



SOWETO GOSPEL CHOIR
Blessed Shanachie 66038

STORY: **Marty Lipp**

Just as some of the founding elements of Latin music came to the Americas from Africa and later traveled back and were “re-Africanized,” gospel music made the round trip and settled down to stay in South Africa for a while.

Gospel was born as a result of the slave trade. African slaves were prohibited from using African instruments or songs, but they instead created a new style that used English language and subjects with call-and-response singing accompanied by syncopated accompaniment. Work songs or “field hollers” and “spirituals” were born amid the miserable lives of slaves, eventually becoming the post-Civil War form called gospel.

While not as internationally renowned as American gospel, South African gospel began to form with European missionaries and survived amid the various local genres of popular music. Since blacks in South Africa were subjugated by the white minority during the apartheid years, gospel never had the resources to flourish in the marketplace, living more in the churches than on record.

In recent years, though, gospel performers such as Rebecca Malope have become recording stars and have even developed a bit of an international reputation, though not approaching that of other South African popular musicians or American gospel. In 2003, choirmaster David Mulovhedzi and producer Beverly Bryer put together a supergroup of gospel singers from the various churches in and around the black township of Soweto. The group caught fire almost immediately and has toured the world and now released its second album.

Blessed, the new album, is similar in approach to the first. The formula is to sing both American and South African gospel songs, mixing in a variety of secular songs that make their appeal that more catholic, so to speak. The secular tunes often are an

expression of national pride for South Africa’s 10-year-old majority rule. These include Peter Gabriel’s “Biko,” “Mbube” (otherwise known as “Wimoweh” or “The Lion Sleeps Tonight”), the traditional “Khumbaya,” a Ladysmith Black Mambazo tune and the South African national anthem. Among its Western repertoire are the Edwin Hawkins Singers’ modern classic “Oh Happy Day” and the traditional “I Bid You Goodnight” (popularized by Bahamian Joseph Spence and later covered by the likes of the Grateful Dead and the Incredible String Band).

While their repertoire is more mainstream than adventurous, their “new” twist on gospel and their vocal firepower eclipse any quibbles about what might have been.

This group of 20-plus singers has more than a handful of soloists who are world-class and could wow in any setting. These soloists are then backed by a lush, full chorus, creating a call-and-response that is jaw-droppingly gorgeous. The singers, who break into joyous ululation, are urged on by percussion and an electric band.

The true treat, however, is to see the group live, which adds another dimension. The large group wears colorful costumes and dance to express their joy in yet another way. In concert, the choir also turns up the heat a bit, making the album sound a bit reserved in comparison. While a few more full-throttle rousers would be fun, the band’s huge, almost-orchestral vocal sound gets the midtempo swing of tunes such as “Tshepa Thapelo” going at an irresistibly powerful pulse.

On one of two of the slower tunes, the band’s electric keyboard pushes the sound toward the saccharine, but overall the choir’s precise, powerful performances prove to be a winning formula.





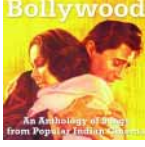





Though the Soweto Gospel Choir has a mission to spread the word, only the most cynical, or tone deaf, could resist the choir’s open-hearted, joyful sound. Despite the religious nature of the group and so many of its songs, the choir is not comprised of arm-twisting proselytizers. They are showing thanks and reverence by celebrating, using their prodigious talents.

Like the American “Dream Team” of the Olympics, the Soweto Gospel Choir highlights one country’s statistic-defying talent pool. Unlike the Dream Team’s divas, these humble performers charm as they amaze.

Through Paul Simon’s *Graceland* and even Disney’s *The Lion King*, South Africa’s vocal tradition has become familiar throughout the world. The Soweto Gospel Choir’s gospel is almost instantly recognizable, a welcome hybrid for fans of both gospel and South African pop.



TOP 10

- 1**  **VARIOUS ARTISTS**
Congotronics 2: Buzz 'n' Rumble From The Urb 'n' Jungle
Crammed Discs CRAW 29
- 2**  **DJ DOLORES**
Aparelhagem
Ziriguiboom ZIR 19
- 3**  **VARIOUS ARTISTS**
Dawning Of A New Era: The Roots Of Skinhead Reggae
Trojan 06076-80548-2
- 4**  **MAHALA RAÏ BANDA**
Mahala Raï Banda
Crammed Discs CRAW 31
- 5**  **VARIOUS ARTISTS**
Bollywood: An Anthology Of Songs From Popular Indian Cinema
Silva Screen SILCD 1204
- 6**  **DABY BALDE**
Introducing Daby Balde
World Music Network INTRO 104CD
- 7**  **THE MOTHERS**
Township Sessions
Mr. Bongo MRBCD 040
- 8**  **MIDIVAL PUNDITZ**
Midival Games
Six Degrees 657036 1109-2
- 9**  **VARIOUS ARTISTS**
Sound Of The World
Wrasse Wrass 169
- 10**  **PAPUA NEW GUINEA STRINGBANDS WITH BOB BROZMAN**
Songs Of The Volcano
Riverboat/World Music Network TUGCD 1040