

Tumi – Whole Worlds

Album biography 2009

Three years back, Boitumelo ‘Tumi’ Molekane gave a tantalizing glimpse into his ability to go it solo with ‘Music From My Good Eye’. Now, at the tail-end of 2009, he’s made good on the promise contained in that South African Music Award-nominated album with a record that’s, quite simply, breathtaking in its musical and lyrical scope.

Titled ‘Whole Worlds’, the release will be filed under hip-hop because that’s the predominant musical force at play here. It’s also the genre where Tumi has nurtured a faithful fanbase, in particular through his work with Tumi and the Volume, long beloved of those who choose their music by way of the underground railroad.

But, make no mistake, this is an album for a far larger audience, offering an entrance into an evolving form of hip-hop, where borders are thrust aside (both musical and geographic) and just about any other genre is allowed to push into the fray, as long as it comes with integrity and quality.

A prime example of this is the album’s first single, ‘Bambezela’ featuring Bricks and actress and dancer, Tracey Lee - and already fast moving up the radio charts.

It’s easily the most instantly accessible piece of music Tumi’s ever made, teaming him with a kwaito star with enough swagger to match the song’s swirling organ and a newcomer female singer who more than holds her own. Bold and expansive, ‘Bambezela’ is likely to deliver Tumi some substantial mainstream success and considerably expand the faithful.

Ask Tumi how he feels about shifting into the mainstream with ‘Whole Worlds’ and he’s unambiguous on what it means. “I think you will find that artists such as Bob Marley and Fela had developed a wonderful faithful following before everyone else caught up. It just feels like the right timing for me to stretch my head up from the fringes.”

Standing to add considerably to Tumi’s assault on the radio and retail charts is his freshly inked deal with Sony Music: ‘Whole Worlds’ is being released through a joint venture deal between the major and Tumi’s own Motif Records label, which released his solo debut in 2006. “Sony has a great roster of artists and they were very respectful to my creative process through finishing this record,” Tumi says of the deal that is also likely to include artists recorded under the Motif Records label over the coming years.

You would think that all of this, along with being regarded as one of South Africa’s most gifted and conscious hip hop artists, would put pressure on Tumi in the recording studio. But he’s never been one for measuring his career moves

and music against people's expectations and it's no different this time around. "I didn't feel any pressure in the studio at all because I'm incredible," Tumi says.

He's half-joking of course, but the head-spinning array of global talent who've contributed to 'Whole Worlds' is no small evidence of how Tumi is viewed by his peers.

In keeping with Tumi's borderless approach to making music, cutting edge producers from no less than four continents feature on 'Whole Worlds' – among them Rene 'Snaz' Hill from Canada, Robin Hannibal Braun from Denmark, Kabir 'Kwality' Ahluwalia from India and Mason Black from South Africa.

The vocal guest spots too are suitably diverse and include Zaki Ibrahim (Canada/South Africa), Tairo (France), Sibongile Khumalo (South African), MXO (South African) and Masauko Chipembere of Blk Sonshine (Malawi/US).

Tumi's ability to build lasting creative relationships has always been a vivid aspect of his musical life - and since 2002, it has been evidenced most potently with his bandmates in Tumi and the Volume: David Bergman (bass), Tiago Paulo (guitar), and Paulo Chibanga (drums).

Indeed, several players on 'Whole Worlds' are revisiting creative bonds dating back several years. It's not the first time, for instance, that Ibrahim has joined creative forces with Tumi: she co-wrote and sang on 'Blink Twice' off 'Music From My Good Eye' and on 'Whole Worlds' delivers a compelling vocal on 'Health, Food and Shelter'. And Chipembere's duo Blk Sonshine was featured on 'I Come Home' off Tumi's solo debut.

Tumi's never made a secret of his regard for female artists and aside from Ibrahim, Pebbles turns up on 'Mr. Gogetit', contributing both vocals and co-songwriting duties. In this tale of a "hustler by any means", who's doing what he can to feed his children, the combination of Tumi's rapping and Pebble's warm singing is nothing short of scorching. There's also plenty to fall in love with on 'Stage Lights' on which Chipembere and Khumalo star, the classical singer adding a mesmerising layer to the cut.

Tumi's selection of male singers is as inspired: MXO's rich, deep vocal is spot-on on 'Family Plan', injecting some strong emotion into a string-drenched song about life's struggles ("and that's how my life began, a dying dad and no family plan") and Maloya singer, Danyel Waro effortlessly captures the intensely felt lyrics of 'Still Not Free'. And there's more where those came from: Canadian hip hop artist Ian Kamau guests magnificently on the title track, while French singer Tairo adds magic to "Village and Malls", one of 'Whole Worlds' standout track, and truly one of the most gorgeous music efforts you're likely to hear in a long while.

For Tumi, deciding whom to work with on 'Whole Worlds' was easy. Just being a fan and also the songs tell you what they want most of the time," he says simply. "I love hearing a different interpretation, sponging off their vast talent."

It's crucial to note that as far reaching as Tumi's music goes on 'Whole Worlds' and as potent as his collaborators (singers, songwriters and producers) are, at the centre of this worldclass album is always his rapping. And, make no mistake, he can rap: 'Let It Burn' featuring The Soil showcases Tumi in full raging flight and he delivers themes of universality with unmatched power throughout 'Whole Worlds' 11 tracks.

Given this, it's no surprise to find that Tumi got the essentials of his album down in fairly rapid style. "I sourced the music pretty early and wrote most of the lyrics pretty quickly," he says. "The real hard work was coordinating between continents, because I still favour a face-to-face approach to making music."

That face-to-face approach is set to take Tumi to new adventures over the coming months. Alongside playing the songs on 'Whole Worlds' live, he's heading for Europe with The Volume and was just recently in Australia recording with "the Public Opinion Afro Orchestra" for an album that launches in March 2010. A trip to Reunion Island to guest on Daniel Waro's album is also on the cards. "There is also a small matter of the football at home, so we will see," he says of what 2010 holds.

For hip-hop fans all over the world, there is now too the "small matter" of a benchmark album that deserves to announce Tumi to a far broader audience than he's assembled until now. Filled with current and universal topics like insurgency, celebrity, love and monogamy, delivered as a semi-conceptual album that pivots around a collection of narratives from the points of view of several South Africans, 'Whole Worlds' is expertly put together with the whole world in mind. Don't delay in joining in.