

# Music ends for maskandi's 14



SHABALALA playing at the Blues Bottle

Picture: DAVID MARKS

## DAVE MARKS

**A**NOTHER great South Africa musician, Mlahleni James "14" Shabalala, died at his home in Bergville last week. His CD is yet to be released.

Shabalala was born on a farm called Mantosi – though nobody seems to know the exact date.

He was given the name "14" by his grandmother, because he was abandoned by his mother when he was 14 days old.

Shabalala never went to school and eventually went to Johannesburg to look for a job. In 1981 he bought his first guitar and started singing.

This led to his meeting well-known musicians Blondie Makhene and Brenda Fassie. They said he should go back to KwaZulu-Natal if he wanted to be a successful maskandi musician.

So Shabalala returned and in 1989 he won a maskandi competition held at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The prize was a recording with

3rd Ear Music who subsequently promoted and secured bookings for him at various festivals.

Shabalala was the first maskandi musician to play at the Drakensberg music festival, Splashy Fen, in 1990.

He will perhaps be best remembered for his amazing live performances and his trademark whistling words – personalising each song with a string of deep Zulu clicks and percussive whistles.

Shabalala played his own style of guitar with five nylon strings, self-tuned, with the top high E string missing and the deep melodies slapped out on the bass strings.

In the true tradition of the maskanda (travelling Zulu troubadour or minstrel), "14" would wander around the Drakensberg mountains sharing his poetic observations and songs with the people, playing his five-string rhythms and sounds that he drew from a range of influences.

These included American country music and strains of Flamenco, mixed into the familiar Zulu walking-pick and combined with his life (East African) and Zimbabwean chimurenga.

Shabalala did feature on a number of recorded compilations, the most notable being his dedication for Nelson Mandela, *uMandela*

*uMose Wesibili* (Mandela is The Second Moses), which featured on the *Mandela Peace Rally* album recorded

at King's Park Stadium in Durban in February 1990, but was not available commercially.

He toured the UK as an opening act with Joseph Shabalala (no relation) and Ladysmith Black Mambazo in 2002. Shabalala recorded a CD produced by Joseph Shabalala for Gallo Records that year, but it has never been released.

David Marks is the director of 3rd Ear Music and The Hidden Years Music Archive Project.



MLAHLINI '14' Shabalala

Picture: STEVE HILTON BARBER