

THE GOLDEN AGE OF LENZ MUSIC

(Robert Abrahams)



The Biblical expression: “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (John 1:46) was a skepticism meant to cast doubt on whether a place of such unimportance – “Nazareth” – could ever produce the likes of a Messiah. It’s a pejorative for the unlikely, the improbable, the impossible.

The same question might be asked of “Lenz” – an otherwise insignificant backwater imagined by the contorted minds that gave South Africa its most bizarre social engineering project, the Machiavellian and hated, Group Areas Act of 1950. As a key piece of legislation enforcing racial segregation, the Act hollowed out many racially mixed suburbs in Johannesburg: Doornfontein, Jeppe, Fordsburg – and shunted swathes of people to segregated areas.

Lenz came about in the writer’s own year of birth, 1955, in a bit of historical trivia that make them both 70 years old. Humble birth beginnings, old Lenz – the ‘Camp’, then in quick succession, ‘Township’ (owner-built houses), Thomsville, Greyville and Rainbow Valley. Something of a backwater, yet residents grudgingly began to call it home.

An interesting phenomenon materialized in Lenz in the late 1960s and 1970s. A large and diverse number of musicians emerged – the majority self-taught: vocalists, drummers, guitarists, wind instrumentalists and Indian classical players, each rendering their own brand of pop, rock, funk, folk, Indian-film songs, serious Eastern classics.

The plethora of bands was matched by the creativity of their names. The ‘Echoes’, led by well-known teacher Edcent Williams (who would later rise to Head of Department of Education in the Northern Cape). The band featured Jodie, Charlie and Dennis, and the honeyed vocals of Ivan Ross. Those of us who grew up in the era of Cliff Richard could hear the unmistakable sounds of The Shadows in their repertoire.

The ‘Doorknobs’ (made up of the Jackson brothers Neville, Brian and their prodigious schoolboy drummer, Gordon) took Lenz by storm. They were joined on vocals by Johnnie Mustapha and his soon-to-be wife, Joyce. They later took on

Nolan Narsoo (vocals). Their impresario was the proud dad, Uncle Gabriel, as we called him.

Closer to the late 1970s, "Sikky" Jooma arranged for his good friend, John Silver (brother to Dawn Lindberg of 'Des and Dawn' fame) to play the classical guitar at the Ramakrishna Hall. John even began a short stint teaching classical guitar in Lenz.

Sikky also briefly played alongside Perry Runganarben and Ash Lutchman at the Lenz Civic in a battle of the band's competition. Perry fronted in a dazzling white jacket emblazoned with an aum sign (such are the peculiarities of memory.) It was Perry who worked out on guitar the opening bars of Simon & Garfunkel's 'Sounds of Silence' and shared it with others.

'Sludge' was the band name Sikky Jooma, Robert Abrahams, Ash Lutchman, Nolan Narsoo and Desmond (?) gave themselves. They played a few times only, memorably, at the opening of a fashionable clothing boutique Papillon in downtown Joburg, at some private gigs in the then all-white suburb of Randburg, and at the Battle of the Bands at the Avalon Cinema in Fordsburg. Equally memorable, and much to the dismay of band members, was the kind offer Nolan made for his dear Mom to make frilly-fronted satin shirts for each band member! Frilly shirts, layered with ruffles for a band called Sludge? Ashwin Lutchman, cousin to the Ram siblings, also managed Sludge from his garage in the Township.

Another group, possibly formed after the breakup of the Echoes, was the talented outfit 'August Formation' made up of Jeff Moodley and Mervyn Naidoo on acoustic guitars and the tight harmonies of the Aaron brothers – Joey, Zervie, Clem and Peter, and the Williams brothers Ronnie, Richie, Rowie. These guys scaffolded three- and four-part harmonies without hassle. Joey would go on later to add his powerhouse of a voice to Gordon's jazz ensemble.

'Born to be Wild' was made up Kenayalal, ('Kunz'), Hari, Matthew Morgan. This popular trio created sensational music, fronted by the virtuosity of Kunz on electric guitar. Some still remember his implausible wizardry dishing out fiendish solos with his teeth or picking licks with the guitar above his head or – we kid you not – behind his back!

Into the mix were Sikky Jooma and Robert Abrahams who by this time discovered their niche: folk music. They collaborated on certain stages with friends, Gordon and Andrew. They covered songs by CSNY, James Taylor, Simon & Garfunkel, and Sting. Any benefit concert, whether raising funds or supporting a worthy cause, would have had a number of musos on the lineup, including these guys. They also offered lessons in folk music at Sikky's apartment in Lenz in that period.

For a while, Robert and Jessica Sherman opened political rallies at the Lenz Civic with the protest songs written by Jessica, a BMus student from Wits: the potato boycott and the Wilson and Roundtree marches of the 1970s; or when Dr. Alan

Boesak was in town, or the eloquent Dr. RAM Salojee was speaking, or someone from the United Democratic Front. Two guitars, two mikes and a crowd waiting to be moved by these leaders.

