Old soul gives jazz fresh sound

JAZZMAN Mpumi Dhlamini worries about the music scene. "I'm tired of people saying, we're getting there. That complacency is the main reason we'll never get there! And I'm tired of the way we keep comparing ourselves to Americans."

Harsh judgments such as this are to be expected from bruised and wrinkled veterans of the scene — but this player is only 21. It's just one of the ways the multi-instrumentalist subverts expectations. With his diffident, slightly goofy, stage manner and fresh-faced good looks, it would be easy to pigeonhole Dhlamini as another young pawn of the commercial music business.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Dhlamini's first album, Combined Elements (Sony/BMG), has been out for only a few months. Any on-stage shyness is clearly the result of the novelty, and it won't last long.

During our interview, he's almost frighteningly focused and articulate, especially when discussing what he describes as his "obsession": not playing, but producing and arranging. "The first thing I research when I buy an album is who the producer is."

Dhlamini is not from a conventional musical family — "although 90% of my relatives were in music. My uncle John Mothopeng was a pianist, my grandfather sang in a Zulu a capella group; my mom sang with an early version of the Mahotella Queens and in choirs. But they'd all left music for other things."

Music did not infuse his home. "The radio was on, but nobody paid much attention to it." His own choice of a musical education was almost capricious: "I went to a concert by the Drakensberg Boys' Choir, they asked if anyone wanted to audition, and I thought it might be interesting so I went up."

Nor, despite the showcase offered first by Drakensberg and later by the National School of the Arts, did his talent initially shine. He says it would be fair to describe him as a bit of a slacker back then. "I failed my music exams a few times and got all the speeches about how 'talent isn't enough'. I was much more into sports." (He made the provincial under-16 teams in both soccer and rugby.)

WHAT inspired Dhlamini, then and now, was challenge. At the end of 2002 his regular pianist at the School of the Arts graduated, and he found himself forced to play his own compositions.

He was studying percussion, and when he asked to make piano his second instrument, he was told he wouldn't be able to reach the required standard in time. "That was what clinched it," he says. "I believe in competition. A lot of musicians are into this spiritual thing. That's good, but I know I need concrete goals to achieve."

The same competitiveness brought him to jazz. "I liked playing with colleagues Mandla Mlangeni — who was into Miles Davis — and Oscar Rachabane who, being (saxophonist) Barney Rachabane's son, is a bebop guy. One day Mandla asked me, 'Can you do Giant Steps?' When I said no, he wasn't interested. And I realised if I wanted to play in that kind of company I had to be able to reciprocate, and go deeply into that music."

DHLAMINI'S musical journey resembles what he describes as "a tree with endless branches. I heard Khaya Mahlangu at Kippies. His influences were (Winston) Mankunku and (John) Coltrane, so I explored them. 'Trane led to McCoy Tyner, McCoy led to Herbie Hancock, and so it goes on."

That exploratory approach also shaped his album — in this case, as arranger seeking to expand the tonal palette for his compositions.

"I was looking for a different kind of trumpet sound to Miles, and that led me to Arturo Sandoval, and so into the Cuban feel that several of my tracks have. I was listening to too many sad ballads, and I needed that upbeat, happy feel."

Mahlangu and pianists Andile Yenana and Themba Mkhize are among the mentors Dhlamini credits. Yenana ("my big brother") and the late Moses Molelekwa get tribute tracks on the album, and he also admires the pianism of Mark Fransman and the arrangements of guitarist Jimmy Dludlu.

"Moses was a master of emotion. When he wrote a happy or a sad tune, he really made you feel that way. You can't choose your influences — you grow up with them — but you can choose how you make reference to them."

It's when discussing how he shapes his tracks that Dhlamini's focus becomes incandescent. When I ask about the shakuhachi flute work he contributes to the track At Peace, he explains: "It's not really meant to be noted — but if it were missing, you'd hear it.

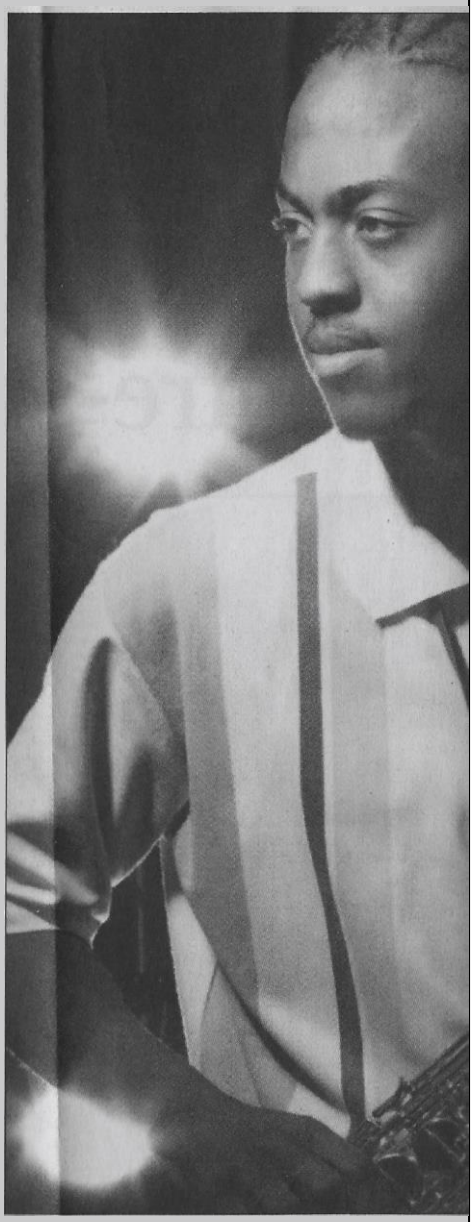
"The tracks are carefully sequenced from simpler to more complex, and I want people to listen again and notice something different each time. So there are lots of what you might call `inaudible harmonies'."

Dhlamini spent a month on preproduction, designing spaces for the sounds of specific soloists: "For example, the bass part on Maybe was made for Carlo Mombelli. Nobody could have played it like he did."

He's aware of the tensions between his youth and tradition, and between the marketplace and risk-taking. "Musical traditions are part of culture, and culture changes. So we can't always keep playing those I:IV:V chords. It's possible to step outside conventional formulas and still produce something commercial, and that's part of what I am exploring."

Dhlamini is already thinking about his next album ("collaborations") and stacking compositions in his mind. You get the feeling that if music stops being challenging, he'll find something else to do — but since he sets himself so many hurdles to leap, that won't be for some time yet.

GWEN ANSELL



ACCIDENTAL JAZZMAN: Mpumi Diamini thrives on ch