

National Arts Festival



Sincerity in his sound: Vuma Levin. Photo: Madelene Cronjé

Jazz sincerity returns

Vuma Levin's music draws on various philosophies and genres that result in a lean, decisive sound

Sihle Mthembu

Vuma Levin is destined to be one of South African jazz's greatest musicians — the 28-year-old guitarist is a purveyor of a liberal kind of jazz whose neglect of genre specifications is the strongest weapon in its arsenal.

Now, in the wake of having spent five years in a kind of personal exile in the Netherlands where he has been studying music, the guitar-wielding Levin is once again on the road for a winter tour in South Africa to support his latest album.

According to the Swaziland-born guitarist, the self-imposed estrangement from his "hometown" was part of a quest to quench his thirst for new experiences and musical paths. "I always wanted to leave home for a bit to try to grow personally, musically and intellectually. Amsterdam was relatively well priced and has one of the top music departments in Europe," he said.

Levin, who has completed his undergraduate degree and is currently completing his master's in jazz guitar performance at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, admits that he is not sure whether he is ready to come back home just yet. Having lived and studied abroad for as long as he has, he says his sense of being displaced has been one of the most interesting aspects in his music-making journey.

Despite the Netherlands having been the playing ground of several South African jazz maestros of yesteryear, such as Julian Bahula in his prime and a young Thoko Mdlalose, Levin says jazz music from his country doesn't seem to have made a mark for itself over there.

He says the jazz scene in that part of the world is vibrant. "The scene in Amsterdam is amazing. The standard of musicianship is incredibly high. There are jam sessions almost every night of the week and there are many, many musicians. It's an incredibly inspiring environment."

His debut album, which has just been released, features young European rising stars that include Italian bassist Marco Zenini and Spanish pianist Xavi Torres Vicente. Speaking about the genesis of his potent and ethereal offering, *The Spectacle of an Other*, Levin says he wanted to make an album that is both responsive and overtly political.

"I started a cultural musicology course [in 2010 at the University of Amsterdam] and a course called Reading Black Music. What I got from the course was a desire to interrogate the manner in which Eurocentric acts of musical production have been used to collude with, propagate, re-enforce construct and subvert colonially inherited power relations," says Levin. "The music that I make is intended, at least in part, to respond to these tendencies and the essentialising they produce."

The resulting music is a sonic journey through Levin's hopes and fears both as a musician and a South African. These are songs that are trying to soundtrack what it's like to be displaced at home and abroad. It's meditative and melancholic, and anchored by his guitar strings.

Popular gigs of unscripted gags

Kgomotso Moncho Maripane

South African stand-up comedy is on the up and Trevor Noah's success in the United States and Loyiso Gola's debut on Australian TV only elevate its profile and calibre internationally.

Bubbling under, however, are movements trying to establish an improvisational comedy scene in the country.

There's Toni Morkel's *Causing a Scene*, Johannesburg's long-running improv troupe, active since 2009. But more visible are the Jittery Citizens, a talented group who see themselves as the country's premier improvisation troupe.

Co-founded in 2012 by Wits University comedy performance and physical theatre graduate Claudine Ullman, it comprises performers such as James Cairns, Nicholas "Pule" Welch, Mpho Osei-Tutu and musical veteran Tony Bentel. They stand out because of their dedication to the craft and their passion to make improv a business and a legitimate way to make theatre.

Apart from corporate work and running workshops at schools, Jittery Citizens have a regular slot on the last Sunday of every month at the Market Theatre. The shows, dubbed *Armando Nights*, take place at Kippies. And the group will be at the National Arts Festival in July.

"We would like to make improv comedy as big as stand-up comedy is in the country. So far we're a little pin-prick — it's a slow process, but the only way to entrench improv is to perform it. I especially want to change the way South Africans feel about improv," says Ullman, who is also getting into stand-up comedy.

She explains: "I've seen that South Africa audiences love short-form improv. They want direct satisfaction. Some don't understand the development of improv."

Short-form improv is characterised by short scenes constructed from a

predetermined game, structure or, more popularly, a word or idea suggested by the audience.

The American theatre academic and acting coach Viola Spolin is credited with having created many of the first short-form exercises in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s in her book, *Improvisation for the Theatre* (1963).

British playwright and director Keith Johnstone, in the 1970s in Canada, outlined his ideas on improvisation in a book called *Improv: Improvisation and the Theatre*. He also invented theatresports, a staple of modern improv comedy.

What many know of improv comedy today, they have probably seen on the United States television series *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*. This has familiarised viewers with short-form improv, based on the foundations of Johnstone and Spolin.

The *Armando* experience you get from the Jittery Citizens's Market Theatre shows includes a guest performer or celebrity comic. Stand-up comedians such as Kagiso Lediga and David Kibuuka have had turns at these hilarious romps.

Ullman studied the style of long-form improv under Armando Diaz at the Magnet Theatre in New York.

Long-form, mostly performed in New York and Chicago, is more concerned with storytelling, characters and themes. It may, for instance, take the form of an existing type of theatre such as a play or musical.

