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# Siphho comes home

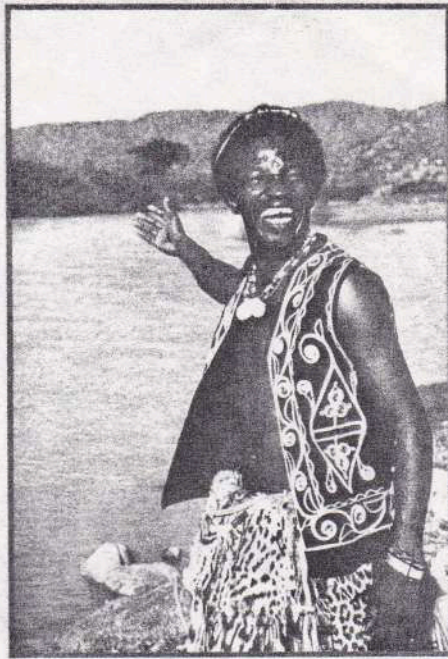
Article: Hanneke Gagiano  
Pictures: Quinten Venter, Minc Records

**S**IPHO MCHUNU has returned to his roots. As a member of the immensely popular group Juluka, he has known the bright lights of the world's capitals. Today, he lives in the remote area of Kranskop in KwaZulu, where he has established himself as a farmer. The Zulu herdsman is back where he has always wanted to be.

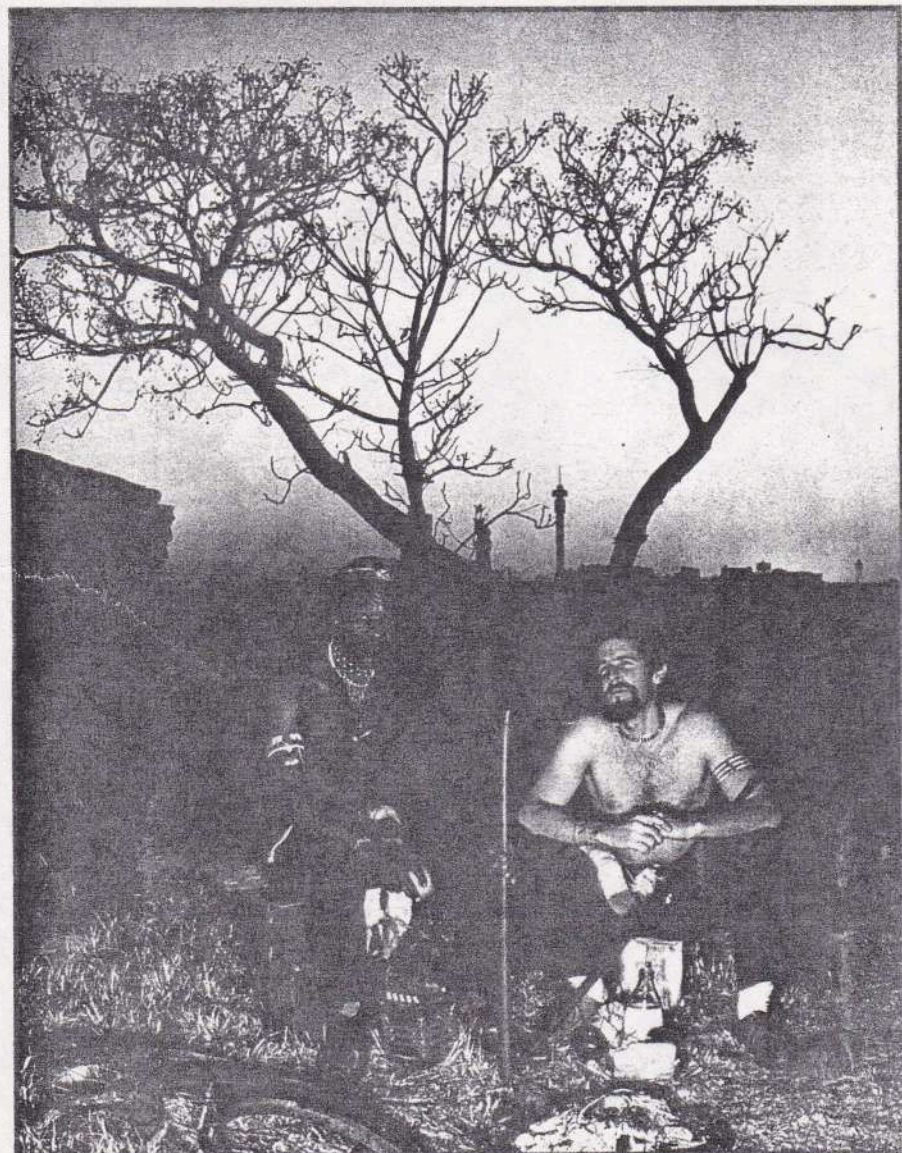
Born 33 years ago on a spot not far from his present home, Siphho is one of 23 children — his father had six wives in the traditional Zulu custom. His father did not wish him to go to school, saying that as a herdsman he knew enough. Another reason, Siphho adds with a grin, was that his father did not want his favourite son to be away from him too long. The man who captures the spirit of Africa and its people in his lyrics



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and music, can neither read nor write.

