

## Lira

### Biography 2010



In a global music world brimming with solo female performers, Lira stands out as that rare thing: an artist who has been able to create a formidable career without compromising the very values that feed her creative soul.

This may not sound like much but cast around the current charts and it becomes clear that Lira's ability to retain a deep sense of integrity whilst selling platinum and raking in the awards is not commonplace.

For this 30-year-old, it's a no brainer. "If something doesn't resonate with me, I won't do it," she says simply. "I have to really connect with the words that I am singing or the statements I am making or the clothes that I am wearing - or else I'd rather not be in this."

Indeed, because of this commitment to herself, Lira almost didn't pursue the kind of music career that has seen her become one of South Africa's most successful artists, respected by her peers and critics alike and adored by fans.

It's not something she likes to dwell on now, but Lira's first start in the music career came in 2000, when, just in her 20s, she was punted as South Africa's newest R&B "starlet". Then signed to one of the country's indie stables, Lira released an album (2003's 'All My Love') and took to the road but quickly bailed when she realised the vision her label had for her was based as much (if not more) on her looks and what she wore than her singing and songwriting. She returned home to Daveyton on Johannesburg's East Rand for an extended period of introspection before taking the plunge and heading back into the recording studio.

These days it's a source of real pleasure to Lira (and her longtime supporters) that since the release of '**FEEL GOOD**' in 2006, her career has become the byword for integrity. And when her looks are mentioned, it's only in the way Lira's undeniable sensuality and extraordinary beauty plays a supporting role in broadening the reach of her music. Just recently, for instance, Lira was named one

of Glamour magazine's Women of 2009, cited for the passion she brings to her music and proving her weighty impact on worlds outside music.

It might be overused in many instances, but passion is a particularly apt word when talking about Lira.

It was her passion for music that saw Lira reject a potential career in business (she studied Financial Accounting and Auditing at the Vaal Technikon) that would have brought this fiercely intelligent woman a reliable source of income.

But Lira's desire to be a musician came early and never went away. In fact, she wrote her first song at just 16 and never really stopped. "A few friends and I decided to enter a talent show – and we wrote a couple of songs and one of the songs I wrote, called 'Let Me Be', went on to win best composition and best performance," Lira recalls. "It was an epiphany for me – at that moment I realised that I could express myself creatively through music and that people got it."

After that first misstep as an R&B singer (hardly a crime given her young age), Lira has not put a foot wrong in ensuring that an increasing number of people "get" her music and a scant three years after the release of '**FEEL GOOD**' Lira's now considered the foremost adult contemporary female solo artist in South Africa.

She credits working with Victor Mngomezulu (a keyboard player) and Tshepo Sekele (a bassist) as well as producer Robin Kohl (of Jazzworx) on her 2006 Sony debut, 'Feel Good' as giving her the confidence to really craft her own sound. That release proved to be a compelling calling card for Lira, delivering an album that swung with consummate ease between jazz and soul and pop even, to create the beginnings of what is now Lira's signature sound.

What was remarkable from the start was Lira's ability to reach out and touch the widest spread of music fans, young and old, black and white and she is now established as a crossover artist capable of delivering to everyone from hip, black urbanistas to suburban grannies and everyone in-between.

For Lira, the personal pleasure she takes in being able to create music that so many different people "get" is undisguised. "If I look back on the past four years, the most amazing thing to me is the way that I have been able to break new ground in a country that was previously built on division," she says. In this Lira sees herself as a product of the "new South Africa". "Even though I was born when apartheid was still in force, I never experienced the hecticness of it. I was able to go to a 'white' school and so learned to see white people as equal and when I look at my audience it just makes sense to me that it is so mixed and diverse."

But even though Lira sees herself as a product of a democratic South Africa, she's not blinded by the challenges her home country faces. "South Africa is not the easiest place in which to live but even though I am aware of this, I choose to live my life in positivity and I want to be a beacon for others in that."

Indeed, a deep sense of positive spirituality increasingly filters into Lira's music and the way she lives her day-to-day life – and it's not a stretch to discover why she called her gold-selling, multi-award winning 2008 album 'Soul In Mind'.

