

Vuyisile Mini

Vuyisile Mini was born in the Cape in 1920. After completing elementary school he worked as a labourer and trade union organiser. In 1951 he joined the ANC, and in 1952 was jailed for three months in the Defiance Campaign. A defendant in the Treason Trial of 1956, he was discharged in 1958. He became Sactu secretary for the Eastern Cape in 1960.

Charged in 1963 with 17 counts of sabotage and the murder of a police informer, Vuyisile Mini, together with Zinakile Mkaba and Wilson Khayingo, was convicted and hanged in Pretoria Central Prison on November 6th, 1964.

Mini, of the Eastern Cape High Command of Umkhonto we Sizwe and his two comrades were offered their lives in exchange for giving information about sabotage activity in their area.

Mini wrote: 'I am presently awaiting execution at Pretoria Central Gaol having been sentenced to death at the beginning of the year. On October 2, 1964, Captain Geldenhuys and two other policemen came to see me. They asked me if I had been informed that my appeal had been dismissed. I told them I was not interested to know from them what my advocate said.

They then said there was still a chance for me to be saved as they knew I was the big boss of the movement in the Eastern Cape. I must just tell them where the detonators and revolvers were, and they would help me. I refused. They then asked me about Wilton Mkwayi (subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment) and whether I was prepared to give evidence against Mkwayi, whom they had now arrested. I said no, I was not. When they asked would I make the Amandla Ngawethu salute when I walked the last few paces to the gallows, I said yes.'

Mini's unmistakable bass voice, ringing out loud and clear, sent his final message in Xhosa to the world he was leaving. Charged with emotion, but stubbornly defiant, he spoke of the struggle and of his absolute conviction of the victory to come. Many of the songs sung by the freedom fighters of today are Mini's compositions.

Vuyisile Mini's daughter, Nomkhosi Mary, a founding member of Amandla, the Cultural Ensemble of the ANC, was among those killed in the South African commando raid on Maseru, Lesotho on December 20th, 1985.

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SACP 65 Years in the Frontline Struggle

VUYISILE MINI

(Adapted from a radio script by RMT Ngqungwana)

When we speak of martyrs and heroes of Umkhonto we Sizwe we speak of men and women who were deliberately murdered by the racists for their ideas and activities; we speak of men who were killed for their part in the struggle to rid South Africa of the scourge of racial and class oppression. We speak of the heroic Vuyisile Mini, whose courage never faltered even as he marched fist clenched, singing freedom songs to the gallows.

Vuyisile Mini along with Wilson Khayingo and Zinakile Mkhamba were the first Umkhonto we Sizwe combatants to be murdered by the racist hangman in 1964. He was a man who was never daunted by the possibility of danger. Mini was a member of the volunteer corps of the ANC and forerunner of Umkhonto we Sizwe. He was a youth leader and trade union organiser charged with many tasks like being the organising secretary of the Port Elizabeth branch of the Stevedoring and Dock-workers Union which was an affiliate of SACTU.

He was an active participant in the 1952 Defiance Campaign. For his role he was sentenced to three months imprisonment. He was also later to be arrested during the 1956 Treason Trial of 156 leaders of the Congress Alliance. The trial ended in acquittal because the state failed to prove treason in the activities of the then peace preaching ANC and its sister organisations.

This was however not to be the end as he was again to be detained in Rooi Hell (the North End Prison in Port Elizabeth) with Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba. It was here that Mini was to experience real hell when the prison officials forbade him to sing revolutionary songs in his famous baritone voice. The sadistic warders were to react to his refusal to stop singing by locking him and his fellow detainees up for twenty four hours a day.

UNDERGROUND

The racist regime was getting more violent. The African National Congress was finally banned. But this did not silence comrades like Mini and he, like many others, decided to go underground.

During this period of mobilisation and reorganisation Mini and his family were to suffer continuous harassment, as he had become very well known throughout the country by the police.

By 1961 Mini was going up and down the country fully involved in the formation of our people's army, Umkhonto we Sizwe. These travels are filled with many stories and escapades: Around August 1961 Mini and a fellow comrade Brian were travelling for consultations in Johannesburg. From that trip the infant MK was to acquire one of its first weapons. They made this gain during a confrontation with a



Vuyisile Mini

boer train guard. While Mini was standing in the passage of the carriage, the boer guard who was trying to get past spoke to him in a very naughty manner. Mini faced him and said: "Look here you must mind your language, brother" he said, looking the man straight in the eyes. The guard was taken aback and produced a revolver. Through quick work they disarmed him, and left the train making a speedy detour.

