

Spring by the Ibrahim Khalil Shihab Quintet: A remarkable “lost” 1968 debut jazz album is now available to a global audience

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In December 2020 Matsuli Music, a small record label specializing in overlooked and suppressed South African music, re-issued a striking 1968 album composed by the jazz pianist Ibrahim Khalil Shihab. Featuring a talented group of musicians, the Shihab Quintet’s *Spring* is a breath of fresh air musically. It also offers an important window into a (nearly) “lost” period of vibrant South African “Cape Jazz” music by artists living under the repressive apartheid regime.

The struggles of nonwhite South African artists in the 1950s and 60s are well-documented. A talented collection of musicians and singers began to emerge across the country during this period. Standouts such as trumpeter Hugh Masekela, singer Miriam Makeba and pianist Ibrahim Abdullah were identified both with innovative musical contributions as well as growing defiance in the face of the widespread suffering endured under apartheid.

The year 1961 marked the infamous Sharpeville Massacre in which 69 people were killed by police. African National Congress (ANC) leaders such as Nelson Mandela were convicted in the Rivonia Trial of 1963. The forced relocations of the notorious Group Areas Act intensified throughout the 1960s, along with enforced racial segregation of major cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town. Among interracial bands, nonwhite performers were sometimes infamously forced to perform behind curtains at concerts. Many artists were forced to flee these conditions, often to the US or Europe.

Artists like Shihab remained in South Africa and were unfortunately cut off from a larger global audience. Yet even under increasingly difficult conditions, Shihab and other jazz musicians were able to create very intriguing music, particularly in the late 1960s.

Shihab and others were clearly building on the efforts of an earlier generation of artists, including Abdullah and his

band the Jazz Epistles, Masekela and Makeba, and Chris McGregor’s Blue Notes, who helped develop a new sound in jazz and groove music. Blending post-World War II American bebop with traditional African music such as marabi [a keyboard style], vocal jive and goema [a genre originally associated with a hand drum], the “Cape Jazz” scene emerged in the late 1950s.

According to the Matsuli Music publishers, the album *Spring* barely saw the light of day in 1968. Shihab, then known as Chris Schilder (he later converted to Islam and changed his name), was 22 years old and had been touring and playing relentlessly with his band across South Africa.

The five-track debut album was recorded at the end of this vigorous touring, in a two-hour session, and under much pressure from the record company Gallo “to get out of the studio.” The band was not permitted to do multiple takes of any songs. Thankfully, the rigorous touring and practice made for sharp and well-prepared arrangements—the listener does not get the sense of a band playing under duress, but rather something closer to a tightly knit unit acting well in tune with one another.

In addition to Shihab on piano, the band consisted of Shihab’s brother Phillip Schilder on bass, Gilbert Matthews on drums, Garry Kriel on guitar and the outstanding tenor saxophonist Winston Monwabisi “Mankunku” Ngozi, all of whom were in their early 20s at the time.

Four of the five songs on the album are original compositions by Shihab. All feel very much connected to the spirit and mood of the “hard-bop” and “post-bop” jazz across the Atlantic, but are not facsimiles. The songs are unique, but also of a piece with the most soulful and engaging jazz music of the early 1960s, particularly from musicians John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk, and Wayne

Shorter.

Saxophonist Mankunku (as he is commonly referred to) could be considered the most studious and serious protégé of Coltrane anywhere in the world, though it does not appear the two ever met. His inventive and cascading solos press the boundaries of almost every song, yet they never leave the framework or meander in academic fashion. These are songs heavily built around Mankunku's dynamic chord progressions, but he does not overwhelm. The band works collectively to keep the harmony and melody toward the front of each composition.

Mankunku's playing is a pure joy on every track, capable of great emotional range and evincing an extraordinary level of skill and discipline for a relatively young musician.

Shihab's tasteful piano playing keeps every song together, restrained and yet constantly driving the band forward. The strong cohesion of the rhythm trio of Matthews, Schilder, and Kriel provide swinging grooves and sharp fills across the album.

The opening track "Spring" quickly envelops, with Shihab's breezy piano notes and Matthews' light-and-steady cymbal playing, soon joined by an elegant Mankunku solo. The song instantly conveys a warmth, giving a sense of renewal and optimism. One can feel the "pain of winter" falling back quickly.

The track "Before and After the Rain"—a nod to John Coltrane's "After the Rain"—is a graceful waltz, with Mankunku's understated playing up top, but also featuring alternating solos by Shihab, Kriel and Schilder, each evoking beauty and joy.

On "Look Up," the bebop-influenced melodies create an angular and danceable rhythm evoking Shorter's compositions, while also giving space to brief improvisatory solos. "The Birds" is a complex composition. It begins as a brooding tone-poem, but then sharply quickens and finds a careful groove. There are elements here of Coltrane's powerful civil rights song "Alabama." (It may be a direct nod, as Coltrane died the year before of cancer). Initial brooding and perhaps even sorrow give way to the powerful, interpretive progression of Mankunku's solos, while the other four provide sturdy and evolving flourishes underneath the saxophone playing. Shihab and Schilder take turns with engaging piano and bass solos as well.

The album ends with a reinterpretation of the Don Raye and Gene de Paul song "You Don't Know What Love Is," a Great American Songbook standard. It was made

famous in jazz by Miles Davis and Chet Baker on separate occasions. Shihab's bluesy piano playing in concert with the soulfulness of Mankunku's phrasings and Schilder's sharp basslines makes for an intriguing interplay of moods and textures.

After the album was completed, according to Shihab, the record company Gallo did almost nothing to promote it. In recent interviews the artist sounds almost in pain discussing the whole ordeal. "They did nothing to help get it around. At times I felt like crying as we were playing. We were trying so hard, and they just said, 'Well good luck.' They didn't like jazz."

Shihab noted that his brother, Phillip Schilder, fell into terrible mental illness within a year or two after completing the album and was unable to ever play again. Shihab, still then as Chris Schilder, subsequently moved toward jazz-funk music in the 1970s and had minor success with the band Pacific Express. But this music was a world away from the "Cape Town sound" Shihab and his bandmates were mastering in 1968.

Winston Mankunku Ngozi (1943-2009) was the only artist able to achieve success after the *Spring* recordings. The same year he released the album *Yakhal'Inkomo* (roughly meaning "A cry of the bull as it is brought to the slaughter"). The album, rich with songs of protest and even more intensely digging into Coltrane's sound, managed to find a broad audience. It became one of the most popular jazz albums of all time in South Africa and is considered a high point of the Cape Jazz music scene.

In fact, it is because of *Yakhal'Inkomo*'s success that *Spring* ultimately found new life. After re-pressing *Spring* only once in 1974, the masters of Shihab's 1968 album were destroyed by a thoughtless Gallo record executive. When Mankunku's album was re-pressed again in Britain in 1996, the five tracks from *Spring* somehow appeared on that reissue, assumed to be Mankunku's compositions. It gave new life and interest to the work, which is now getting a proper release outside of South Africa.

It is a credit to Matsuli Music that *Spring* has been saved and made available again. A new audience will certainly benefit from its release.



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