

# KWAITO'S BIG CLOUT

**BILLY SUTER**

**F**OR SIX months in 1999 he performed ballet in four European countries and 14 African countries with a French ballet company, Company Durieux.

But nowadays 30-year-old Zakes Bantwini – real name Zakhele Madida – is best known as Durban's kingpin of kwaito, having released nine albums, scooped the Best Male Award at the 10th Metro Music Awards last year and also emerged as last year's winner of the Most Gifted Video of the Year Artist at the Channel O Awards.

Zakes is short for Zakhele and Bantwini means "people's person" in Zulu. "My friends always teased me when I was growing up because I was so friendly," he says, explaining his name.

Bantwini decided not to follow a career in ballet or acting – he had been involved in theatre since he was 11 – because he found there were just too many rules and little freedom for personal interpretation. "I prefer to be spontaneous," he says, adding that his ballet dancing came to an end because the choreography got him down.

"Even at times when I did solo performances, everything needed to be choreographed and have a set structure which wasn't for me. To this day I don't have dancers on stage with me, because I'm not a fan of choreographed dance routines."

Bantwini, who lives in KwaMashu, started his career playing the piano while he was studying for a diploma in jazz and popular music at the then Natal Technikon. He received his diploma in 2004.

"I saw the value of being an all-round musician, able to use my skills in different genres, and jazz gave me the ideal foundation," he says.

"Because there were no other work opportunities for me, jazz became a career and not a hobby. With a background in jazz, musicians can cross over to other genres easily," he says.

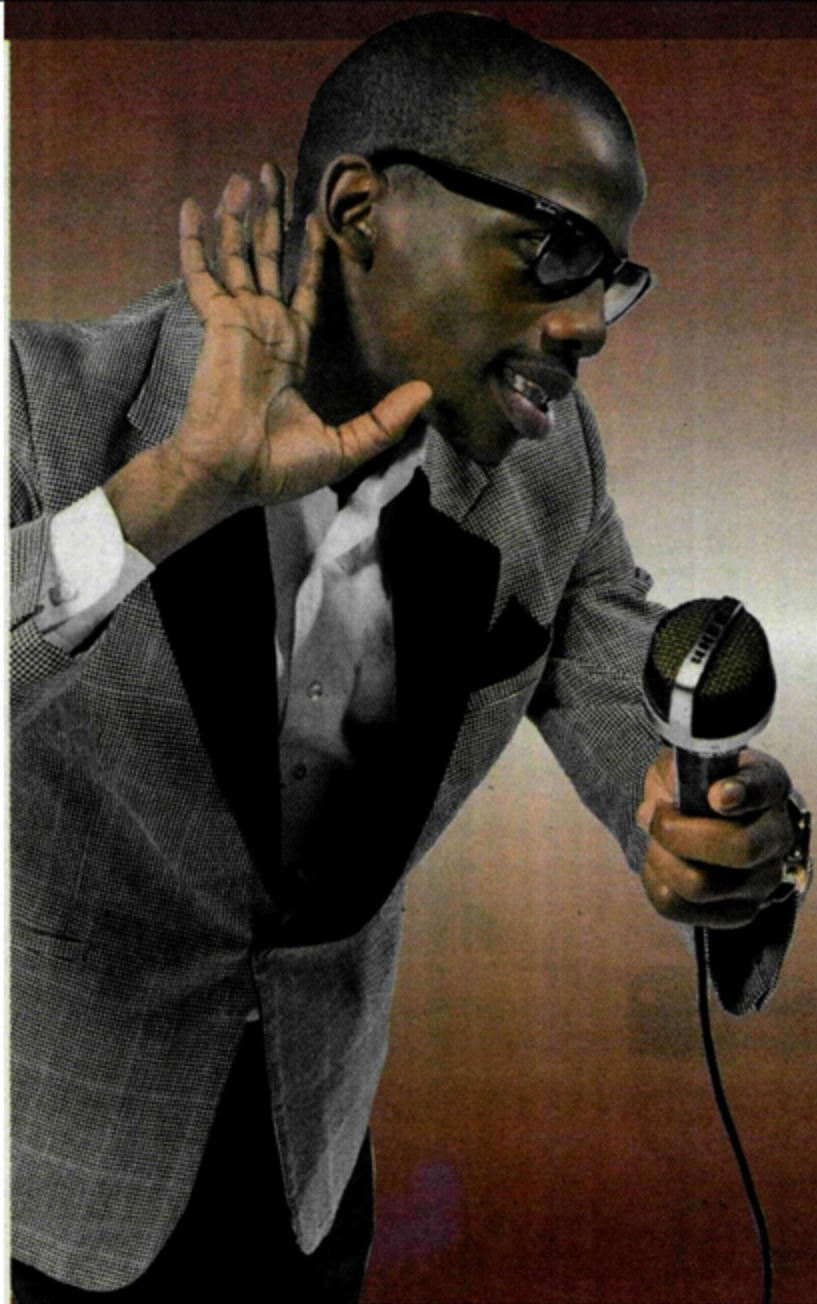
Bantwini's passion for music led him to establish his own independent record label, Mayonie Productions, during his final year of study.