He handled all situations in a cool, calm and collected manner, this being one of the major factors for his appointment to the Eastern Cape Command. He was a member not from recklessness or a sense of adventurism but from a deep conviction that this was the only method that would achieve the freedom of his people.

The cadres of Umkhonto we Sizwe were drawn from the active youth of the congress movement. It was the dedication of men like Mini that steered the infant MK into shape. The work involved great risk. The fundamental training was carried out secretly in houses and in the bush. At one time a football field was used for demonstrating manoeuvres and how to place bombs on a target. Arms and explosives had to be manufactured and distributed. None of the command had ever received thorough military training as no African had ever been drafted into military service.

DECEMBER 16

On the evening of Saturday December the 16th 1961 the whole country was to reverberate from explosions, taking the whole country by surprise. The regime's natural response was to arrest anybody and everybody they suspected, like Mini and semi-blind old men, some of whom did not even believe that the ANC could be involved in 'terrorist' activities. The ECC (Eastern Cape Command) was not crippled. The following day after their release the Eastern Cape was rocked by explosions.

Coupled with all this work of pioneering the formation of MK, he was also actively involved in the work of the ANC and SACTU. But time was running out for him as the reign of terror was being intensified. The notorious special branch policeman Donald J Card was specially dispatched from East London to hunt and hound Mini. But it was becoming apparent that the fly was within. Mini was arrested and tried along with Wilson Khayingo and Zinakile Mkhamba. During the trial Mini displayed his heroism and courage. This was illustrated by Mini's refusal to give evidence against Wilton Mkwayi even though he was certain he would be executed. He refused to be reprieved at the expense of a fellow patriot, a comrade-in-arms.

His voice, his beliefs, his ideas still live on in his songs, in his work, in our history and shall continue to do so even beyond the attainment of freedom in South Africa.

His name shall be written in bold letters on the Roll of Honour.

Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony Photo

Through a chronological history of the liberation struggle in South Africa, the documentary cites examples of the way music was used in the fight for freedom. Songs united those being oppressed and gave those fighting a way to express their plight. The music consoled the incarcerated and created an effective underground form of communication inside the prisons.

Amandla! - singing down apartheid

Bongani Majola

23 June 2003

The stirring account of the struggle against racial oppression in South Africa cannot be told without the role of music in that struggle, and that's the context and subject matter of Lee Hirsch's documentary film, *Amandla!*.

For every song, there was pain, for every tune there was joy and heartbreak as South Africans at home and abroad sought solace and encouragement. *Amandla!* is an impassioned chronicle of the role of music as a means of protest and survival through more than 40 years of struggle against apartheid.

Directed by Lee Hirsch, co-produced by Hirsch, Sherry Simpson and Desiree Markgraaff, the documentary took 10 years to make and features well-known political figures, former exiled musicians Hugh Masekela, Vuyisile Mini, Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, Sophie Mgcina, Duma ka Ndlovu and Vusi Mahlasela, and former Umkhonto weSizwe (MK) guerrillas Thandi Modise and Lindiwe Zulu - as well as numerous unsung heroes.

Subtitled "A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony", *Amandla!* It is a poignant portrayal of the triumph of spirit, through song, against one of the world's most repressive state apparatuses. "The apartheid government took everything away from people, but it couldn't stop them from singing", says Hirsch.

In song lay the resilient spirit of an oppressed people. Also in song could be found that rare ability of South Africa's people to find humour and creativity in impossible conditions, in abject poverty - and in battle.

When the first victims of apartheid brutality died protesting against the pass laws in the 1960s, they were singing. When innocent students were fired on by police with live ammunition during their protest against the use of Afrikaans in black schools in 1976, they were in song.

As Masekela amiably puts it: "We will go down in history as an army that spent a lot of time singing, rather than fighting".

Legend has it, according to Masekela, that before the first shot was fired in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, the British commanders ordered their regiments to let the approaching Zulu impis finish the song they were singing - before war broke out in earnest.