This was the golden age of vinyl, seven singles and LPs and where the hi-fi was a feature in most homes.

After, the 'Doorknobs', Neville Jackson moved into the dance scene with his 'Night Raiders' made up of Boya and Sonny Poonen and Ikes. Strongly enunciated Latin rhythms brought dance-hungry revelers to their feet, week after week.

Neville would form his next group, 'Esplendos', which included the saxophone players Cyril and Percy. The guys were extremely busy, often playing every weekend at venues across the then Transvaal.

Another band to hit the local scene much earlier, was 'The Silver Jewels', a full-on dance band led by an uncle of the Jacksons, Everett Jackson. Playing in dance halls both fed the need people had to socialize, and for adding to the coffers of the musicians. Untold courtships had their genesis in such events.

'The Boys' did the party scene. The group was led by Krish. Other members cannot be recalled for this article, unfortunately.

A sensational dance outfit featured several seasoned players, Jay Pavaday (saxophone), Lennie Somasundram (on piano, but by day a biology lecturer at the teachers' college), and Toonoos on drums. Theirs were unadulterated dance swings and pure 'langarm'.

In retrospect, the question must be asked where all this talent came from, that made the era the high watermark of Lenz music? It's not an easy question: there were no music schools in the area. There was school music, mainly children's songs from the curriculum of the Transvaal Education Department. And there was the lone after-school music teacher, Madam Grace, teaching a handful of kids whose parents had some spare coins for her piano classes.

There was of course, church music and temple music, but largely limited to worship hymns and bhajans (nowhere near the full-on church worship teams of the modern era.) So, how do I explain this phenomenon?

It is likely that the seeds of talent were latent in the early residents' chromosomes in Fietas and Fordsburg and the areas (and Durban, for that matter) even before harried families packed for Lenz? It's also possible to see the music gene running like a vein through families (think Ram, Jackson, Williams.) Could it be the influence of radio (Springbok, and David Gresham's weekly hit parade featuring the top bands across the world); or the ubiquitous influence of the decade's defining happening – Woodstock, and the counterculture hippy movement it produced to which youngsters found themselves drawn?

What is without doubt is that the diversity of styles and genres was unparalleled. 'The Highlights' played to pack venues. They were fronted by the explosive vocalist Sippy with hits straight from the silver screen. Guys who played for the band were variously Hemant Bhowan, Sikky Jooma, and others. Nithia Singaram brought in the beauty of songs in the South Indian vernacular. Jivan Ramjee started the band, and it was the glue that kept everyone in harmony, so to speak.

'The Dilshaad Entertainers' also played uplifting or downright sad, unforgettable Bollywood songs at functions.

'Avikar Melodies' featured Hemant Bhowan, Chota Gowrie, and Bharat Guruparsad. They recorded two songs at the old Gallo Music studio on Fox Street. They played for a year or so at the Blue Danube dance hall in Fordsburg in the mid-1970s. Their crossover genre incorporated Indian 'chutney' to western pop and blues. They also did the wedding circuit.

'The Ranjeni Orchestra' were a South Indian group who featured at cultural gatherings and at weddings. Siva Padayachey was a formidable Karnatik musician who could joyously fuse into jazz with his next-door neighbour, Gordon Jackson.

Another group made up of family members was 'Rajendra Sounds' focusing on film music.

Added to the lineup was the hugely popular and entertaining Bushan Dass singing Indian film scores with his gentle and melodic vocal timbre.

The inimitable Bash Hoosein could be caught laying it out at huge fetes, festivals and carnivals in halls and stadiums. People enjoyed his renditions of film music.

Only a handful of musicians had the discipline to take their talent to the next level in formal 'paper' music and, for us the uninitiated, its concomitant mysteries of music theory. Gordon Jackson (flute under Dr. Honey); Andrew Francis (piano with Mrs. Liebman); Prof Dawn Joseph (Lenz-born, Wits educated musician – currently teaching at prestigious Deakin University in Australia).

Into this line-up of seriously trained musicians are accomplished Ram brothers, Rabindra (sarod), Vivek (sitar) and Deepak (bansuri) who honed their craft both in the country and outside, in North Indian classical and fusion. Alongside the enigmatic but sophisticated siblings were a host of other hugely talented Indian classical artists from the Lenasia School of Music. They took their music for the discerning ear to various stages, halls, universities and recording studios locally and abroad.

And who can ever forget the dedicated and devoted Indian classical music master, Jairam Bhana, who for several years lived and trained students at Tolstoy Farm.

The rest of us plugged-on, barely literate, laboriously searching out from LPs melodic licks, improvisation, chords and harmonies all through the ear!