"I didn't want to be another musician whose fate lay in the hands of a record company.

"I focused on signing new talent and negotiating on their behalf and at the same time developing my own career," he says.

Mayonie Productions has put him in a unique position when it comes to dealing with new artists. "I understand what it's like to be new in the industry and I know how artists should be treated."

Was starting the record label a gamble for Bantwini? "It was a huge gamble. But I



## COMING HERE

Zakes Bantwini will perform new material in Soweto on June 16. His show, called *Upfront With Zakes Bantwini*, will be a tribute to the music of Sophiatown.

started the company because my dream was bigger than just making my own music. There were problems at first – a peer in the industry ended up crossing me and signing the first artist I was pursuing. But that taught me to be stronger and it taught me that a contract is non-negotiable."

Bantwini struck gold with his first official signing in 2005 – kwaito sensation L'vovo Derrango, whose first album was hugely successful.

He now has seven artists on his books, including himself.

One thing Bantwini is very proud of is the fact that he is one of the pioneers of the sound known as Durban Kwaito, a genre that balances house beats with kwaito lyrics. "It was born out of a conversation with a friend in the industry. We were discussing the specific beat and style of music in 2006. We developed the name for the genre, because the music was so different to anything being played back then."

And how big is the Durban Kwaito sound now?

"It really is huge at the moment and there are quite a few artists who are experimenting with the sound and performing it."

Durban, he believes, could these days probably be called SA's capital of kwaito. "For the past three years Durban has produced the best kwaito musicians and you can see it, with the SA Music Awards recognising Durban musicians in this category."

He goes on to name acclaimed kwaito acts such as Professor, T'zozo, Big Nuz, Beezory, Bhar, Bullistic and Oros.

Bantwini says he has come a long way since releasing his first album, *The Good Life*.

"That album did okay, but at the time I was still exploring sound and different genres of music. My frame of mind was different then. The album wasn't really intended to be a popular album but rather a personal process of discovery."

Bantwini says his sound has grown and developed over the years. "And with every performance and collaboration it grows even more."

He adds: "I'm not even listening to the songs I was listening to last week as I'm constantly evolving and changing my preferences."

"If, today, I had to re-record one of my previous albums, I think it would sound completely different because I've grown so much as a musician."

Teaming with top producer and award-winning DJ Black Coffee, Bantwini's latest album, the award-winning *Love, Light and Music*, has acquired platinum status.

It marks a collaboration between Mayonie Productions and Soulistic Music, following the success of their collaboration on *JuJu*.

The album was recorded in Joburg, but the hit single *Clap Your Hands* was recorded in Durban.

Bantwini is delighted that the album is doing well, both locally and internationally, presenting opportunities for him to perform in Africa, Europe and Asia.

When he isn't busy in the recording studio, Bantwini loves nothing more than to be on stage, clearly evident in the energy and passion he brings to his live performances.

On stage with his seven-piece band, he has been described as a blend of James Brown and Fela Kuti, with a good helping of New Orleans soul thrown in for good measure.