Amandla! is a typically South African story that begins with the exhumation of Vuyisile Mini's skull and bones, to be reburied in his home in the Cape. Credited with writing the ominous song "Bhasobha iNdoda eMnyama Verwoerd" (Beware the black man, Verwoerd), which became a rallying cry for many liberation army soldiers, political activist and songwriter Mini was hanged and given a pauper's burial by the apartheid government.

The documentary also captures the archetypal South African war dance, the toyi-toyi. While a marvel to watch, as throngs of "comrades" charge forward chanting slogans, the toyi-toyi could strike fear even in the most menacingly armed forces of the land.

Former riot police commanders, interviewed in the film, admit as much: "I can tell you that most of the riot police and soldiers who had to contain those illegal marches were shit-scared of the chanting blacks confronting them. But they had to stand their guard. Here was an unarmed mob instilling fear just by their toyi-toyi!"

Over and above the toyi-toyi, there are heart-rending moments in the documentary, accompanied by intensely moving songs such as Vusi Mahlasela's ballads, Masekela's "Stimela" and the works of "People's Poet" Mzwakhe Mbuli.

Amandla! also features the music of Vuyisile Mini, Mbongeni Ngema, Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, Abdullah Ibrahim, Sibongile Khumalo and Sophie Mgcina. Mahlasela, Masekela, Makeba, Rathebe, Ibrahim, Khumalo and Mgcina are all interviewed in the documentary.

"The film has been an emotional journey for us as filmmakers, and we hope it will be for the audience that come to watch. It is the history of a voice that gave courage, hope and comfort, and will be an important historical reference for future generations", says Markgraaff.

Winner of the 2002 Sundance Festival Documentary Audience and Freedom of Expression Awards, the film's only weakness is by omission. Time and the constraints of making a film could not possibly do justice to half a century of song in South Africa. Equally, the film could have interviewed a more varied range of musicians, activists and ordinary people.

However, the power and the urgency of freedom music lives on in the documentary. An inspirational call to arms, "Amandla!" (power) - followed by the retort "Awethu!" (ours) - means power to the people, and the documentary is testimony to that powerful triumph of spirit.

Amandla! runs for 102 minutes and is currently showing at selected cinemas across the country.

- Click [here](#) to watch the Dave Matthews interview on *Amandla!*
- The soundtrack to *Amandla!* which includes pre-recorded masterpieces from legendary South African musicians, new voices from South Africa, as well as amazing never-before-heard field recordings and performances recorded exclusively for the movie. One dollar from every record sold will be donated to the Vusi Mahlasela Foundation, a music resource centre for young people in Pretoria. [More info, orders](#)

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Reviews

Singing Down the Walls

by Robin Fillmore Chapin

Film Review: Lee Hirsch, *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (HBO: 2002).

The film opens with a faint sound, a vibration that says something's coming, and so you listen very closely. Then there are voices—many—singing the full and glorious harmonies of Africa. It's an overwhelming gospel of possibility sung by those who had nothing but hope and their voices with which to sing. Such is *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, a documentary produced and directed by Lee Hirsch on the critical role music played in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

Amandla!, which means "power" in Swahili, is an HBO-financed project that won the Documentary Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival in January. It will air on HBO, although programmers haven't yet set a date. Part living history lesson, part archival search, Hirsch interviews activists, poets, and singers for their stories of how they lived under the brutally repressive system of forced separation in South Africa. Activists explain how the songs and chants gave voice to blacks as they narrated the stories of the forced relocations from their homes in the city into shantytowns. The songs said to the minority whites: "Here are the black people." By also including archival films, Hirsch puts us in the front row of the chorus, where historic gatherings of protesters sang with every part of their bodies—their feet dancing, their hands raised in fists of prayer, and their heads bobbing to a rhythm of release. The struggle against apartheid consumed one's life and soul.

THE DOCUMENTARY'S central character is Vuyisile Mini, who we first see as his body is being exhumed from a potter's field. Executed by hanging in 1963 in a Pretoria jail, Mini was a trade labor organizer whose stirring bass voice and impassioned lyrics aroused blacks to remain defiant in the face of apartheid and committed to the ideal that victory over oppression was inevitable. Mini's songs were neither dirges nor fight songs but soulful chants with melodies of promise. Not understanding the language, white teachers unknowingly led their black students in singing Mini's words—among them "White man, we're gonna hurt you."

