

TONIGHT

Dave gets on his music Marks

HIDDEN YEARS OF A SONGWRITER ARE NOW BEING REVEALED

PETER FELDMAN

It's ironic. David Marks, whose "protest" songs in the sixties and seventies were banned by the SABC, returned last week to this hallowed institution to record his first solo album in one of its studios.

Here was the curly-haired singer and songwriter, clad in his "Durban gear" of blue T-shirt, surfer shorts and blue and white power sneakers, producing the very music that had angered the old guard.

Marks was always an outspoken critic of apartheid, I remember, and of the South African music industry.

Time has not tempered his values.

The Durban-based Marks remains one of South Africa's most successful songwriters and producers, having written such classic songs as *Master Jack*, *Mountains of Men* and *Fairygold*.

But an interesting facet of his 30-year career is that although he has performed his songs in many venues, and has recorded, mixed and produced for numerous acts, he has never cut a disc himself.

I asked him why. "I've had opportunities through the years to do records, starting as early as 1969," he says, "but I've always had a problem."

Although he didn't mind the songs he wrote and he enjoyed

other people's interpretations of them, he had a problem hearing his own voice on tape. "I just don't like the way I sing my songs."

Marks has never stopped playing, even though nowadays it's more likely to be in front of his family. "I find music very therapeutic," he confides.

His attitude to recording changed after the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown two years ago.

He produced a show called *Songs and Stories From A Rocking Chair*, which featured songs from the past, plus a collection of new material, and it was a highly acclaimed venture.

Then he began thinking about a record, an idea suggested to him by executive producer Rael Birns.

Another idea was to utilise the talents of people he had worked with over the years, musicians like Manfred Mann, Joseph Tshabalala, Steve Newman and Tony Cox. He explains: "It was going to be a compilation of various people doing my songs. But that would have been very costly and disjointed."

He decided, instead, to record the songs himself and embellish the project with contributions from more than 50 musicians. It's a veritable who's who of the music world from Koois Kombuis to Kenny Henson and from Sipho Mchunu to Matt Hurter.

To highlight this diversity we

find such names as Four Jacks and a Jill—they had a major world hit with *Master Jack*—Hugh Masekela, Gene Rockwell, Ian Lawrence, Anton Goosen, Barney Rachabane, Nico Carstens and American wordsmith Shawn Phillips.

In the studio Marks assembled a tight outfit comprising Durban musicians Alan Judd, an ace

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arranger who also plays guitar and bass, Joe Delew on piano and keyboards, Vusi Khumalo on drums and Concorde Nkibande on bass.

Working on the album, to be called *The Hidden Years*, and released soon by the SABC's own new record label, RPS Music, caused Marks inner turmoil.

"We were doing what I hate doing. And that's building music. I've always complained to record companies that you can't hide behind a studio to make your

music.

"This is the antithesis of my philosophy in making music. But it's very difficult and costly to bring artists in from all over South Africa and have them work around the mike. So we are building it slowly."

The Hidden Years will reflect 30 years of music making. "I selected songs that will take me through a journey more or less right up to the present song *Rocking Chair*."

He discusses the track *Coming Home*'s interesting history. First written in 1971, the song changed form in the mid-seventies for the late Barney Simon production *When Jeppe Was a Two-Way Street*.

"Another song evolved out of this when we started getting politically heavy and we were saying to people, 'Come home'. The song is interesting because it spans the years from 1971 to today."

Marks says today, with the massive political change that has overtaken South Africa, he still tries to reflect the state of the nation in his music.

He has a new song, he says, called *Stranger in Africa* which he wrote in a mood of bitterness. "But I've now changed it, even though people have said I shouldn't change it because that was the time. We aren't strangers in Africa any more. We are accepted."

Marks spoke about the

apartheid years and the problems he personally had in making music. "I'm not trying to take away from the people I was involved with, like Roger Lucey and John Oakley-Smith, because I encouraged them to record.

"But my own personal thing is that I just couldn't make music to be remembered at that time, given that era. Since the changes I have purposefully thought, 'Well, hell, I can sing again' because apartheid bit into all of us."

His parents were politically aware people and even at school in Witbank, Marks recalls with a laugh, he was regarded as the "resident communist" in town.

"My mother was ostracised for having a Miriam Makeba record. All this made me aware of what was going on at the time.

"What I'm trying to say is that it was very awkward for me to try and make music the way I'd love to have, given the circumstances."

He adds that Roger Lucey was more "pertinent" than he was at the time and he preferred producing artists of that ilk because they documented what was happening.

"But now I have another attitude—I cannot believe that people give up when they reach the age of 40 or 50."

Marks, incidentally, is a young 52.

He turns 53 next month.

"My making a record at this age means it's never too late."