

Klaasen brings music of South Africa in 'feel good concert' of the season



By Brock Weir

Sprucing up her big wigs and donning her shining outfits, Lorraine Klaasen was going for a little bit of Diana Ross when she first auditioned as a singer in a Montreal nightclub in the late 1970s.

A native of South Africa, she admits she 'put all that African stuff away' when she began to carve out her own niche in her new homeland, but something just didn't feel right.

She missed celebrating her African heritage on the stage and imparting the music she grew up with and, as the daughter of famed South African singer Thandie Klaasen, it is truly music that is in her blood.

When she came back to her roots, the roots of her mother, and the music of Miriam Makeba, people sat up, paid attention, and Lorraine never looked back.

It has been a long journey, one which has taken her from Apartheid South Africa, through Europe and eventually to Canada. It takes a detour through Aurora this Friday as Ms. Klaasen and her band take the stage at the Aurora Cultural Centre.

'Sometimes I find we are like submarines,' she says. 'When the winter comes, we performers all go down but when the summer comes we're all busy. We always wait until the festivals and that is why I am so happy to come to the Aurora Cultural Centre. Intimate settings are one of my favourite settings because you have a connection with the audience. It is very up close and personal and you are able to perform songs and material you wouldn't normally do if you were in a larger crowd.'

'When you do festivals, people are up on their feet and want rhythm. When I do intimate settings, I sing songs that really show my voice. I love the interchange with the audience.'

In her upcoming concert, Ms. Klaasen plans to perform the music of her heritage coupled with new material she honed this month at a recording session in Washington, D.C. for her upcoming album. Her works celebrate the 'Township Music' that came out of South Africa in the 1960s and was popularized around the world by singers like Makeba and her mother.

'When I was a little girl, I always knew I wanted to be just like my mom, travelling the world and singing,' she says. 'I never had a career where I then decided I didn't like what I was doing. I am so happy to live my passion and enjoy what I am doing.'

The Klaasens left South Africa in the 1970s with the musical group Sola Sola. This collective of 30 singers and dancers took a play,

banned in the Apartheid environment of the time, on the road to audiences first in Israel and then in Greece. (?That is where I met Onassis before he met Jackie Kennedy,? she confides with a distinct wink in her voice).

Soon after they performed in Greece, South African youth began to take a stand against Apartheid and the troupe couldn't return for a significant period of time. Eventually, the performers went their separate ways.

Ms. Klaasen met her future husband in Greece, where he was a student, and she followed him to Canada where he completed his studies.

As conflict continued in South Africa, she arrived in Quebec at the height of Rene Levesque and the separatist movement ? but it was in Montreal where she found her feet, in a city overflowing with cultural diversity, and where she continues to thrive.

?On my new album, I want to maintain the same feeling of that Township style because that is the style of the 60s and it never goes out of style,? she says. ?It is still relevant today. Even in my new material, I try to make sure I still lean in that direction. When you listen to South African music, you can listen to five or ten different artists and nobody will sound the same, but it will have that distinctive style you can identify in so rich a culture.?

Friday's concert gets underway at the Aurora Cultural Centre at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$30 in advance or \$35 at the door. For more information, call 905-713-1818. Doors open at 7.30. General admission.