

Nothing Will Ever Kill The Radio Star! Tribute to Thuso ‘Thuzoski’ Letlhoma, 1972-2020

*Botsalo Ntuane**

In 1979 The Buggles released a hit song titled, ‘Video Killed the Radio Star’. As the country mourns the death of famed announcer Thuso Letlhoma, himself a star on the national broadcaster, avid listener Botsalo Ntuane pays tribute by going down memory lane on the times and magic of Radio Botswana.

Connoisseurs of sound now live in a time of online streamed content where one can obtain their music fix from a variety of service platforms. The latest fans actually never get to touch and feel the record they are buying. Before streaming there was an invention called the compact disc (CD) player. Fragile and expensive looking, when it first hit our shores, we could only marvel at it. To own a CD player was the trendiest thing ever. I remember the first guy in our residence block at the University of Botswana. Always reserved and unassuming, he got on with everyone else, never forgetting he was there for education and not the extra curricular activities some of us reveled in. If he was not at lectures he was in the library. When his room door was slightly ajar he would be sitting at the study desk, swotting up like a model child who received serious sermon when he left home about the purpose of education. Rumour had it his cousin was studying in the United States. From his baggy, Rap style clothing there must have been merit to the claim. Those clothes were not common place in this neck of the woods and could only have been imported or handed down by someone who could get more. Then one day whispers went around that he had acquired a CD player. It must have come from the cousin in America. His door started opening wider for curious passers-by to steal furtive looks. His music grew louder with a different quality and the girls who visited got prettier. Students we never thought knew him, became regulars in the room. The once regular guy was now a big shot. That is how I remember the first CD player I ever saw, and the way it set someone on the pathway to social mobility.

In the evolution of music players, before the CD player was the portable cassette player which then birthed the walkman worn with headphones by trendsetters of the day. But they were preceded by among others, the radiogram and the stereo. That is how we used to consume our music. Or it was the radio station. Since human kind discovered that making certain noises gives pleasure to the ear, no appliance has come bigger than the radio. With the radio set came the announcer to make commentary and, when recorded music became available, to announce the songs. The world over, the first superstars before movies and television were the voices on radio. An object of mystique, I am not the only one in my adolescence who was fascinated by the voice coming from that small box, wondering just how that person got in there. Our moods could be modulated by the voice on the radio. It was over the airwaves that my memorable songs arrived. Then there were those moments in the evenings when adults became sombre and told us to shush when the death notices came on and as children we tried to make sense of the phenomenon called death.

Irrespective of the type of household one was raised in, the radio or the wireless as it was called, was an item of high esteem. It was probably as much treasured as the crockery tea set stored in the cupboard waiting for special visitors that never arrived. Not that visitors didn’t come by, in fact they came around often. But none ever seemed to make the grade to be served tea, poured from a porcelain pot, into a matching cup held daintily between thumb and little finger. And in the etiquette of the Queen of England, they would then take measured sips from the saucer. In my years of childhood, prolific tea drinkers roamed every village and made it a point to visit as many homesteads as possible. At their sighting, the teenage girls whose role it was to prepare tea would scamper for cover. It remains true that to date,

* Botsalo Ntuane, Gaborone: Email: botsalon@gmail.com

villagers still copy the mannerism of sipping Five Roses or Joko tea from the saucer in regal style of the Queen. They are never allowed to use the visitors tea set though.

As they savoured their tea, Radio Botswana would be switched on for the news. And it was not every urchin delegated the honour of twiddling the dial for the clearest signal. That was the job of a child deemed responsible but also trusted to rat on mischief makers who in the absence of adults had moved the dial to some foreign station blasting out music. The unlucky ones paid for their idiocy when they were unable to return the dial exactly to Radio Botswana where our grannies expected it to stay put. With no one ever having seen a television set, the radio was the only medium bringing important announcements from the government. When the founding President of Botswana, Sir Seretse Khama, passed it was the radio that informed us early morning. Growing up where the liberation war for Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) was raging not too far away, and our childhoods were spooked by radio dispatches of a one-eyed man called Ian Smith who was refusing black people to rule themselves. It was Radio Botswana that broke the news that Rhodesian soldiers had killed 15 of our soldiers at Lesoma. So anguished was local guitarist Dikgang Maletle that he came out with a new composition which played on national radio, exhorting able bodied men to join the army to fight Smith. Backed only by his guitar, and all the way from Lerala village he also railed at unnamed countries jealous of Botswana because it had its own currency of diPula le diThebe.