In the film, Mini's heirs are brought together to re-inter his body and to offer this hero of the revolution a proper burial. As dignity is restored to Mini's body, dignity is restored to the millions of blacks in South Africa. Like the walls of Jericho, the walls of apartheid were blown down with song.

The film does nothing to capture the current state of crisis and disease in South Africa, but, in fairness, that isn't what director Hirsch intended. He leaves his audience with the belief that the world is a better place without the horrors of apartheid, and for that, we thank him. Hirsch has reconstructed a world so vivid in its colors and so compelling in its symphony that we can see the faces, visit the places, and hear the tales of those who committed themselves to spreading the gospel of justice. And we're also left singing Vuyisile Mini's words: "Mayihambe le vangeli; Mayigqib ilizwe lonke," or "Let this gospel spread and be known through the world."

Robin Fillmore Chapin is director of internship, education, and hospitality at Sojourners. See www.hbo.com to check screening dates.

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Sunday Times - South Africa

The soundtrack to SA's story

The Wild, Wild West

How is the story of the past 50 years to be told? Whose memory is true enough to tell it all, to encapsulate it just so, and give it to generations to come?

Our country bristles with stories waiting to be told. There are the young women - girls, really, children - who left South Africa in fear to join a liberation movement they probably misunderstood and knew very little

about. Who will tell their stories of love and fear? Of longing and despair? Of joy and hope?

Then there are the young men, the ones who were afraid and did not want to patrol townships in the dead of night, the ones who were conscripted and spent two years of their lives being ordered about and sent to fight in Angola. How do we tell future generations about their fear as they faced an unknown and angry enemy, as they died a lonely death in places whose names they could not even pronounce and whose people they were indoctrinated to know only as terrorists? How do we tell our children that in our time children were given guns to go and kill other children?

Then there are the stories of those who spent years in prison to end apartheid. Then they came out, and watched in confusion as their people faced rising unemployment, were retrenched from jobs and lived in squalor and indignity in squatter camps. Who is to tell of their anger and despair as it becomes clear that even under a beautiful democracy such as ours, some will die of hunger and disease?

I first heard the story of Vuyisile Mini from my younger brother. "Vuyisile Mini," he said, "went to the gallows singing. He was the first Umkhonto weSizwe soldier to be executed by the apartheid government." When Mini was sent to prison his youngest daughter was two years old. After hanging him, the government gave him a pauper's funeral and refused to tell his family where or how he was buried.

Mini was no ordinary man. He was a poet, a fantastic singer, a composer of songs. He was a freedom fighter. Mini knew something about the telling of stories and the preservation of memory. He composed songs that ensured people never forgot the injustices around them. Many of us have heard Miriam Makeba sing that beautiful song Nantsi Indoda eMnyama Verwoerd! (Here comes the black man, Verwoerd!). It was a Mini song - simple, combative, haunting. It has been sung again and again in the capitals of the world and in this country, and it embodies the spirit of freedom that beats in every caged bird and human being.

Lee Hirsch has tried to tell the story of the past 50 years. In his beautiful and haunting film *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony*, Hirsch tells a simple and yet complex story: almost every facet of South Africa's struggle was characterised by songs. Those who opposed apartheid always sang when they protested. The women who marched on the Union Buildings in the 1950s sang; the people of Sharpeville, who were murdered for burning their passes sang; the children of 1976 sang, the men and women who went into military camps in Angola and Zambia sang, those who marched on Trafalgar Square sang, and the men and women who went on the defiance campaign of the late 1980s sang.

They sang as they were arrested, sang as they were shot at, sang as they were chased by the police. They sang, like Mini, as they were murdered. They sang different songs, songs which suited the moment - the angry toyi-toyi songs, the dirges, the laments, the prayers, the chants of joy and of pain.

In his film, Hirsch tells the story of the music. He tells of Mini's music, of the Dolly Rathebes and Miriam Makebas, of Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika. With every song there is a story: of pain, of joy, of heartbreak.

"This story will remind you why you always want to go home if you are outside of South Africa," a friend told me before I went to see it in London. He was right. Amandla! is a triumph, and I hope as many of us as possible see it when it opens in South Africa, fittingly, on April 27.

-By Justice Malala