

Pre-task: Rachabane music royalty

Octavia is Sepedi speaking - North Sotho which is both her mother and father tongue. She grew up in Soweto, where she got to know all the languages, mixing with people speaking Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans and all South African languages. In Soweto they sometimes fuse the different words from different languages in a “ghetto-style” way of speaking.

Octavia’s career has always followed in the path of her legendary father, Barney Rachabane. At the prime of his career in the 1980s, Barney was known as “the most soulful saxophone player in the world.”

Octavia recalls watching one show in particular, “South Africa Live at the Market Theatre” with Gloria Bosman. That was the first time the idea of her being a musician struck her and to perform on stage with her dad.

Music was all around Octavia. Her elder brother was the great saxophonist, Leonard Rachabane. Leonard gave Octavia her first break, performing in his band at the age of seventeen. Octavia went on to study at Pretoria Technikon and has performed professionally with Louis Moholo’s historic ‘Back to the Roots’ concert with his Dedication Orchestra, alongside greats such as Glen Mafoko, Bheki Khoza and Khaya Mahlangu. She has also performed internationally in the Graceland revival concerts.

Barney Rachabane’s father was a Reverend, and both his parents played organ in the church. However, Barney was the first in his family to go professional as a musician. So music is a family tradition with the Rachabane’s, much loved, and involving three generations of Rachabane’s all playing music.

Barney Rachabane’s lesson in versatility

Barney Rachabane was born in Alexandra township in 1946. He is a self-taught and self-actualized musician in every way. He is an inxile, meaning he never went in for politics, and has been a professional musician since the age of 10. From the simple beginnings of starring in the pennywhistle bands, the Kwela Kids and the Alexandra Junior Stars and the *Township Jazz & Variety* series, his sound travelled all over the country. As a teenager he swapped to saxophone and performed with Chris McGregor’s Castle Lager Big Band, the Early Mabuza Quartet, the Jazz Disciples, The Soul Giants soul band, the Rockets and Hugh Masekela’s *Technobush* project.

In the 1980s Barney’s global breakthrough came with his two albums recorded in London, and then the big break recording on Paul Simon’s Grammy Award winning *Graceland* album.

This was in the middle of Apartheid when many South African musicians were choosing to make their careers overseas. Barney never left his family or his home in Soweto, and whatever he earned abroad he brought back home to send his kids to school. As Octavia fondly recalled, “Barney managed to give his family ‘stability’. This was very rare for so-called jazz musicians of that era.”

Somehow Barney cracked the music industry. But, how did he do it?

Barney said, “I think different. I didn’t go to school for anything. I organized my life somehow. It is a different thing. It is not like normal people who go to school and then they study an instrument, no. It is just impromptu, it just happened the way I wanted it to happen. And I enjoyed it. It feels nicer to teach yourself. If somebody is trying to teach you something, some teachers don’t even know. They have the education but they can’t even play. How are you going to teach if you can’t play?”

Here are three important lessons from Barney:

1. Listening to good music: Growing up in Alexandria township, Barney listened to the best jazz at homes of some of the top musicians, and also collected records. When he started earning, he bought his own vinyl’s and learnt from the turntable.

2. Learning to be alone: If you know South African music, you will know that many of our great musicians have succumbed to the obstacles of the industry, and fallen to early death through drink, drugs and depression. Barney has avoided this and survived through cultivating an inner strength. He had to be smart when there was no income. He had a corner shop and a curtain business. But mostly he had to learn to be alone with himself – he did this through meditation.

3. Versatility is the way to go: Although Barney grew up playing mbaqanga music, he ended up performing in all musical genres, jazz, soul and even rock. As a musician versatility is a key to sustaining your career.

As Barney's youngest of 4 children, Octavia has also developed versatility. As she says, "Music is much broader than genre, it is people's emotions, people's experiences and lifestyles." Although her music is truly African, it has a lot of influences. She is influenced by songs in the North Sotho language by singers such as Judith Sephuma. She is influenced by Jazz, R & B and poetry, particularly Jill Scott and of course the famous style of Miriam Makeba.

Now, answer the following exercise questions

1. As a child of the Rachabane dynasty – Octavia feels it was her destiny to be a musician? Can you describe the talents of your family line and what path have you taken to make music a career?
2. We have seen how one of the keys to Barney's international success is versatility. What does versatility mean to you, and what are the different musical styles that you are exposed to? Now with your chosen instrument, how will you practice versatility?
3. An outstanding aspect of a great music composition is that it can be played in any musical genre. Take for example the composition 'Summertime' – it has been played in almost every genre. What is your favourite composition to play? Can you play it in multiple genres, such as a jazz version and then a reggae version?
4. In the Graceland collaboration Paul Simon said, "mbaqanga is the reggae of South Africa." What he is saying is that mbaqanga is the musical emblem of South Africa. Do, you think mbaqanga music has the unique and defining musical identity that can showcase South Africa to the world? How would you describe that musical identity?