Sunday mornings were also devoted to religious programming. As the only broadcaster in the nation, we got every bit of information from Radio Botswana transmitting via shortwave from Gaborone. The voices from the city spoke to us from basic transistor sets bearing brand names like Tempest, Blaupunkt, Sony and Omega. The family that owned the radio set ruled the roost. They were treated with deference and whoever came to listen had to be on their best behaviour and not talk over the radio. When the radio spoke, all were rapt and attention bound because the word from the radio was king. Hence, the first idols for many of us growing up in a certain milieu were radio announcers. They were so adored I used to wonder just how they looked like in ordinary life. I think my first star announcer, like for many of my peers was Philip Moshotle, known to all as 'Mokgankgara'. The man was a larger than life figure, a giant as far as we imagined. No one could churn out hit after hit from all over the sub-region and not carry the physical stature to match. When Mokgankgara was on radio the whole nation was infected with good feelings and it was the dream of many of us, young and old alike just to catch a glimpse of him. Unfortunately, my primary school in Selebi Phikwe didn't go on trips to Gaborone for which the highlight was the live greetings programme. We would listen with envy come Saturdays when some kids from the boondocks claimed their 15 seconds of fame to convey greetings to an assortment of relatives and teachers. Kids who at home referred to their parents as *bo-mme le bo-tate* would in the studio change tack by calling them *mama and papa*. And *mama and papa* would be sitting in the village proud to hear the name and voice of their little one but not exactly sure who the kid meant by *mama and papa*. That was the radio of our times.

For me the avid listener the female announcers had velvety voices when they made the daily spot announcements. Some of my favourites after Mokgankgara included Monica Mogotsi and Nkope Matlou. Just from their voices I surmised they were smash hits. There was a man in Selebi Phikwe I overheard claiming to have seen Monica in person. His colleagues swarmed around, eager to know if she was as pretty as she sounded on radio. I doubt he was telling the truth and just wanted to play big because he had gone on a rare work trip to Gaborone. The mysteries of radio and its personalities were ruined for us when in some public relations gimmick the broadcasting department started issuing posters of all the radio announcers. They hung in offices and some homes. To my dismay I realised most of the golden voices belonged to ordinary looking people, even Mokgankgara himself. It was so unfair. I felt cheated. People on radio were not supposed to look like your average uncle or aunt. Though

they still sounded good they didn't look as glamorous like the time when they only existed in our imagination. But Radio Botswana still remained a place where we could escape our mundane world.

As some of us grew more refined and thought the stuff played by Mokgankgara was too grassroots, we defected to the Rock and Roll presented by Oshinka Tsiang with an accent suitable for the genre. Those with a liking for news and current affairs became aficionados of 'Round Table' show presented in dulcet tones by Andrew Sesinyi, speaking big English and laughing languidly just like an Englishman. I could visualise him holding his cup and saucer, sipping tea just like the consort of the Queen of England.

But radio also caused me some heartbreak. I thought I knew quite a bit of general knowledge because I loved reading any stuff I came across as long as it wasn't mathematics. A popular youth show was 'Debswana Knockout Quiz' on which Jerry Masete and Esther Kanaimba alternated. For boarding students it was mandatory listening. Then one day it came to our school. My moment had finally come to dazzle the entire nation with my grey matter. Alas, the selectors chose a different set of contestants. Memories of radio come flooding back in times of loss of when voices that have become part of our lives decide to check out.

I still remember the number of cars that made the journey as mourners made their way to Matsiloje to bury Mokgankgara. The only interaction those mourners had with him were through radio and through it the uplifting effect he had on their daily lives. I attended the funeral of Brooks Monnaanoka in Mahalapye a few years back because him and I were fairly acquainted and on some occasions would discuss Rock Music over a drink. I could also call in for a particular track on his show. The sense of loss of an icon is more heartfelt if you saw the individual developing from a novice into a seasoned broadcaster.