When the album was first released Lira described the 13-track record as “the sound of a woman getting into her own skin, of finding her own creative voice”. “My music has to be empowering,” Lira says of the songs on the critically-acclaimed 'Soul In Mind'. “I am very, very conscious of that – especially growing up in Africa. I don't want to bring anything negative into my music yet do that in way that is not preachy.”

With that as her guiding vision, Lira easily snagged the hearts of fans around South Africa and in June 2009, '**SOUL IN MIND**' reached gold status (20 000 units), an infrequent occurrence at a time when record sales are diminishing globally.

'**SOUL IN MIND**' also proved to be the hot favourite at the 15th annual South African Music Awards (SAMAS), the country's most prestigious music awards event, winning a leading four SAMAs including the prestigious Album of the Year and Female Artist of the Year.

Ask Lira about the armful of SAMAs she received at the early May 2009 ceremony and the most important thing to her was the acclaim her multiple win earned from ordinary fans. “Immediately afterwards it really had not sunk in. But on the plane to Cape Town the next day I had people congratulating me in a way that showed they felt like they had also triumphed that night and that is when what we had been able to achieve really hit home.”

It's this attitude, coupled with her ability to still see the small (but important) details in things that ensures Lira remains solidly on firm ground in a career that can so often catapult its stars into a world of rampant egoism. “Just the other day I was driving in Joburg and these two older white ladies began hooting at me like crazy,” Lira confides. “At first I thought there was something wrong but then I realised they just wanted to wave at me because they had recognised me. At the same time, I stopped at a traffic light and an older black lady on the pavement also began shouting and waving to me, in support. It's at those times that I really feel blessed to be able to do something I love, in the way that I want to.”

And already the rest of the world is hitching itself to Lira's music. Over the past few years she has undertaken live dates in several new countries including Italy, Germany and Fiji and she's poised to make an impact on the US music scene. This ability to reach over borders is not something Lira takes lightly. “It's a privilege to have the chance to connect with people in other parts of the world,” she says.

But to those fans that have been following her career for close to a decade now, the fact that Lira is being embraced outside South Africa's borders is no surprise. After all here is an artist who creates songs that are not bound by trends or fashion but instead have all the makings of lifelong favourites. Tracks like 'Dance of Life' off '**FEEL GOOD**' or the album's title track (which earned Lira a fourth

SAMA in 2009 for Best Remix of the Year) and 'Rise Again' off '**SOUL IN MIND**' are timeless and are sure to hit home with music fans around the globe. Lira is also someone who takes her music with an enviable seriousness, always pushing herself as a singer, performer, songwriter and musician (she plays the acoustic guitar). And, while she never trades in it, Lira's Afrocentric yet global sense of style only adds to an already compelling artist's appeal.

For Lira herself, the challenge now is to see just how far she can go with her music. "Already the response we have had from fans at the international shows and on the internet gives me confidence. But I know that I can take my music so much further. In the end I make music for as many people as possible to hear. It's feel good music that anyone anywhere in the world will be able to connect with in the way I do."

### **Discography**

- Audio CD and DVD - Live In Concert: A Celebration (2009)
- Soul In Mind (2008)
- Feel Good (2006)
- All My Love (2003)

### **Awards**

- 2010
  - The 16th annual South African Music Awards (SAMA)**
    - SAMA – Female Artist of the Year
    - SAMA – Best Global Chart DVD
- 2009
  - The 15th annual South African Music Awards (SAMA)**
    - SAMA - Best Female Artist
    - SAMA - Album of the Year [Soul In Mind]
    - SAMA - Best Adult Contemporary Album [Soul In Mind]
    - SAMA - Remix of the Year [Feel Good]
- 2008
  - SAMA - Best Selling Download [Feel Good]
  - SAMA - Best Music Video [Ixsha]
- 2007
  - Best Music Video [Feel Good]

### **Nominations**

- 2009
  - MAMAS – Artist of the Year / Best Female Artist
  - Channel O - Best Female Artist /
  - MOBO – Best African Act

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