

"And as a quiet kid raised by my paternal grandparents in a beautiful home in Pietermaritzburg [the capital of the province of KwaZulu-Natal] I was always fascinated by the nature of cows," she offers. "I loved staring into their eyes as they chewed their cud. It made me feel peaceful," she says.

"Later I learned of the cultural significance of cattle, as providers of food and clothing, as signifiers of land ownership, and ownership of the means of production. They are at the heart of our memory and history as a people."

Her story is both her own, and that of her people, she says. "I'm singing about my experiences, and about people who are like me. People who are not like me can relate to these songs as well. This is a full circle."

The 16 song-stories on *Inganekwane* unfurl over a musical landscape that takes in South African sensibilities, West African rhythms, pulsing keys and swelling guitars. Shooting off on tangents, riding on rolling, danceable grooves, it's a sound threaded with a rich seam of soul and gospel (Modiga grew up singing in church choirs), and imbued with the liberating power of jazz. Modiga's influences – Erykah Badu, Fatoumata Diawara and Nina Simone as well as the South African greats Miriam Makeba, Busi Mhlongo and Thandiswa Mazwai – can be gleaned via repeated listening. But it's the singularity of each of these touchstones that resonates the most.

Produced by bassist BandaBanda and engineered by a clutch of Grammy winners, *Inganekwane* is released on Modiga's very own Yelloëwax label. "Being a self-employed independent musician has challenges, which are often about having these amazing ideas and trying to find the resources to match them," says Modiga, who has enjoyed live collaborations with the likes of Thandiswa, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, lauded jazz drummer Louis Moholo and the late Johnny Clegg.

"I like to create space to let the music do its thing," she adds. "Bra Louis Moholo taught me you can't be a smart arse about music. You don't lead it. It leads you."

Modiga's self-produced, independently funded 2017 debut *Yellow: The Novel* is a testament to her tenacity and self-belief. A passion project whose 23 tracks are structured as a four-part novel with English and isiZulu musings on heartbreak, rejection and redemption, *Yellow* was very nearly something other than the two-time South African Music Awards 2018 nominee that many Modiga fans say changed their lives.

Having come to national attention in 2016 on the South African version of the TV singing competition *The Voice* (Modiga's renditions of hits including Rihanna's 'Diamonds'

and Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' are available online), she piqued the interest of a major record label. On hearing her rough cut of *Yellow* ("my favourite colour; the colour of happiness"), they made her an offer that involved wresting creative control. She duly set up

Yelloëwax, determined to do things her way.

Hailing from a family of academics working across fields including forensic science, Modiga intended to command the same level of respect with a musical career. She attended the National School of the Arts in Johannesburg, studying everything from singing, acting and choreography to the instruments noted above, honing a flamboyant aesthetic involving leftfield fashion (glitter, fringing, platforms) and a predilection for blowing up (yellow) balloons on stage.

"I'm a big performance geek." She flashes a smile. "If people pay for a ticket and they're walking into a venue to see you, they are expecting to see how you occupy that space. They're seeing the sparkles on your shoulders, your dance moves, everything."

"The pandemic means we can't perform as much right now," she says of a band that includes South African guitarist Nathan

"Cattle are at the heart of our memory and history as a people"



Smith, Nigerian drummer Ire Bolaji and Senegalese percussionist Samba Ndokh Mbaye. "But we're currently exploring other 3D ways for people to experience us." Modiga went on to study jazz vocals at the South African College of Music, based at the University of Cape Town. Her time there was not as she had anticipated: "When I got to my third year in 2015 unfortunately I was kicked out because they said my theory was not up to par," she says with a shrug. "This was a very disappointing period that pushed me into a space of creativity. Thankfully I was still able to use the facilities at UCT for that year, so I locked myself in a room with a grand piano and the songs for *Yellow: The Novel* just came pouring out."

There were other compensations, including being chosen by acclaimed South African jazz pianist and composer Kyle Shepherd to sing 'Amazing Grace' on the film, *Noem My Skollie* (Call Me Thief). Modiga was awarded a SAMRO Overseas Scholarship – open to those who have completed or are in their final year of music study – and spent weeks in New York and California investigating different ways of learning music.

Having garnered a solid following with storming appearances at local venues and celebrations such as the Cape Town International Jazz Festival, and with her debut ready to go, Modiga decided to relocate to the bigger, brasher Johannesburg ("a place where you can grow your talents and get your message heard"). But first, she needed exposure. A stint on *The Voice*, she figured, would showcase her versatility, and fast track her into the big time. ►