AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

The Incredible Journey Of

Bakithi Kumalo

THERE'S A MOMENT IN JOE BERLINGER'S 2012 documentary *Under African Skies* that gets right to the bottom of Paul Simon's game-changing 1986 hit *Graceland*. We learn that the album's music showed the world a different side of apartheid-torn South Africa, that Simon's arrival was politically complicated, and that the combination of his vision, the studio musicians' talent, and engineer Roy Halee's editing prowess created a synthesis previously unheard in the annals of American music. But when the camera gets to Talking Heads icon David Byrne, he verbalizes precisely what bass players all over the world were thinking: "The [Paul Simon] albums before *Graceland* had great songs, but this one had a little bit more low end going on."

Indeed. Underneath brilliant pop tunes like "Diamonds on the Soles of Her Shoes," "I Know What I Know," "The Boy in the Bubble," and "You Can Call Me Al" flowed joyfully vocal bass lines that were singular works of art. The swooping, muscular parts, models of nimble technique and impressive intonation, were uniquely South African, immediately intoxicating, and buoyantly delivered by a young man named Bakithi Kumalo. Fretless bass would never be the same.

Bakithi, born in Alexandra township and raised in Soweto, grew up surrounded by church music, and his uncle had a big band that played Count Basie and Duke Ellington. But it was the traditional music Bakithi heard on the streets of Soweto, in the countryside of Zululand, and at the clubs of Zimbabwe that made the deepest impression. Right from the beginning, he was playing vocal melodies on bass, soaking up the rhythms and flavors that would make

BY E.E. BRADMAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELE CORBY

him a bass hero for his work on *Graceland* and its 1990 successor, *Rhythm of the Saints*.

In the years since, Kumalo has adapted his instantly recognizable bass approach to fit a dizzying array of situations, including Laurie Anderson's *Strange Angels*, Edie Brickell's *Picture Perfect Morning*, and Carl Perkins' *Go Cat Go*. A quick spin through his credits is eye-opening: That's Bakithi shakin' booty with Gloria Estefan, being tasteful with Herbie Hancock, funking it up with Randy Brecker, hitting the road with Chaka Khan and the Tedeschi Trucks Band, working magic with pan-African grooves by Angelique Kidjo, Vieux Diop, and Vusi Mahlasela, and layin' it down with contemporary jazz royalty, from Chris Botti and Grover Washington Jr. to Bob James and Jon Secada. His range runs from Celtic music (check out "Paddy in Zululand," with Irish fiddler Eileen Ivers) to cosmic spirituality (with folk yogi Danny Paradise) and the early '90s pop of Cyndi Lauper's *Hat Full of Stars*. It's safe to say, in fact, that Bakithi has brought African bass flavor to places no other African has gone.

Along the way, he's also put out a handful of excellent, expressive solo albums. *Step on the Bass Line* (1987) and *On Friendly Basses* (1990) are long out of print, but 1998's all-star *San Bonan* was his coming-out party, followed by *In Front of My Eyes*, for his youngest daughter (2000); the *This Is Me* collection (2005); the transition-period *Transmigration* (2008); and *Change* (2011), celebrating his newfound status as an American citizen.

The morning we sat down to chat, anniversaries were very much on Bakithi's mind: He had just turned 60; it had been 40 years since the anti-apartheid Soweto uprising; it was the 30th anniversary of *Graceland* (his famous solo on "You Can Call Me Al" was recorded on his 30th birthday, in 1986); and, somewhat appropriately, it was Nelson Mandela's 98th birthday. Kumalo, ruminating on putting out a new album and an autobiography tentatively titled *After All These Years*, began reflecting on his incredible journey by reminiscing about the VIP's, whose tour of South Africa's Zululand changed his life.

What kind of music did the VIP's play?

Mostly soul, but also traditional music, I–IV–V and IV–I–IV–I–V grooves. Once in a while, we'd hear a song like "Have You Ever Seen the Rain" or "Mother and Child Reunion" on the radio, and even though we didn't understand the words, we'd pick it up and make our own thing. We got an offer to go to Zululand, and that was the beginning of my journey.

