

Brenda Fassie

songbird from Langa



Sunday Times, 23 March 1988

Brenda Fassie (1964 - 2004)

Brenda Fassie, one of nine children, was born in 1964 in the township of Langa on the Cape Flats. She first performed as a member of the Tiny Tots when she was four years old. She was soon noticed for her beautiful singing and for her love of being the centre of attention. Her exceptional talent brought her to the attention of Producer, Kolozi Lebona, who, with Brenda's mother's permission took the 15 year old girl to stay with him and his wife in Soweto. When one of the members of the group Joy went on maternity leave, Brenda was asked to replace her and this proved to be her big break. Her first hit, Weekend Special, made it to Billboard's Top 100 when she was only 18. It was the first local act to have made it into the Top 100 and it became a radio and club hit. It made it on to the dance charts in the UK and did well elsewhere. It became the fastest-selling single of its time.

Commentators have remarked not only on the great beauty of her voice, but also on her originality. She didn't try to copy any of the American singers and this made people feel that her music was really South African.

She is remembered as having been very generous and for never forgetting her roots in Langa. She was also a flamboyant personality with famous mood swings. In public she would weep, become extremely angry and then become loving and sweet all in a matter of moments. Several journalists have said they were more scared of interviewing her than other famous singers and actors. She had one son, Bongani, whom she loved very much and tried to protect.

Brenda became addicted to crack cocaine in the 1990s. In 2004, she died probably from a drug overdose.

Newspaper Sources – an Exercise in Image Making

In this lesson plan, learners are asked to think about different images that the media communicates. They will see that one person can be represented in many different ways and that one person also has different sides to themselves. Brenda Fassie was a very complex person.



SOME OF BRENDA'S HITS....

Weekend Special (1983)

Too Late for Mama (1989)

Now is the Time (1997)

Memeza (1998)

(The biggest selling album of the year & earned Brenda several music awards including the 1999 Kora Award for best female artist.)

Amadlozi (2000)



Brenda Fassie Joe Sefale, Sunday Times, 16 January 1985

Madondo wonders why SA has turned its back on its queen of pop?

She situates herself so close to me that I get to inspect her face, real up close and personal; I could count her facial pores. Her previous robust life of continuous crack consumption and a fascination with the high life is responsible for this picture next to me. ... She scans my mind. "See, I have done more than 25 videos, more than 15 albums, performed in more shows than everybody in this country today, partied harder and funkier than all, while feeding a tribe of relatives as well as throwing myself to the wolves of Jo'burg's smoky nightclub strips. Of course my skin would tell my stories. So, I don't look like Naomi Campell. So what? "Man, I will survive, oh, I'll survive!", she lets rip with an emotion-packed baritone.

Madondo The Sunday Independent, 8 November 1998



Brenda Fassie shooting a video Raymond Preston, Sunday Times, 4 March 2003



Brenda wows the crowds at Kilimanjaro Dudu Zitha, Sunday Times

What music's new school thinks of Brenda Fassie?



Lebo, lead vocalist, Boom Shaka

When we were about 14 we were just dancing, she knew us and called us on stage ... she inspired us to be where we are now. No matter what happens she'll be the one.

Arthur, kwaito star, head of 999 records

I can still remember everything about the first time I saw Brenda perform in Soweto ... later, working with her was really important to me.

Bonnie Mbuli, TV presenter

I remember when she got blue contact lenses and it was considered a thing not to be done by black women. I think it was brave and I liked it.

Queen, lead vocalist, Abashante

She's a born fighter. I was influenced by her in everything singing, dancing, she's got it all.

Gerry Williams, presenter M-Net

I think Brenda is the closest thing we've had to a superstar ... but I don't think audiences will give her a second chance...

Christos, house music producer and DJ

She was 19 or 20 when she got success. People need to be taught how to handle themselves in that situation. Record companies were more interested in making money than helping her.

Interviews and research by Maria McCloy, Mail and Guardian, 8 - 14 August 1997

The Infinite Love of Mabrrr

She was a Xhosa damsel who lived her life as if there was no tomorrow! And typical of a Madiba clan maiden, she was reckless, spontaneous and bubbling over with love and energy. Nevertheless in her search for love and goodness in her fellow human beings, she missed what her mother gave her the most of – love!

Some decried her gestures as wayward and irresponsible as she was extremely generous with her material wealth, dishing out to those who were needy and greedy....

And looking back at her character now, I realize she was God's natural child and one of the most wonderful human beings.

If the truth be told, when the then unknown Brenda Nokuzola Fassie landed in the dusty streets of Soweto towards the end of the 1970s, this friendly, extremely talented, talkative, noisy, nosy singer and actress had long been a stage performer of note in the backyard of her birthplace, Langa in Cape Town.

She came into the public's eye at a time when Soweto, and many other townships, were reeling and weeping after the tragic brutality of 1976, a difficult time in apartheid era South Africa's history.

And when it was time to bid her short and tragic life farewell from her death-bed at the Sunninghill Hospital, typical of the Brenda I knew, she made such a fuss of her date with death...

Sipho Jacobs ka Khumalo, City Press, 16 May 2004

Learner Activities

- Brenda said that her skin could tell the stories of her life. So, her skin was like an archive! Think of a person you know - probably an old person - whose skin tells the stories of her/his life.
- Write a paragraph saying what her/his face tells you. If you like, draw/paint or photograph the person's face.
- You are writing a tribute to Brenda Fassie after her death in 2004 for a local newspaper or magazine. Choose one of the ideas listed below as a theme around which to build your article. You might want to conduct additional research.
 1. Needed media attention but in the end couldn't keep up
 2. Overgenerous – allowed people to sponge off her and lead her astray
 3. Fantastic, bubbly, very talented, strong woman
 4. The little girl from Langa who grew up too fast
 5. A great talent destroyed by addiction to crack cocaineWhen everyone has written her/his article, put them up around the classroom. See how many different ideas there are about Brenda. None of them is really wrong!

Other Ideas

- Talk about why there is a celebrity culture. Why do celebrities fascinate us? OR
- Why is it that so many celebrities end up dying prematurely often from drug overdoses?
- Ask the learners when they think the celebrity culture began? Is it only a recent phenomenon? Did their parents or grandparents have the same sort of culture? Why/ Why not?



Bassline Newtown,
Johannesburg artist,
Angus Taylor *Sunday Times*

Criteria for Assessment

- Learners show appreciation for the fact that older people have stories to tell of their lives. There are different ways of recording such stories.
- Learners can conduct research and write a coherent piece around a given theme.

Curriculum Link – Grades 10 & 11

LO1, AS 3 & 4

LO3, AS 3 & 4

Grade 10 Content link – What are the constructed heritage icons that are celebrated today? OR Grade 11 How unique was apartheid South Africa?



This lesson has been developed by the South African History Archive (SAHA)