

The death of South African jazz musician Louis Moholo-Moholo, 85: “Music is the healing force of the universe”

Gary May
19 June 2025

On June 13 the sad news arrived that legendary South African drummer and composer Louis Moholo-Moholo had passed away at 85 after a long illness. Louis, “Tebogo,” Bra Louis, as he was variously and affectionately known, seemed indestructible to those who had followed his career, as he survived illness, apartheid, exile, the loss of his fellow band members and the death of his wife, Mpumi. But now the last survivor has left us.

Born in 1940, Moholo-Moholo’s interest in drumming came in part from listening to the Scout marching bands that passed by his house when he was a child. He was hypnotised by the rhythm of the bass drum. At a later age, his interest in jazz was stimulated by the famous American bands he heard on the radio. Although a local scene already existed, it had little chance of becoming known through the South African media, entirely controlled by the white minority.

His professional career began in groups such as the band led by Early Mabuza, or The Chordettes, and with an individual he would later play with in London, Ronnie Beer, and The Swinging City Six. Louis therefore had a solid musical background and experience before meeting Chris McGregor, a decisive encounter for both men. Moholo-Moholo has expressed his frustration with the way that histories of the subsequent events often place McGregor at the centre of things, which he regarded as an extension of the widely prevailing racist attitudes at that time. It should be pointed out, however, that McGregor himself was not responsible. While it is true that McGregor, as a white man, had openings which would have been impossible for an all-black band, on a musical and personal level, the two men were equals.

The fact that they created a “mixed” band with Johnny Dyani, Nick Moyake, Dudu Pukwana and Mongezi Feza would precipitate future events. The apartheid regime was becoming more and more strict at the time and opportunities for such a band to play, or even appear in public together, were rare and increasingly risky. When the occasion presented itself for the band, named the Blue Notes, to participate in the 1964 jazz festival at Juan-les-Pins, a resort town in southeastern France, the musicians were aware that they were effectively buying a one-way ticket.

The Blue Notes in France, 1964

Once in Europe, the pace of their musical development increased rapidly. In addition to the numerous encounters with other musicians, however, various obstacles arose and nothing was easy

for the musicians (for precise details on this period, see *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath: My Life with a South African Jazz Pioneer* by Maxine McGregor, Bamberger Books 1995).

After a period of time in France where the band was well received, but had few work prospects, South African musician Abdulhah Ibrahim (still known as Dollar Brand at the time) gave them an opening in Switzerland. This was to be a defining moment for Moholo-Moholo, meeting for the first time people such as Swiss jazz pianist Irene Schweizer and Danish saxophonist and composer John Tchicai. Then came the call to go to London.

Moholo-Moholo has described London as the musical Mecca of the era, and the timing of the Blue Notes’ arrival was perfect. Apart from a brief stay in Copenhagen in 1965, London was to be their base for the next several years. Their first recording in England, in 1968, included Moholo-Moholo’s old acquaintance Ronnie Beer, and shows both in the title, *Very Urgent*, and the music, the increased confidence and freedom of everyone involved.

Fortunately, they were able to make use of Ronnie Scott’s famed jazz club, which for Moholo-Moholo and the others became a melting pot of musical exchanges.

However, the musical creativity was counterbalanced by the pain of exile. Nick Moyake found it too difficult and returned to South Africa. Moholo-Moholo explains in a book about Johnny Dyani:

We were still young, we missed our families. It was cold and the audiences were not like the African audiences we knew, loud and appreciating. When there were crises and one wanted to go home, we would sit down and discuss it and come to an agreement. The more we stayed, the more we got used to it, and apartheid was going on in South Africa and we didn’t want to go back to that. (*Mbizo: A Book About Johnny Dyani*, edited by Lars Rasmussen, The Booktrader, 2003).