Spolin influenced the first generation of modern American improvisers at the Compass Players in Chicago, leading to the Second City — an improvisational comedy enterprise, renowned as the first-ever ongoing improv theatre troupe in the US and Canada.

Ullman also studied with Second City in Chicago, an experience that has produced many of the original cast of *Saturday Night Live* and com-



Improv innovators: The popular Jittery Citizens bring their comedy to Grahamstown. Photo: Oupa Nkosi

edy stars such as Mike Myers, Tina Fey, Steve Carell and Eugene Levy.

"When I studied improv in Chicago and New York in 2010, it was male-dominated. The torchbearers for women were Amy Poehler and Tina Fey. When I returned in 2013, women had started to infiltrate improv in New York. The same is happening for women in the male-dominated stand-up and improv comedy scenes locally," Ullman says.

The Jittery Citizens have made a tiny hole for improv in Johannesburg and are continuing to dig. Comedy and physical theatre performer Cairns says "the reason for this progress is due to the support of venues like the Market Theatre, the Auto and General Theatre on the Square and PopArt in Maboneng [in downtown Johannesburg], which are willing to take a risk on the development of the genre".

Actor and writer Osei-Tutu's observations about the industry give a glimpse into the history of improv growth in the Johannesburg underground.

"When I began my studies at Wits University there wasn't a lot of edu-

cation in terms of improv. In 2002 Joe Parker had improv shows in casinos. That didn't last long due to the demand for stand-up comedy, but there were breakout improv groups like Al Producers' troupe and Chris Forrest's *Starship Improvised*. Actors started forming their own troupes, like Toni Morkel's *Causing a Scene*, and there were other groups in universities. Wits now has Drama for Life, which is issues-based improv theatre," he says.

The nature of improv is that it is not scripted; everything is created in the moment, on stage, but it relies heavily on being inclusive. Because of its spontaneity, it contains a huge risk factor.

Cairns elaborates: "The magic of improv is in people walking out thinking there's no way the actors could not have planned that, because things can go hideously wrong. I did an improv show with Chris Forrest as a corporate gig and it went so badly, they chucked us out. Risk is a great thing in performance. It keeps you on your toes."

Bringing in a South African nuance, multilingual stand-up comedian,

actor and musician Welch, fluent in isiZulu and Setswana among other languages, adds: "Improv is fundamental to who we are as South Africans because we love seeing people try and flop. The failing is in essence a success."

With stand-up comedy being so dominant, Welch believes South Africans are ready for something new. "Improv is part of our South African culture; it's about making up stories as in our oral tradition and *izinganekwane* [folk tales]. As Jittery Citizens we're about to extend on it by incorporating indigenous languages and 'vernac' to broaden the types of expression.

"There's a spirit of play in improv and with it you can break out of the moulds of society. It's a release that allows us to be free to be our identities. Performance is a way to claim a lot of things, including accessing each others' lives. Improv can make it fun for us to be African."

The Jittery Citizens perform at the National Arts Festival from July 2 to 10

ns on guitarist's sonic trip

What is most impressive about the album is how decisive and lean it is. It would be easy for someone with talents as varied and adaptable as Levin's to go overboard, particularly on a concept record like this. Instead, the offering is an exercise in patience and none of the songs on the album sound like fillers or place holders. It's a record that ends just as you are in the middle of enjoying it — and that's the point. It lingers precisely because the songs on it feel like the start and not the end of something.

Levin's life story is evocative of an old jazz idiom that the best jazz players come to the genre by way of rock 'n roll and vice versa.

"I first heard jazz at a very young age. My dad used to play all sorts of music fusion — 1960s and 1970s rock like Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin. Jazz was rare, but I distinctly remember having heard *Kind of Blue* and *My Favourite Things* and *A Love Supreme* early on in life. It took me a long time to gravitate towards, and then finally appreciate, jazz," says Levin.

"I guess what attracted me to it was its harmonic and melodic sensibilities, the emphasis on timbre and dynamics and the whole instrumental

angle. For me, it just meant the possibilities for abstraction, expression and interpretation were very broad.

His favourite music "changes all the time. Marcus Wyatt's album *Africans in Space* is my favourite South African jazz album," he says.

The Spectacle of an Other edges towards being a multilayered piece of philosophy, one whose roots stretch as far wide as Carlo Mombelli, The Pharcyde and Achille Mbembe to orientalism and Afrika Mkhize. Levin's challenge has been to take all that is orbiting in his headspace and package it in a cohesive way that makes musical sense.

Speaking about the aesthetic of his sound, Levin notes that it's a mutating organism that is not yet free from the bonds of history.

"From an aesthetic standpoint, my aim is to create a music that occupies the space between various strands of popular music, jazz, Western art music (from Bach to Schoenberg) and the full array of South African music."

Part of the allure of jazz is its flamboyance, but on this album Levin has

gone for a lo-fi approach and dims the lights on the solo moments, opting for a sound that is distinguished by his band's collective excellence. This results in a kind of tug-of-war with the audience upon first listen. Where you expect the solo to be you might be confronted with a litany of strings or the marching thud of horns. Everything is not as it should be and that is what makes it enjoyable.