Orphaned at the age of nine, Siphoh went to Durban when he was only 11. He later moved to Johannesburg, where he found work as a gardener, supporting himself in the big city.

His meeting with Johnny Clegg was quite by chance. He was strolling down the street one day, playing his guitar, when Johnny heard him. Johnny wanted to learn the Zulu language and traditional music, and asked Siphoh to be his teacher. The two soon struck up a warm friendship, united by the universal language, music. Siphoh recalls an amusing incident with a chuckle: Johnny had tape-recorded some of Siphoh's songs without telling him about it. When he heard the songs played back to him, he thought it was the *tokolosh*. Johnny had quite a time to convince him that it wasn't magic at work, but technology. When Siphoh realised the possibilities of teaching Johnny Zulu with a tape recorder, he bought one himself. He and Johnny now met as often as possible to practise their unique brand of music.

Johnny's mother is a friend of Des and Dawn Lindberg, and she brought them together. Through the Lindbergs, record companies became interested in the new sound of Africa that Juluka produced, and the two friends were on their way to fame and fortune.

Their first record, *Universal Man*, was released in 1979. It soon turned into a gold with more than 25 000 copies sold. All Juluka records were awarded gold status, and three of them, *African Litany*, *Scatterlings* and *Work for All* turned platinum, having sold more than 40 000 copies each.

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1. Siphoh with his joy and pride — his herd of cattle. A Zulu's wealth is determined by the number of cattle he owns

2. Siphoh and one of his wives. He wears traditional Zulu apparel, and she kneels while serving him

3. He has installed a pump on the strong-flowing Tugela River, so that he is always assured of enough water for farming

4. Siphoh and Johnny around the fireside, with the Johannesburg skyline in the background, silhouetted by the setting sun

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For a local band, this is no mean achievement.

Juluka's music is alive with the spirit and soul of Africa. No wonder, for Sipho is as much part of Africa as the soil. The group combines traditional African and rock-orientated Western music to form an unique sound that appeals to everybody. Although Juluka is officially disbanded, it will still make music — in fact, plans for a new record are well under way.

Sipho has no formal music training — he taught himself to play the guitar when he was eight years old. His music is the vehicle through which he expresses his feelings, and is emotional rather than intellectual. He always writes the music first and then the lyrics which complement the mood without prescribing to it. He always has an audience in mind when composing; his music must speak to them and add meaning to their lives.

It is clear that Sipho has retained his Zulu heritage and traditions despite

his contact with the Western world. This contact has heightened his perceptions of himself and made many experiences possible, but at heart he has remained a full-blooded Zulu. He still follows the old Zulu ways as his forefathers did. His three wives and seven children still kneel when they speak to him, and are not allowed to look him in the face while doing so.

We were received in his sitting room, with his gold and platinum discs hanging on the walls. People from his neighbourhood are entertained in the traditional way in a round hut, sitting on reed mats on the floor.

During one of Juluka's overseas tours, Sipho wore a traditional Zulu loincloth. He said he did not feel embarrassed wearing it in the bustling sophisticated London, as he was adhering to his culture, in the same way Westerners dress according to their culture.

Sipho is, however, not averse to adopting Western technology and cus-

toms when convenient. He uses solar heating in his huts and has installed a pump in the Tugela River to irrigate his lands.

His plans for the future centre on farming. He has received some communal land from his tribal chief for this purpose, and concentrates on cattle and goats. He will also plant vegetables as water is no problem even in times of drought. One has only to see him in the cattle byre to realise his great love for animals. It is easy to imagine him thinking back to his childhood as a herdboys, looking after his father's cattle. Today he owns more than 350 head of cattle and 1 500 goats.

Sipho confesses that while in Johannesburg he was not happy away from his people. When he left Kranskop as a little boy, he made a vow to return to his place of birth and care for his people. This vow was no idle promise. He left Juluka at the height of its fame, both in South Africa

*Sounded good to me!*



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and abroad, and returned to Kranskop because his people were suffering in the drought. Today, he not only looks after his family's interests, but also those of his community. He knows his children must be educated to make a success of their lives, and has built two schools in his neighbourhood.

Siphon is well known and respected in his community. When asked directions to "Siphon's place", our guide pointed with a smile to the red-roofed house. His fame has not made him blind to the needs of his community and he helps where help is required. The water pump he has installed has become the community's favourite meeting place.

His children have inherited their father's musical talent. His eldest son has taught himself the acrobatics of breakdancing, and the youngest entertains everybody with the traditional foot-stamping of Zulu dances. The children are well-disciplined, but that does not mean that they are without spontaneity and initiative.

Siphon sees South Africa as a strong country, strong in the sense that its people will weather their problems. To him, everyone who lives in this country is a South African. He has very high hopes for the people and makes his contributions towards the future well-being of all its citizens.

Siphon has not buried his remarkable talent. He makes music for all who care to listen and in doing so, spreads joy around him. He has stayed true to the people for whom he sings. □



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5. Members of Juluka. Their rousing performances have brought them standing ovations from audiences all over the world

6. We've done it! Siphon and Johnny congratulating one another on one of the many awards they've won with their new sounds

7. Siphon Mchunu, the man who composed the music and wrote the lyrics that made Juluka famous

8. Siphon Mchunu and Johnny Clegg, two members of the highly successful Juluka. Their record, Work for All turned platinum when more than 40 000 copies were sold

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