Since his days at the University of Botswana we knew Thuzoski as the slightly rotund but jolly guy who would dance a storm and make a grab for the mic to join the band at Cosey's joint across campus. Even back then he loved fun and music. His first and only employment gig was at the national radio station. There, he became versatile taking turns between reading news in two languages to being a joy to listen to as a general announcer and music spinner of note. Sometime in my political career I hit on the idea of attracting bigger crowds to rallies by putting on live bands. Most popular of the groups for my target voters was the South African Dan Tshanda owned Splash stable comprising disco acts like Dalom Kids, Matshikos and Patricia Majalisa. They were also a favourite of Thuzoski and when they had one of their national tours, you could tell from the songs on rotation that fun days were beckoning. If Mokgankgara turned Johnny Mokhali of South Africa into a local idol, the same can be said for Thuzoski with regard to Splash. The character he was, modest in tastes, always walking or using public transport and drinking at run-of-the-mill establishments, I doubted he would have been the type to take payola. Otherwise, his would have been the lifestyle of an extravagant bon vivant. The man just loved his job and felt artistes must be given their due in terms of exposure. In doing so his listeners would be left all the happier. Anyone who shared good times with Thuzoski was considered a friend because to him camaraderie came naturally. A night owl and lover of life, such was his sense of conviviality and humility that to him I was simply 'Bra Bots'.

In June 2019 when I went along with Odirile Motlhale to check on him at Princess Marina Hospital he was surprisingly upbeat, casually explaining his illness in detail that left us shooketh. With Thuzoski there were no airs and graces of the kind we see exhibited by some third rate chancers already claiming stardom. But besides our regular communion at Splash shows, we also had lively nights at the extinct and much lamented Satchmos nightclub in Gaborone West. It was the time of the proposed alcohol levy which I stopped dead in its tracks much to the delight of liquor traders and imbibers alike. My hour of glory it was and every place I patronized would lay drinks on the house. At Satchmos

copious amounts of firewater we had with Thuzoski and one of his bosom buddies, that fine dancer and dandy dresser Kesaobaka 'KK' Keoreng who must surely be distraught at his loss. Sometimes when the calabash overflowed with fun, Thuzoski would step up the mike for a karaoke session while carousing partner KK would take to the dance floor, contorting his body in places we didn't know existed.

In death Thuzoski reminds us about the hallowed legacy of Radio Botswana in our popular culture. His passing and that of others before him must not allow silly fads to derail the station from its loyal audience which replicates itself with each passing generation. I am yet to understand how entertainers of today can be described as musicians when practically none of them can show passable proficiency on a single instrument. Unless, of course a laptop computer qualifies as a music instrument. To everyone, for whom Radio Botswana was the station that provided the soundtracks to their rite of passage and more, the institution long assumed protected heritage status.

I follow online stations from all over the world. However, Saturday, starting 6pm is my date with Lilian Dithupe on 'Letlhoa' warming up Pako Teita, replacement for the legendary Mogatusi Kwapa to fire up the night with sounds from Gallo and Mavuthela. Many a midweek night I have placed a call to Mike Kaote requesting a sizzling Congolese evergreen track. For my long drives on the A1 Highway, Goitseone Moathodi remains an ever dependable navigator. I still miss Smallboy Mothibi opening his morning shift with that amazing track by Izintombi Zomoya. The Sunday morning show 'Dipina le Maboko' is overdue for a nationwide tour to record those folk guitarists and poets that chronicle our daily condition. So eclectic and diverse is Radio Botswana's sounds that it unquestionably lives up to its tagline of 'the Station at the Heart of the Nation'.

Many words have been said and written in tribute to Thuzoski and his craft. That the radiogram, the cassette tape player, walkman, the video, television and the CD have all failed to consign it to the history books proves that nothing will ever beat radio. Radio presenters are our lived daily experiences and memories. Therefore, reports by The Buggles in their 1979 hit single, 'Video Killed the Radio Star' have proven premature and much exaggerated. Nothing will ever kill the radio star. To his fans and fellow socialites Thuzoski lives!

Acknowledgement

First appeared in *Sunday Standard*, 7-13 June 2020