That's where you had the dream about playing with your fingers.

Yes. Back then, I was playing with my thumb. In South Africa, it was either the pick or the thumb. In my dream, I saw this guy with no head, just hands, playing bass with his fingers. When I woke up the next morning, I tried it, and everything became so easy and simple.

Who was the man in your dream?

I didn't know until my sister recently told me that she and my father, who was also a musician, were in Zululand when I was there. That's where he was born. I said, "Wow—this dream makes sense now. It was my father who came into my dream and helped me."

What bass were you playing?

A Gibson Thunderbird owned by the band's manager. It was big, and my hands were so small!

How was that first tour?

It was rough. The bass strings broke, and I had to tie them together. Then I would forget and slide up and down the strings, cutting my fingers and getting blood all over the bass. After a while, our car broke down, but there was no phone and I couldn't write to my mother. I got stuck for 16 months in the middle of the bush. I was terrified that I was going to die there.

How did you get home?

I stopped a car on the road to Johannesburg and asked for a ride. When I got home, I had chickenpox because I had only been eating sugarcane and oranges. My mother didn't even recognize me; she thought I had died.

How did your career continue when you got back?

I didn't have a bass, so I took a piece of cardboard, cut it like a bass, and drew strings and frets on it. I'd play that piece of cardboard when I heard a song on the radio. Between that and rubber bullets flying all over the place, it was a struggle, man. I was scared to death. But music was always the thing that I felt was going to save me. I was very lucky that I got a gig at Gallo Records right around the time my mother bought me a fretless, in 1982.

The one you later used with Paul Simon?

Yes, the Washburn. I got it right before I went on a tour to Zimbabwe. Man, I was in heaven with all that Zimbabwean music!

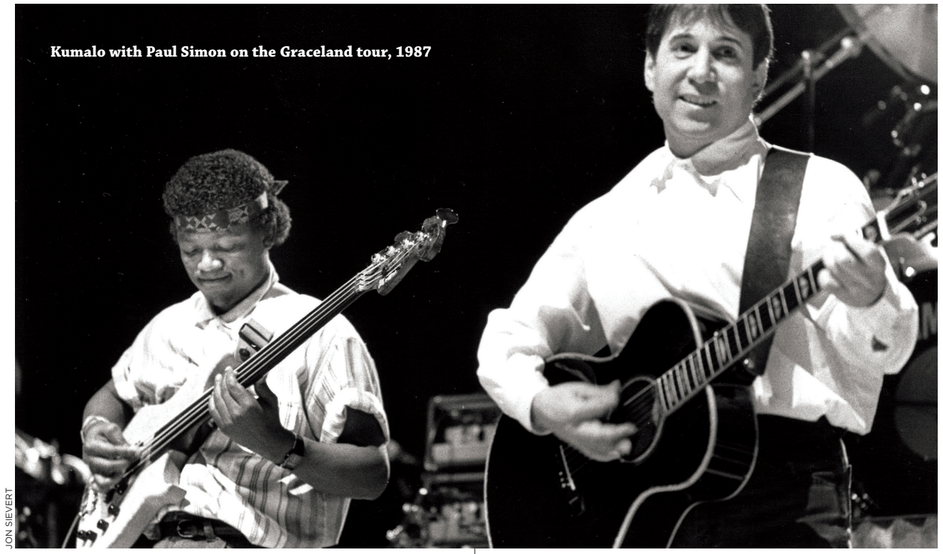
Were you consciously integrating tribal music into your playing?

Oh, yeah! Other bass players would rather play blues and jazz, but I wanted to learn South African music, the music that the government was hiding. I grew up hearing James Jamerson and jazz, but in the township, I'd see these people playing, and it was amazing. In the studio, I worked with all the different tribes—Shangaan, Ndebele, Tswana, Sotho, Pedi, Xhosa—because they knew I could listen and follow.