Chris McGregor had begun working with another exceptionally talented South African, bassist Harry Miller, and they would shortly form the group that would reveal the full scope of Moholo-

Moholo's talent, the legendary Brotherhood of Breath. The Brotherhood albums with Moholo-Moholo, two studio recordings and several live ones display his capacities to their fullest.

The band was a heady mix of strong personalities, both on a musical and personal level. They pushed McGregor's highly original arrangements to the breaking point and could obtain a level of joyful intensity that can still surprise even today. Miller's bass, McGregor's piano, and, above all, Moholo-Moholo's drums somehow managed to keep the band together during these free-form flights of fancy.

Footage of the Brotherhood of Breath is rare, which makes this, from 1973, all the more valuable.

The Moholo-Moholo/Miller partnership was to prove extremely fertile, ending only with the bassist's tragic death in a car accident in 1983. Often in trio with explosive pianist Keith Tippett, they formed the robust, flexible heart at the centre of many of the period's best recordings.

Amongst these, in 1977, was the first album under Moholo-Moholo's name, *Spirits Rejoice*, on the Ogun label founded by Miller and his wife Hazel. As free as the wind and with Moholo-Moholo's drums as its heartbeat, this proud, passionate, angry album has since been released on CD.

Louis in concert with Keith Tippett, 2011

Sadly, some of the most beautiful music these men would commit to tape was the result of tragic events. The needless death of South African jazz trumpeter and flautist Mongezi Feza in 1975 (in London, from untreated pneumonia) moved his friends to express their grief and anger in the studio. *Blue Notes For Mongezi* (Ogun) is monumental in its emotive charge and is also the recording where the African roots of the musicians become most apparent. After the no less shocking death of Dyani in 1986, the surviving trio created the heartbreakingly beautiful *Blue Notes For Johnny* (Ogun).

Another musical formation that seemed important to Moholo-Moholo was the Brotherhood-style big band. An important example was The Dedication Orchestra, a cooperative of British-based musicians, created to play and keep alive the music of the Brotherhood and the Blue Notes. Their first album, also called *Spirits Rejoice* (Ogun), brings together an exceptional selection of improvisers and arrangers, and is simply wonderful. On Feza's famous tune "Sonia's Theme," a loping, seemingly nonchalant rhythm from Moholo-Moholo provokes Lol Coxhill to produce a sneaky, captivating solo on soprano which is a true delight!

In an interview on www.allaboutjazz.com, Moholo-Moholo kept his distance from the big business exploitative music industry and stated: "I know I would have made a lot of money playing pop music. A lot of pop bands wanted me to join them; John Lennon and Frank Zappa had an interest; I turned them down."

If Louis was a rebel, he was also loyal. But above all, he was a survivor. The last of the Blue Notes (McGregor and Pukwana both passed away in 1990), he was also the only one to have seen the dismantling of the apartheid regime. He often returned on holiday to South Africa before going back definitively in 2002 to work with local musicians. Expressing his feelings about his homeland, he said: "I just want to feel that I belong, that I'm not a minority"

(www.allaboutjazz.com).

It was above all Europe and Europeans who heard the best of Louis and his music while his compatriots were isolated by the international blockade against apartheid. Addressing the ability of music to cross borders, connect people of different nationalities and effect change, Moholo declared:

We liberated our country partly through this music. Everybody gave a hand—[John] Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Keith Tippett, Elton Dean, John Stevens, Johnny Dyani, Mongs [Feza]. ... Music is the healing force of the universe. The political disease was there, it needed music to heal it up. (www.allaboutjazz.com).

Summing up his feelings about the loss of his band members and the oppression of apartheid, Moholo declared toward the end of his life that, although

so much of what happened in South Africa in those years was so cruel, I don't have regrets in the end. So much wonderful music remains. When people are oppressed, they sing, you see it all over the world, and through history. They may be sad, but they sing. It's like squeezing a lemon, the juice comes out.

Louis Moholo-Moholo in duo with Alexander Hawkins in Paris, 2016.

A vast amount of Moholo-Moholo's recordings are available on the Ogun label.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact