The new album is her much-anticipated follow-up to 2006's widely-praised, self-produced debut 'Chimurenga Soul,' which spread its subtly alluring blend of soul, jazz, folk and African influences all over the world.

Then she emerges from the studio, and her unpretentious charisma emerges with her. In an entertainment world that seems to demand excessive ego as a pre-admission downpayment, Netsayi is the invigorating converse. This eclectic singer-songwriter was born in London and lives there again now, but in between, spent her formative years with her family in Zimbabwe. As the new album again attests, such a mixed cultural background has shaped an artist of great creative inquisitiveness.

"Musically," she muses out loud, "on the last album I was trying to explore the relationship between traditional music from Zimbabwe and, I suppose, folk. Then I ended up on a mad journey where I hooked up with all these jazz musicians, so the album ended up really jazzy.

"What we did live, and what the record was, were quite different, and that was a bit of a shock to me. With this album, I wanted to simplify things. I still think it's turned out more complicated, in some ways, but the recording process takes on a life of its own, doesn't it? It's a bit of a shock to me, still."

That sense of wonder informs the whole attitude of a thoughtful yet adventurous soul. Netsayi can write songs with melodies and lyrical plots that draw people towards them in a way that even she's not quite ready to admit.

"I'd prefer it for the songs just to exist independently of me," she says, "but I'd like to think they've got some sort of universal relevance beyond the story in the song. I enjoy the process of thinking about 'Ok, I've written the song, I can't really release it like this, so how am I going to put it in a context where other people will be interested in it?'"

However she does that, she does it. Netsayi's upbringing gives her a simultaneously authentic window into two very different cultures, and the inspiration provided by both has the same effect on her audience. Ultimately, though, her songs are about something that's fundamentally the same on *any* continent: the human condition.

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“My way into the songs is always something very personal,” she agrees, adding with a smile: “My lyrics are quite literal. I suppose my brain works in a linear way, so it’s easier for me to take a story, tell it and let it expose itself. I don’t write a diary, so that’s what a lot of the songs are, me thinking about things. They’re not always about me, they’re about people I know.”

That was certainly true of the infectious single ‘Punch Drunk.’ “This friend of mine was in a massive dilemma, his relationship was falling apart,” says Netsayi. “He’s a good childhood friend of mine from Zimbabwe, he was phoning to ask my advice and jokingly said ‘Write a song about that.’

“It was actually a great challenge to look at the circumstances he was presenting to me and think about what was universally complex about relationships. That’s the one with the hook that says ‘Is love for the love, or is love for the glory?’ It’s a universal theme, of course.”

Another track on the new album, ‘Teenagers,’ harks back directly to Netsayi’s years in Zimbabwe. “It’s about how you used to just hang out aimlessly, and what our aspirations were as teenagers. I’m amazed how we used to just drive around and go partying, and there was a certain recklessness about it.

“All we wanted to do was *leave*. Where I grew up in Harare, there were like, two or three million people, so that’s a city, but it’s small. We just used to think the grass was always greener somewhere else.”

Born in Camden, Netsayi lived in north London with her exiled parents, older brother and younger sister until she was seven. “My parents had been in England for 13 years, my dad going backwards and forwards, because he was involved in the war,” she explains. “I remember a little bit about being in London — some random TV program, a bit about the school I went to — but I really associate growing up with Zimbabwe.

“But it’s very Anglicized, so I remember when we went to junior school we were like ‘The kids who’d come from England.’ I think there were quite a lot of families who were coming back from exile after independence.” Her life was completely filled with music, from local jit and mbira rhythms to the wider influences of American R&B and hip-hop, and Jamaican reggae. To this day, Netsayi quotes the music of Bob Marley and D’Angelo among her lifetime favourites.

“Every time before I go back, I have to de-tune from all the news, because you realize we’re exposed to an abnormal amount of information. Then I land, and it’s like this massive sky, and it’s quiet. Then it takes a few days to realize, oh yeah, it’s a real hustle to get bread, or you can’t change any money, or get a phone card, there are all these inconveniences of a collapsed economy. So there’s all these contradictions.

“When I started traveling in Africa, I went all over, and I realized that Zimbabwe is actually probably one of the most together countries in Africa. It’s quite organized, even though there’s a lot of chaos going on.”

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Netsayi's initial creative soundings, both in Zimbabwe and South Africa, took her towards film and television. When she returned to the UK at the turn of the millennium (initially living in Bristol before coming back to London), she started an MA in film studies. "I did a year of a two-year course, then ducked out in favour of music," she remembers. "It was the right thing to do."

She started to play live around the UK in 2001, soon turning heads with her performances in every imaginable location, from the London African Music Festival to a much-coveted 'Peel Session' for Radio 1. By 2004, she'd formed her own independent label, Militant Prince, and released the single 'Tatters.' The underground success of that song provided the momentum for 'Chimurenga Soul,' not just the title of the debut album but Netsayi's own title for her hybrid style, named after and inspired by Zimbabwe's war against apartheid.

First released in 2006 on her own label, 'Chimurenga Soul' attracted media praise that was truly lavish. "Refreshingly, startlingly excellent," glowed Mojo magazine, while the Guardian described it as "one of the finest debuts of the year."

The album was then picked up by World Connection, the company she's now signed to directly. That led to further extensive touring both in the UK and around the world, sometimes solo, sometimes in band line-ups. Now a highly experienced live performer, Netsayi has played in locations that literally run from A to Z, from Amsterdam to Zanzibar.

The batch of new songs that have become its sequel were written by Netsayi and then recorded at home. Striving as always for the freshness of the moment, those demo recordings are the basis of the finished album, and she's itching to air them: after prestigious performance at London's Folk Day at Trafalgar Square and the Shanghai World Music Festival, live plans extend through 2009, including an eye-catching support slot on the huge UK tour this coming October and November by Ladysmith Black Mambazo. A mouthwatering double-bill indeed.

Whether it's on one of those stages or on the new album, what you see with Netsayi is what you get. "I don't have an outfit or a costume, it's just me," she says. "I don't have an alter ego, I'm just a real person making a real album about real stuff that's gone on in my life."