Even though that Zululand trip was rough, I learned so much by being around people working in the fields and singing in the countryside. When I came back to the city, I was loaded with information about our music, and I loved it. I didn't want to play anything else.

You represent a distinctly South African style of bass, which is so different from Cameroonian and Nigerian bass.

Vincent Nguini, a great guitar player from Cameroon, explained to me that Cameroonian music is all about the ceremonies. Sometimes it's in 9/8 or other rhythms—it depends on the ceremony. In Nigerian music, the bass part is based on the talking drum, the same way that in Brazilian music, the bass plays the surdo part,



Kumalo with Paul Simon on the Graceland tour, 1987

JON SIEVERT

which then takes a different part of the groove.

The young generation of Cameroonian musicians went to school, and some of them, like Richard Bona and Etienne Mbappé, play Jaco-style and all kinds of fast stuff. Richard is on another level. Sometimes I get a headache just watching him—the speed, I can't take it! [*Laughs.*] The bass should be the support, the heart of the music. But now it's all about chops.

Before you joined Paul's band, had you played with other international artists?

I played with any artist who needed a bass player. In 1983, a couple years before Paul arrived, I toured for two or three months with an American R&B group called the Realistics. The music was like the Brothers Johnson—there was a lot of slapping. And when Harry Belafonte came to South Africa, I recorded with him.

Which South African bass players had an impact on your playing?

Joseph Makwela was the first person I saw playing an electric bass. He was a traditional *mbaqanga* guy—he played with Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens—and he played melodies up high, which was a big influence when I picked up fretless.

Sipho Gumede, who toured with Letta Mbulu and Caiphus Semenya, top South African artists who had left during the struggle, taught me a lot. Sipho would say, "Before you play a bunch of notes, get your tone right, and then everything's going to be easy and simple. Make sure you sing what you play." He began recommending me for sessions he couldn't do.

There were a few other guys, too, like Peter Motishu, who played with Koloi Labone, and Tony Sawudii, from Drives. David Mabaso, who was playing with singer Brenda Fassie, was crazy about Jaco. South Africa is loaded with bass players. It's just like Cameroon: Everybody's a bass player, and nobody wants to play keyboard [*laughs*].

Did you mentor younger players, too?

Yes. Just before Paul arrived, I finished playing on Johnny Clegg's new album, but I couldn't do the tour because I had to go to the States with Paul. I talked to a young bass player named Solly Letwaba and showed him everything. He joined the group, and he was awesome. Unfortunately, he passed away some years ago.

Another great young player is Fana Zulu, who came to me for lessons when I lived in Mfulo. He's left-handed like Jimmy Haslip. I showed him everything I know, and we became good friends. When I left South Africa, I told Fana to take care of business, and he did just that. His style is different from my fretless stuff and melodies—he is more about rhythm—and he's a great player. He's touring with Hugh Masekela.

You mentioned in an interview that when you met Paul in 1985, you were coming from work and carrying your bass without a case.

After I came back from Zululand, things were bad, and my mother was in and out of the hospital. There was no money, so I got a job as a runner for a mechanic—the guy would tell me, "Go get me a wrench. Grab me this and that." I had given a producer my number at work in case he wanted me for a session, and I always had my bass at the job so I could practice during lunch breaks.

One day, my boss calls me into the office. I'm thinking, "Am I getting fired?" And then he says to me, "Do you know who Paul

Simon is?" I said, "No." This guy was a white boss; I come from the township. He started singing all of Paul's songs, and I didn't recognize any of them until he sang "Mother and Child Reunion." I was like, "Yeah, the reggae song. Isn't Paul Simon Jamaican?" "He's not Jamaican, he's American." He's like, "Paul Simon is in town, and they're looking for you in the studio, so here's the money. Take the bus." He gave me a couple of rand, and I took the bus with my bass, without a case, to the studio.

