

In the Mix

Power to the Singers

Oakland's Vukani Mawethu Choir Harmonizes for Human Rights



It's Wednesday evening in the Angel Room at the First Congregational Church of Oakland, and the people are singing. Alto and tenor voices blend, then give way to deep bass tones that work in robust harmony with strong sopranos. The word "Mandela" punctuates the lyrics.

The room's name calls for ethereal comparisons, and there is indeed an angelic flavor—if heaven has lusty angels who belt out activist messages. The most spirited angel, the one using her whole body to direct the singers, gestures to still the voices.

Then she raises a clenched fist and, fervor bubbling into laughter, shouts "Amandla!" (Power). The group completes the chant: "Awethu!" (To the people). Appropriate, as this is Oakland's Vukani Mawethu Choir, which took the stage for the

first time 22 years ago, singing South African freedom songs in an anti-apartheid benefit concert held in Berkeley.

Since then, the choir has performed to tumultuous applause at countless fundraisers and before hundreds of thousands of people including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Jesse Jackson, Harry Belafonte, Alice Walker and Whoopi Goldberg, to list a handful of the myriad of "big names" who've heard the choir and loved it. At the choir's most famous event—Nelson Mandela's 1990 World Tour celebration at the (then) Oakland Coliseum, which the choir co-produced and where members went onstage with the legendary leader—the audience numbered 78,000.

When apartheid ended, "We thought people might stop asking us to sing, but they never have," says Pat Jameson-Amwele, executive director and a member of the ever-evolving, multicultural and multigenerational choir since day one. The 25 singers are all volunteers, says Jameson-Amwele, who works for the Peralta Community College District in her day job. "We are very frugal. None of us takes a penny for what we do."

Through the years, the choir has kept and added to the collection of Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho songs for which it became famous. A South African leads the singers through regular pronunciation lessons. "Some of the clicks are really challenging," says music director Andrea Turner, also an original member, who works as a senior services program director for the City of Oakland when she's not leading the choir with "Amandla!" Vukani Mawethu's post-apartheid repertoire of gospel songs, spirituals, labor and civil rights songs, and more has a strong Oakland focus and addresses the universality of racism and other human rights issues.

Currently the choir is raising funds for its second South Africa tour next year. Same as last time the singers were there, they will perform at fundraisers and distribute money around the country. "We can cook, clean, sell cookies, fry fish—we'll do whatever it takes," a singer at the Wednesday night rehearsal joked. But no joke is November's gala fundraising event when the choir will present what it's calling its first Ubuntu Award. It will go to the choir's founder, Fania Davis.

Vukani Mawethu performs at 7 p.m. Nov. 15 at the First Presbyterian Church, 2619 Broadway. For details, call (510) 444-5009 or see www.vukani.com.

—By Wanda Hennig
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