Several music venues opened up in this period for bands: there was the Barn (named for the building at the entrance to Lenz that once housed farm animals). The Ramakrishna, Gandhi and Patidar Halls regularly hosted benefit concerts (Time-to-Learn and others), social and community events and weddings. Tahiti Cinema opened its doors to a few Indian band competitions (Richard Jon Smith was reputedly a guest performer on one occasion!). The Lenz Civic and Jasmine Hall held sway for 'lang-arm and ballroom dances.

For a small community in the south of Johannesburg, Lenz hosted a sizeable number of acclaimed South African musicians whose music made it to the charts during 1960s and 1970s.

'The Flames' from Durban (featuring the brilliant Fataar brothers Ricky, Steve and Edries, and Blondie Chaplin). Who from that period could forget their epic hit 'For your precious love'?

From the Cape came a number of really great band and musicians: 'The Rockets' who played to sold out crowds and took to the stage at old Nirvana High under the farsighted headmaster, Mr Rathinasamy.

Other artists were Zayn Adams and 'The Pacific Express'; the inimitable Robbie Jansen; Lionel Peterson; Richard Jon Smith; Hawk (and their chart-topping remix of the George Harrison hit 'Here comes the sun'); 'The South Country Band'; and from just around the corner - The 'Hoochie Coochies' fronted by Laka.

A series of jazz bands emerged in the late 1970s, early 1980s, playing really great grooves – some dubbed the sound West Coast, others called it smooth jazz. Whatever the classification, the genre was contemporary, tight, seriously melodic and the musos were simply from another planet. The music spoke volumes for their artistry and inventiveness that turned the players into demigods in Lenz and beyond. The musicians were the ever-evolving professional Gordon Jackson (drums, and later to a myriad of wind instruments); the unique Andrew Francis (keys); Gavin ('Gus') Poonen (virtuoso lead and rhythm guitar); inventive Spiri (wind); classy Gregory Moonsammy (bass), and later the huge talent of Alvin Fredericks (keys). Many of the friends went on to record CDs of the music. They played to excellent reviews extending to well outside the narrow borders of the community.

Like musos elsewhere, guys came and played, left to join or form other bands, only to rejoin later or depart for good. The comradery remains to this day, evidenced by at least two WhatsApp groups of old Lenz musos. The upshot of all this was that 'D-Fusion' morphed into 'Round Midnight' and 'Round Midnight' disbanded eventually.

There were lovely guitar players who for reasons of their own, shunned the limelight, choosing instead to make music quietly with just a few buddies: Dooreh Morgan (who was not mesmerised by his cover of the Marmalade's 'Reflections

of my life’?); Neelan Poonen (and his unfathomable love for the lugubrious pathos of Leonard Cohen’s ‘Suzanne’ or ‘So long Marianne’); Bennie Augustine (playing worship music); and Madhi “green eyes” – a rarity of genetics which drove the girls wild – with a good repertoire up his sleeve.)

Younger musos who like fell under the sway of ‘Round Midnight’ (or ‘D-Fusion’) were Kaniga (Kani’) Naidoo, a multitalented former pro-soccer player and a performing and recording jazz muso (lead guitar and saxophone). He played the club and gig scene in Cape Town and still finds time to collaborate with friends in Johannesburg.

Mervin Naidoo was another young player (bass) also possibly influenced by the predecessors. Mervin is an academic and Wits lecturer.

Other talented musicians from the younger generation but regularly playing the circuits are the duo Dushen and Ashwin – and judging from their bookings, clearly popular.

The list of musicians, bands, and cultural orchestras listed in this brief article is not exhaustive. Further updates can be added to the online platform, either by those unintentionally omitted, or by their families where artists have passed on.

The article is meant to raise awareness of the richly diverse, cultural vein that ran through the community in the decades of the Golden Age of Lenz music.

We pay homage to the many who lived and breathed music; who were consumed and played it to the point of mastery or exasperation; who were transported by its lure and dedicated themselves to it; who put in hours of rehearsals; who loaded and off-loaded instruments and equipment in the wee hours, winter or summer, and going bleary-eyed to jobs in the city in the morning, and who, like Sisyphus, do it all happily again for the next gig. For their dedication, discipline and passion...take a bow!

Miraculously, some of the guys are still making music and are open for hire: Jeff Moodley (plays restaurants and clubs); Gus Poonen (supper clubs in the burbs); Kani (performs at popular restaurants in the North); Gordon (corporate gigs, weddings, benefits and church worship); Greg Moonsammy and his ensemble (turning in serious music in and around the city. He also works with young musicians at church; Robert (worship music and the occasional benefit concert); Bash Hoosein (still gigging and the owner of a professional grade recording studio just off Rose Avenue); and Bushan Dass (also active on the music landscape.)

(NB. Valuable Information for the article sourced from Gordon Jackson, Hemant Bhowan and Sikky Jooma.)

1 May 2025