

BLK JKS

(photo caption / credit: [Photo by Demonica Orozco](#))

[L to R: Molefi Makananise, Lindani Buthelezi, Tshepang Ramoba, Mpumi Mcata](#))

Just a short time ago -- in a last ditch effort to supply a borrowed van with wheels to make a club gig -- the four members of BLK JKS took turns hand-over-hand pushing a tire through the darkened, kinetic streets of Johannesburg, South Africa's Soweto township. For bandmates Lindani Buthelezi, Mpumi Mcata, Molefi Makananise and Tshepang Ramoba it's a simple and tough philosophy: every gig, everything at stake. They have shared stages in North America and Europe with artists as celebrated and disparate as Femi Kuti, Santigold, Dirty Projectors, Michael Franti and Cody Chesnutt; they have played festivals like Sasquatch and Soweto Arts Festival; and Ramoba has been celebrated by Billboard as "the best musician" at SXSW. It's an inspiring juxtapose from that day when a Jo-burg gig hung in the balance. But to witness the frenetic energy and soaring celebration of a BLK JKS gig is to know that they have maintained that same ideology.

It's been too long since anyone was able to bring this much soul and heartblood to progressive rock, a medium that has been left cold and dry by a misguided focus on technical show-offery. But by entangling the music they love -- township blues, fringe jazz and renegade dub -- into the DNA of prog, BLK JKS have provocatively pulled afro-futurism into a new century. After Robots has all the ingredients of a party record -- young, joyous musicians; surging, afro-drumming; aggressive horn blasts (supplied by the cultishly famous HYPNOTIC BRASS ENSEMBLE) -- but this is not party music. It's at times disorienting and overwhelming, but it always maintaining a cool, alluring mystique. It's in Mcata's patient, complex and enviable jazz chord vamping. It's in Makananise's from-the-pocket-to-the-stars bass approaches. It's in Buthelezi's blues-inflected phrasing and searing guitar leads. It's in Ramoba's super-polyrhythmic, flailing beats.

In January 2009, BLK JKS set foot on US soil for just the second time, holing up with Brandon Curtis (SECRET MACHINES) in the quaint, spirited town of Bloomington, Indiana, to record the music that would become After Robots, their first proper album. Ten-hour days turned into fourteen as the band relentlessly exorcised their collective ideas and ideals about music. The process was an overwhelming sensory experience in its own right. To discuss certain musical passages for which there is no accurate English befit to describe, BLK JKS seamlessly shifted from accented English to their differing tribal languages. Then --giving up on words altogether -- they'd dive back into a fine-tuned performance of a song. It is the band's tendency to work it out on the spot that is most impressive about their approach to recording and structure.

After Robots triumphs on its own strange set of genre-ending rules, and BLK JKS are undeniably a band of our times, embodying the duality of our violent and hopeful new world, these days of mystery and wonder.