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CONTACT: LISA WOSKE
(805) 756-7110

Ladysmith Black Mambazo Returns to Cohan Center Feb. 9

SAN LUIS OBISPO -- No group is more closely identified with African song than Ladysmith Black Mambazo. On Wednesday, February 9, 2005 at 8 p.m. in the Cohan Center, Cal Poly Arts brings back Ladysmith Black Mambazo in “Long Walk to Freedom,” featuring music from their just-released CD, “No Boundaries.”

Special guest tenor Vusi Mahlasela brings his unique sound to the group. After one of Mahlasela's performance, Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer declared, “Vusi Mahlasela sings as a bird does: in total response to being alive.”

Ladysmith Black Mambazo is a 10-member Zulu a cappella group that came to international fame in 1986 accompanying Paul Simon on his landmark "Graceland" album. Since that release, the group has gained a worldwide audience and critical acclaim.

“Ladysmith Black Mambazo…imbued its music with a haunting, ethereal, dreamlike quality. Its seven bass voices and...its three tenors sang such close harmonies with such subtle nuances that they sounded like one deep, rich, resonant and proud voice.” (NY Times)

The Los Angeles Times agreed: “Black Mambazo's team of bass voices turned into a mighty engine, driving the group through chugging cadences that were repeated at length, carrying a clapping, foot-tapping audience along.”

For more than thirty years, Ladysmith Black Mambazo has blended the intricate rhythms and harmonies of their native South African musical traditions to the sounds and sentiments of Christian gospel music. The result is a musical and spiritual sound that is said to represent every corner of the religious, cultural and ethnic landscape.
Assembled in the early 1960s in South Africa by Joseph Shabalala, the group took the name Ladysmith Black Mambazo: “Ladysmith” being the name of Shabalala’s rural hometown; “Black” being a reference to oxen, the strongest of all farm animals; and “Mambazo,” the Zulu word for ax – a symbol of the group’s ability to chop down any singing rival who might challenge them.

Their collective voices were so tight and their harmonies so polished that they were eventually banned from competitions – although they were welcome to participate strictly as entertainers.

Shabalala says his conversion to Christianity in the ‘60s helped define the group’s musical identity, with a mission “to bring (a) gospel of loving one another all over the world…(But) this music gets into the blood, because it comes from the blood…It evokes enthusiasm and excitement, regardless of what you follow spiritually.”

The group’s philosophy is as much about preservation of African musical heritage as it is about entertainment. When Paul Simon visited South Africa and incorporated Black Mambazo’s rich tenor/alto/bass harmonies into his “Graceland” album, it was a landmark recording key to introducing the genre of world music to mainstream audiences.

A year later, Simon produced Black Mambazo’s first U.S. release, “Shaka Zulu,” which won a Grammy in 1987 for Best Traditional Folk Album. Since then, the group has scored six more Grammy nominations, most recently for their 1999 album, “Live from Royal Albert Hall.”

In addition to their work with Simon, Black Mambazo has recorded with numerous artists, including Stevie Wonder, Dolly Parton, The Wynans, Julia Fordham, George Clinton, The Corrs and Ben Harper.

Their film work includes a featured appearance in Michael Jackson’s “Moonwalker” video and Spike Lee’s “Do It A Cappella.” Black Mambazo provided soundtrack material for Sean Connery’s “The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen,” Disney’s “The Lion King, Part II,” Eddie Murphy’s “Coming To America,” Marlon Brando’s “A Dry White Season,” and James Earl Jones’ “Cry The Beloved Country.”

A recent film documentary, “On Tip Toe: Gentle Steps to Freedom” -- the story of Ladysmith Black Mambazo -- was nominated for an Academy Award.

Black Mambazo has been invited to perform at many special occasions, including two galas for the Queen of England and the Royal Family, two Nobel Peace Prize Ceremonies, a concert for the Pope in Rome, the South African Presidential inaugurations, and the 1996 Summer Olympics.
January’s release of “No Boundaries” is a classical crossover recording with The English Chamber Orchestra, a unique project pairing their “isicathamiya” (a Zulu word meaning “to tiptoe”) singing with the likes of Mozart, Schubert, and Bach.

“Our tradition is meant to be spread around the world,” says Shabalala. “Ladysmith Black Mambazo is a mobile academy that teaches the world about Zulu people and culture, about South Africa and all that is wonderful here.

“So when people came to me and said, ‘Hey, maybe you can sing with a full orchestra who play classical music,’ I said ‘Why not?’ After all, our singing is a sort of Zulu classical singing.”

The CD alternates between classic Mambazo pieces and classical masterpieces, such as an orchestrated rendition of Paul Simon’s “Homeless” and an Africanized version of Bach’s “Jesu, Joy Of Man’s Desiring.”

Highlights also include a striking interpretation of “Amazing Grace” and the closing Zulu lullaby “Walil’ Umtwana (The Child Is Crying).”

Tickets for the performance range from $26 - $38, with student discounts available, and may be purchased at the Performing Arts Ticket Office, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturdays. To order by phone, call 805/756-2787; to order by fax: 805/756-6088. Order on-line at www.pacsl.org.

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