Levin is tired of how jazz has become apolitical. He is a believer in the genre's ability to tell stories. "Despite the absence of words, I think that instrumental music definitely has a semiotic dimension to it. However, due to a lack of words, the emphasis is on the abstract rather than the concrete. So the narratives that it is able to weave are primarily left up to the imagination of the listener."

Levin's music signals a return to what once made South African jazz music great and distinct: sincerity.

Asking him questions is like opening a minefield of references, each one of which makes its way into his musical mix. Asked about the title of the album, he breaks down how it was based on a chapter from a book by

social philosopher Stuart Hall where he discusses the ways in which colonialism manifests itself through the creation of fantasies and fetishes about non-Westerners. This is heavy stuff and Levin likes it that way.

But the guitarist is not unaware of the music's need to adapt to a contemporary vernacular; it must go where it's needed and be heard by the people it claims to represent.

"I think the good thing about jazz musicians of the here and now is that they are deconstructing the notion of bounded genre. Most contemporary jazz musicians use the vocabulary and improvisational practices of the tradition as a basis to speak in the cultural language of our times," says Levin.

"When this is done in a nonreactionary manner, as an organic extension of one's self-expression, that's when the real magic happens."

"In any case the boundaries between music are becoming increasingly blurred to the point of being somewhat insignificant. Jazz, hip-hop, rock, soul, etcetera — it's becoming increasingly difficult to say where the one genre ends and the other begins."

"Jazz, as with all other forms of cul-

tural production, is fluid, dynamic and ever-changing. It changes as society changes, to accommodate the stories that people want to tell and the ways in which people want to reflect on themselves and the broader contours of society," he says.

This album and the tour to venues in Johannesburg, Cape Town and the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown signal the start of a three-way conversation between the audience, the music and himself. This, Levin says, is a conversation he is eager to have.

Speaking about what audiences can expect from him and his band as they hit the road, Levin points out that the music is the message.

"The people that I play with are young, dynamic and incredible musicians. People should just come for that alone. Over and above that the music is an attempt to reflect upon what it means to be South African in the here and now and I would like to share my vision of that with people."

Vuma Levin performs at SB Jazz and Blues Café in Grahamstown on Thursday July 2 at 10pm

Grahamstown National Arts Festival highlights

Music

We Salute Madiba (Rolihlahla) celebrates indigenous song, dance and drama from the diverse people of the Eastern Cape. The material for the show is inspired by the Freedom Charter and the life of Nelson Mandela, who was born in that province. If you are not familiar with Xhosa culture, this show will give you insight into its traditional gear and rituals.

South African bassist and composer Carlo Mombelli is sharing the stage with The Storytellers ensemble, which is made up of Kyle Shepherd on piano, Mbuso Khoza on vocals and Kesivan Naidoo on drums. This show is described as a "manipulated bass and sound design" and promises not to be disappointing, with its assemblage of esteemed names from the local jazz circle.

Mombelli has been in the music industry for more than 30 years. If you have never seen him live, make



Musical tales: Carlo Mombelli will be joined by The Storytellers

sure you get a taste of his talent at the festival.

Comedy

The festival celebrates the contribution made by satirist Pieter-Dirk Uys

to South Africa's theatre industry by staging a few of his old and new stage productions. The programme includes premieres of *African Times* and *The Echo of a Noise* and his previous solo shows, *Never Too Naked*

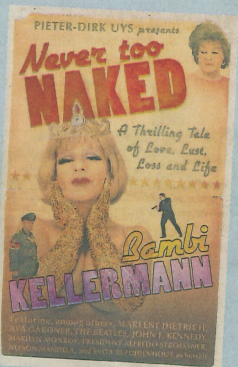
and *A Part Hate, a Part Love*. Uys's three films, *Adapt or Dye*, *Farce about Uys* and *Skating on Thin Uys*, will also be screened.

Theatre

A Doll's House: Ibsen's great play and a cast of five great South African actors — Jennifer Steyn as Nora, Martin le Maitre as Torvald, Dawid Minnaar as Dr Rank, Anthea Thompson as Kristine and Rob van Vuuren as Nils. It adds up to six reasons in search of sell-out houses and critical acclaim.

Born in the RSA: Thirty years after its workshoped genius wowed South African theatre, the Barney Simon classic returns, opening 30 years and two days after Simon himself died, prematurely, on June 30 1995. Just go see.

The Imagined Land: Malcolm Purkey directing from a Craig Higginson script with theatre luminary Fiona



Fare at the festival: A celebration of Pieter-Dirk Uys

Ramsay sharing the stage with notable newcomers Nat Ramabulana and Janna Ramos-Violante. Enough said. — Katlego Mkwahazi and Darryl Accone



MAKE SENSE OF THE PAST **APARTHEID MUSEUM** MAKE SENSE OF THE PRESENT

Images courtesy of Sam Ntshiri and Gallo Images/APR