



LET US SUPPORT THE HIDDEN GEMS OF THE INFORMAL ARTS ECONOMY

By Rosemary Mangope

As we rack our brains for how we can better support our artists in the face of limited public and private funding, sometimes the answer is glaringly simple – and is right there under our noses, where we live, where we work and on our daily commutes. This struck me after meeting an exceptionally gifted and determined young street musician from KwaZulu-Natal, a singer and drummer named Phila Dlozi.

Phila (21) has come all the way from the hills of Sokhulu, near Richards Bay, to seek, if not his fortune, then at least a decent living on the streets of Jozi. He often busks outside the National Arts Council offices in the Market Theatre Precinct, next to the Newtown Junction shopping centre.

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in the formal structures and organisations we’re funding, and or what reasons and outcomes, that we forget the many thousands of artists and craft workers who ply their trade in the informal sector, where there is an abundance of talent, passion and enterprising spirit.

So, as Phila became a familiar face (and voice) in our precinct, who we’d pass every day on our way to work, we thought we’d stop to chat with him and hear his story.

After speaking with him, we realised that every small token of appreciation for his talent translates into the much larger gift of dignity – the dignity to sustain himself without asking for handouts.

What he does is a profession, he says – one that he executes with diligence, commitment and dedication.

“Busking is my only source of income, so I regard it as a full-time job,” he says. “I wake up every day and pick up my drum and go sing on the streets to make a living, and hopefully find my breakthrough.”

Phila’s case is typical of the informal arts economy, where the majority of our cultural workers ply their trade. This includes not only buskers but also artists and artisans who sell their wares at markets or street stalls, budding fashion designers who try to establish a customer base in their communities, writers who self-publish, and new-media entrepreneurs who market their digital creations via social media.

Street musicians like Phila and other informal artists who are getting out there and making their own luck have my unqualified support and respect; they brave the elements to use their talent to get by, come rain, cold or shine. It can’t be easy and it must be exhausting, not to mention the passers-by who are rude, dismissive or – worst of all – look through you as if you don’t exist, as if you are nothing.

But Phila

is tough and clear of vision and purpose, amid his youthful idealism. He grew up in a polygamous family “of multiple talents” where he was one of 20 children.



I found his “origin story” of how he discovered his musical calling fascinating. It draws heavily on his African roots and his traditional beliefs: “One night, I had a dream,” he relates, setting the scene for a compelling account.

“With me being an ancestral person, my grandfather appeared to me and gave me his drum and said, ‘Take this drum and go heal people, and you shall be greatly rewarded for it.’ So, the next morning I went to look for his drum and started playing. To my surprise, the beat I was playing was beautiful. Then I started dreaming of songs and I would sing them to people, and they would pay me.”

He underwent formal voice training in KwaMashu and sang backing vocals for former Idols South Africa winner Khaya Mthethwa, and busked at malls and taxi ranks in Durban before making the leap to Joburg, with his manager. “I believed we could conquer all, with his love for the music business and my love for music as a whole – and here we are,” Phila relates. He has since recorded two singles with local producer Golden Beats SA, and hopes these will provide the breakthrough he’s been dreaming of.

Until that happens, he continues busking – which is certainly not a glamorous job, and is often thankless. Phila often has slow days when he barely makes enough money to buy food, after covering his transport costs. Sometimes he performs at venues for free – just to try get his name and brand out there, and to build a following on social media.

But he is inspired by the success of artists such as Sjava, who draws on his Zulu ancestry in his music and recently featured on the Black Panther soundtrack, “for taking traditional music to the world and honouring his culture”.



It’s also encouraging that, these days, thanks to technology, it’s possible for a musician to get his or her compositions out into the public sphere cheaply via artily shot cellphone videos posted on YouTube; however, challenges such as copyright protection and market access remain.

Yes, there is no shortage of raw talent operating in our informal arts sector, but getting exposure and being seen – literally and figuratively – is often the hardest part. And yes, those of us in the formal arts sector certainly have a role to play in broadening access to opportunities.

But every South African can also help build a thriving, multidimensional creative economy. It’s not just about buying the odd handmade item from a market or giving the occasional coin to a street performer. We can also, for example, create a fuss and a vibe on social media when we come across an exceptional busker, artist or designer. That way, we start forging a “proudly local” culture in pursuit of an arts sector where everyone – trained and untrained, formally and informal – has a shot at earning a dignified livelihood.

Such work should be celebrated, and not sidelined. As Phila says: “My work aims to say, ‘Shine, black child. Use your gift and never forget where you come from. With a lot of hard work and dedication, you can be a superstar and heal nations with your music or whatever your gift is. It is all possible.”

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Follow Phila Dlozi on social media:

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