

Documentary on Joseph Shabalala and Ladysmith Black Mambazo selected as SA entry into Oscars

South African documentary *Music is My Life - Joseph Shabalala and Ladysmith Black Mambazo*, has been selected as South Africa's submission for the Best International Feature Film for next year's 96th Academy Awards (Oscars).



The film documents the story of Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Source: Supplied.

The film is the directorial debut documentary produced by veteran filmmaker Carolyn Carew from Free Women Films and directed by Sowetan-born director Mpumi "Supa" Mbele.

Shining a spotlight

Selected by the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF), an agency of the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture (DSAC), this is the first time a documentary has been selected since South Africa began submitting films for nomination in the International Feature Film category in the Annual Academy Awards in 1989.

Bringing a nomination or award home would be a fitting conclusion to the film about the life of the legendary leader of the country's most iconic isicathamiya acapella group, which hailed from Ladysmith.

Shining a spotlight on Ladysmith Mambazo's frontman, the legendary Joseph Shabalala, the film explores his rise to international fame with the group following their musical contributions to Paul Simon's award-winning album *Graceland*,

which sold over 20 million copies.

Music is My Life, filmed over five years, traces his path from his humble beginnings in rural KwaZulu-Natal (KZN), South Africa, to his peaceful departure in 2020.

Along with footage from the *Graceland* recording sessions, the film introduces us to many luminaries who worked with Shabalala, including Dolly Parton.

The film also documents the complex history of Isicathamiya music – the musical idiom whose boundaries he helped to expand – regarding the political and musical forces that helped to form it.



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“We are humbled to be selected by NFVF selection committee to represent SA at the 96th Academy Award in the International Feature Film section,” says the film's lead producer, Carolyn Carew.

“As a team, we worked tirelessly with the band, Baba Joseph’s family and the Dr Joseph Shabalala Foundation to tell his story. To be in his presence was to be left in awe of his deep commitment to his craft, informed by his love of music, the land, his spirituality, and his dedication to bringing his unique as well as the powerful voices of Ladysmith Black Mambazo’s music to the world.”

“Shabalala’s achievements place him in the pantheon of African musical superstars,” comments director Mpumi Supa Mbele. “This film takes viewers on his spiritual and emotional journey.”

“Thanks to all the stakeholders for their hard work and dedication to the fulfilment of this dream. I salute them,” says Thoko Shabalala, Joseph’s wife, who features in the film.

A great and privileged opportunity

Thobela Mayinje, NFVF acting CEO says, “It is always a great and privileged opportunity to have a South African film represent the country at the global industry’s foremost awards. The fact that this particular film tells the authentic South African story of the iconic Dr Shabalala, is even more special.”

“The KwaZulu-Natal Film Commission wishes to congratulate Carolyn Carew and the team for documenting this important work done by the son of this province, the legend Dr Joseph Shabalala. KZN Film is proud to have supported this amazing project and note that this Academy submission will enable more people to witness the beauty of the KZN Province; the rich culture and tradition through this film,” says KZN Film Commission acting CEO, Victor Senna.

South African public broadcaster SABC 1 flighted the documentary on 28 August 2023, ensuring a wider audience of millions of fans who loved and admired Joseph Shabalala had access to the film in a celebration of his life.

Music is My Life screened at the Labia Cinema for seven days, including what would have been Dr Shabalala’s 83rd birthday in 2023. It has been selected for several local and international film festivals in America, New Zealand, Australia and Spain, to name a few.

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