I showed up at the studio, and it looked like a daycare. There were a lot of musicians, and some of them had brought their kids. Paul was sitting on the floor playing with kids, and then he introduced himself. He said, "Hey, my name is Paul Simon, and I love your work." I'm thinking, "You love my work?" Then he plays "Ha Peete Kea Falla," by Tau Ea Matsekha, and he asked, "Are you the bass player on this track?" I said yes. He's like, "Man, I love this. We're going to work with this groove." So we started to jam and change things around on [what later became] "The Boy in The Bubble."

And you were still in work clothes.

I came in with my greasy hands and ripped pants, and my toes were sticking out of my shoes. Paul asked me if I wanted a bass case, and then he was like, "Do you need another bass?" I said, "Sure!" So he sent somebody to the music store and got me a Fender. I played that bass on the Graceland shows we did in Zimbabwe, and it sounded unbelievable. But it got stolen in South Africa.

How were the initial recording sessions?

Paul loved everything I played. His engineer, Roy Halee, deserves credit for recognizing my sound, putting reverb on my bass, and letting the world hear it. He's responsible for my fretless sound. Paul chose the musicians he wanted to work with, and when he decided to bring us to New York to continue the sessions, I was so excited. I couldn't sleep the night before we were supposed to leave. I thought that if I went to bed, I might wake up late and miss the flight [*laughs*].

But you made it to New York.

We stayed on 48th Street and Eighth Avenue, right where there was a lot of stuff. We'd go to Manny's and Rudy's, and everything was open 24 hours, pizza all over the place … oh my god, it was beautiful. It was amazing.

My first session after Paul was with Laurie Anderson. She loved my fretless sound. Will Lee told me, "Man, people call me to play like you. Go take care of business!" He introduced me to a lot of people, and then I started to get sessions. Paul Winter, Herbie Hancock, and Randy Brecker all won Grammys for records that I played on. Word started to get around—"Hey, man, Bakithi's in town."

I've heard that Paul has strong ideas about your parts and your basses.

Yeah, it took me a while to understand that. He's always listening. Because I played a fretless 4-string on *Graceland*, for example, he'll notice if I play a fretted bass or a 5-string. Paul is not really a bass person—he likes the feel of it, but he's not a really big bass fan. He likes guitars and horns; keyboard, not very much. He's always directing the bass, and I have to give him what he wants.

What does he want?

He doesn't want too much bass in his ear when he's singing because he's telling a story, and he wants people to hear every word he's saying. Before the last tour, we rehearsed for about five months, and every day, he asked me not to play, to just listen. When it was time to run the whole show, he asked me if I had parts, and when I began to play, he directed me until he was happy with my lines.

On his recent albums like *So Beautiful or So What* and *Stranger to Stranger*, there's hardly any bass.

To not hear bass all the time is beautiful: You hear the words clearly, and you can hear the other little instruments. Because of its tone, the bass can take over. Onstage, if one of the guitar players and I are trying to do things at the same time, it can be like a traffic jam. It confuses the ear. So I stop playing, and then when I come back in, it's like, Oh—everything is beautiful.

How closely do you stick to the classic bass parts on Paul's records?

I learn the changes and the approaches, but I always keep my style. I don't try to make it better—I just play it so Paul can sing and understand it. And sometimes, he asks me to come up with new bass lines.

You've been with Paul for three decades. Why do you think you've lasted so long in this gig?

Because I learn. And I don't take it personally when Paul tells me to not play.

What are you playing these days?

I have my signature Kala U-Bass, a John J. Slog 5-string with pickups that match my Aguilar DB 751 head and SL 112 and GS 410 cabs, an NS CR Design Radius, an NS NXT Design Double Bass, and the upright bass that I play on "Wristband."

How long have you played upright?

The bass player in my uncle's band used to play electric and upright, so there was always one around. I always loved to play upright, which is why the transition to fretless was easy—I was used to not looking at the frets. My fretless Radius is similar to the bass I played on *Graceland*, but with stronger tone.

Do you still have the Washburn?

