

It worked. Having finished in the show's final eight, she capitalised on the attention, repositioning herself as an artist of original merit. After releasing *Yellow* she spent three years collaborating and performing (a European tour, stints at now defunct Jo'burg venue The Orbit, a lauded set at South Africa's Afropunk festival). Slowly, came the story-songs of *Inganekwane*, "about black people and the African diaspora. About knowing what's there within you, and about our Creator, Umdali."

Modiga decided to tell these stories through the prism of her mother tongue. "As a people, the idea of language has been taken from us," she says. "Recording this body of work in isiZulu allowed me to reclaim the power of my language, and express my own understandings. It was a journey for me as well."

She therefore took some convincing before agreeing to include 'Black Butterfly', the album's only English-language track, an acknowledgement of her love of language and an ode to reawakening. '*Flying low, but through the sky, black butterfly/Glad your wings know what to do...*' she sings.

"I wanted to help change the negative connotations surrounding the word 'black' as a descriptor – 'black market', 'black mail', 'blacklist' – and recognise the weight of a word. This song acknowledges that we generally fly low as black bodies because that is the way the systems have been created. But though our flight is of a different kind we still fly high."

Opener 'Kwasukasukela' (Once Upon a Time) plunges us into the South African storytelling tradition in which Modiga was raised, a fantastical world where animals are given to human thought, where life lessons are learned through adventure. '*Truth is heavy*,' she sings in isiZulu on 'Umlolozelo' (Lullaby), a tune intended to sooth a spirit fragmented by trauma. 'Lengoma' (This Healing) is a groove-laden homage to the self featuring the deep voice and African horn playing of Tubatsi Mpho Moloi from acclaimed quartet Urban Village. "I asked Tubatsi to hop on this song because I knew he would bring a beautiful kind of male energy to the record," says Modiga of a tune whose call-and-response refrain plays on the words *ingoma* ('song') and *ubungoma* ('healing') as both chant '*thina siphilela lengoma*' (we live for this song). "We recorded it at a time when conversations around femicides and gender-based violence were taking place. I wanted a female and a male voice to symbolise unity and healing."

'Umdali' (The Creator) is an otherworldly tune that features the soaring flute playing of Mthunzi Mvubu and Modiga on guitar, over subtle synth-sounds that imply the idea of a peaceful universe. Laden with biblical references, it asks the listener to embrace their own godliness: "To take messages from the people that came before us so we can fully live out our life's purpose, the things we were put here on this earth to accomplish."

Rearranged by BandaBanda from the song made famous by Miriam Makeba (on her 1989 classic *Welela*), 'Ilanga Lishonile' is an African standard whose images of sunsets and unspoilt nature chime with *Inganekwane*'s emblem of the cow – a trope that might have been strengthened by further reference elsewhere on the album, but whose traditional and spiritual significance is undeniable.

"It feels important to be releasing music that contributes to the type of conversations the world is having right now"



While 'Abantu' is a love letter to Africans and the African diaspora ("our only fault is that we have been conditioned to see ourselves as shadows of who we are"), 'Intsha' raises a clenched fist to the youth movements of the world. "Outside of commemorating 1976 [the Soweto uprising], young

people have always been part of watershed moments. This is a song affirming that our generation are the leaders, dreamers, protestors and heroes of our time. We have to step into these roles. We can bring change to this reality we live in."

"I wrote this album a year before the Black Lives Matter movement," continues Modiga, eyes flashing. "So it feels

incredibly special and important to be releasing music that really speaks to the times and contributes to the type of conversations that the world is having right now. For black people and our allies these conversations are way overdue."

The stories on *Inganekwane*, then, acknowledge the past to clear a path to the future. They use song and music, and metaphor and magic, to offer healing and hope. Like all good fairytales, they stir stories within the listener. '*Cos cos yaphela*' ('The end') sings Modiga on the closing track. "Though it never ever ends," says the artist who is only just getting going. ♦

+ ALBUM *Inganekwane* is out now and was reviewed in #161



We have three copies of *Inganekwane* to give away. To enter, answer: What was the name of Zoë Modiga's debut? See p21 for competition rules and deadline

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