Yes! It was starting to buzz, so I got new pickups and a new preamp from Aguilar, and it sounds unbelievable again. I also have 4-, 5- and 6-string Elrick basses. Rob is a great guy, and he builds such great instruments. I take his basses to sessions because they have good tone, much different from other basses.

How can someone develop a style as distinctive as yours?

Don't spend time trying to play stuff that's already been created. Go research all kinds of music to come up with something, and don't be stuck on one type of music. I listened to the left hand of the accordion guy; in Zimbabwe, I listened to the mbira. My part on "Diamonds" was a little piece I took from the guitar.

You know, I had no idea that I might have a voice someday. I was just playing the way I was playing, but *Graceland* created the voice. So I stayed with it.

Do you think Paul is going to retire?

I don't know, but I've never heard of a musician retiring. You cut down things, but you don't retire. This man loves music. But maybe it's because of what's going on with the world now. It's scary to travel—you might be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

How can we, as musicians, make a difference?

We have to keep our heads up and be aware of what's going on. It's not really about making money and getting people dancing; it's about doing something for the people who are suffering. We have to help one another and stay connected. We have to keep telling our stories. And we have to fight with our voices, our instruments, and songs that are positive. **BP**

Diamonds On His Fingerboard

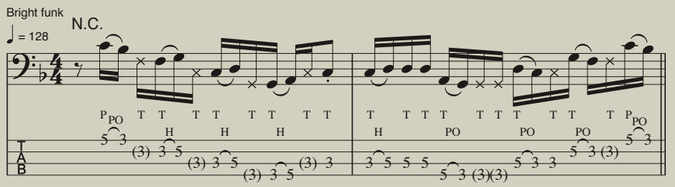
BY CHRIS JISI

THIRTY YEARS AFTER creating the timeless, rich-timbre bass lines on *Graceland*, Bakithi Kumalo continues to infuse Paul Simon's songs with grooves informed both by his South African youth and north-of-the-Equator career. **Example 1** shows how Bakithi currently plays his two-bar fretless solo breakdown in "You Can Call Me Al." On the original, Bakithi slapped a one-bar fill, and the second measure is the first bar *backwards*—the result of engineer Roy Halee flipping the tape over and splicing the two bars together. Live, Bakithi believes in staying as close to the original as possible, because audiences expect it (although he now uses a fretted bass). Key to the pace are the thumbed ghost-notes, which occur on the same string as the following notes in bar 1 and the preceding notes in bar 2. "Learn it slowly and gradually pick up speed," he offers.

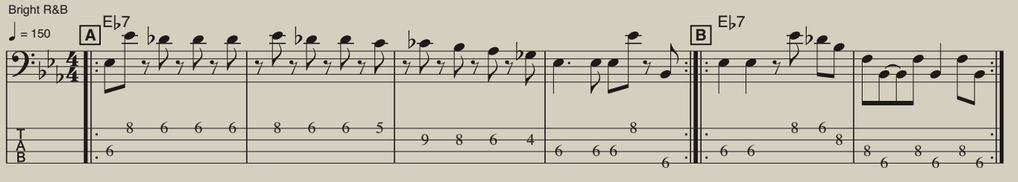
Turning to Simon's latest album, *Stranger to Stranger*, **Ex. 2** comes from "Wristband." Letter **A** shows the main bass line, while letter **B** has the bass part for the song's third section (around 2:00), both of which Bakithi created after being told to approximate the notes coming from the frame-drum part. He recorded the track on his John J. Slog 5-string, with Simon later replacing it with Carlos Henriquez' upright bass—leading Bakithi to play the part live on his NS Design NXT Double Bass. He advises, "Lay back a bit in the pocket."

Finally, **Ex. 3** contains the main bass line from "Cool Papa Bell," which Bakithi played on his signature Kala U-Bass. "This is based on a traditional South African groove called *mbaqanga*. I tried to be melodic and leave space for the other instruments. Play it right in the middle of the pocket."

EX. 1



EX. 2



EX. 3