

Time for Pinkie to soar to new heights

WHEN it came to dreaming up a title for her soon-to-be-released debut album, Durban theatre, opera and gospel favourite Pinkie Mtshali had one pop into her head in an instant.

"It is titled *Time* – simply, saying it is time now for me to spread my wings and fly," says this jovial, much-loved entertainer, an original member of cabaret vocal group The Durban Divas, who has enjoyed more than two decades in the spotlight.

Mtshali, who turns 43 on September 11, is putting the finishing touches to her album while touring with fellow Durban personalities Aaron McIlroy and Lisa Bobbert in their acclaimed, zany revival of their grand tribute to the music of Abba, *Abbamaniacs*.

Mtshali has been with the Abba show since its inception 15 years ago. She will star in it again in its revival at the Hilton Arts Festival at Hilton College at the end of this month.

She is excited about her debut album, for which she has penned and, with Jabulani Madida, co-arranged all 11 tracks.

Scheduled for release towards the end of next month, it will be launched with a series of performances, the first of which will be at Jazzy Rainbow in Morningside, Durban, at 7pm on October 26, when tickets will cost R50 each.

Mtshali labels her sound as "simple yet sophisticated", with the emphasis on "Sophiatown, jazz, gospel and maskandi sounds".

"It has all the ingredients that reflect my personality, and embraces all cultures," she adds, mentioning her influences as including Miriam Makeba, Sibongile Khumalo, Letta Mbulu, Lira, Ringo Madlingozi and Hugh Masekela.

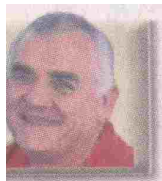
Mtshali's favourite songs on *Time* include *24 Years* – "It gives people a taste of what I have experienced in showbiz since I started out 24 years ago" – and *Nguwe Wedua – UR the One*, "a praise song to the one I love".

She also points to *Masibambaneni (Bring Back Humanity)* as an album standout: "I am requesting that people join hands, as we are surrounded by poverty and homeless people."

Also worth a mention is the Sophiatown-inspired *Dudu*, "an upbeat song asking Dudu to return home to her hungry children, crying

Profile

Billy Suter



mother and the alcoholic husband she left behind when she went to Joburg to look for work. It is a happy song."

Mtshali started working on the album's songs in July last year, with Sibusiso Mthethwa, better known as maskanda guitarist Nyambose, and the late bassist Bongane Maduna.

After the three had played a few gigs together, both men convinced Mtshali to start recording in February, when the first tracks were laid down at the eKhaya Multi Arts Centre recording studio in KwaMashu.

Mtshali's co-composer, Madida, who appears on the album on keyboards, also co-produced the collection, with Mtshali, with assistance from the centre's director, Edmund Mhlongo.

Also appearing on the album are saxophonist Delane Mbokazi, bassist Robert Mkhize, drummer Sibongiseni Shongwe, percussionist Malusi Ndlovu and Durban Divas.

Special guests are the Kholwa Brothers isicathamiya group, seasoned Durban keyboardist Melvin Peters and bassist Philani Ngidi.

The album is now in its final stages of production with Neil Snyman and Marius Botha at Headroom Studios in Bellair, Durban.

Mtshali was nine when she realised she had to pursue a career as a singer.

"One day, Maria Callas was screaming so loud on the radio my dad had to switch it off. I had sat listening to this woman, with tears rolling down my cheeks, without even understanding what she was saying.

"But I knew this was it ... I just had to sing opera. The music was so different to the bubblegum I had grown up with. It spoke to my soul."

After matriculating in 1987, Mtshali registered for an operatic and light music performance diploma at the Academy of Music at the former Technikon Natal in Durban.

In 1988 she won Samro and Durban Arts bursaries to study vocal technique with Sandra de Villiers at

the Academy of Music, and obtained an opera studies diploma in 1990.

"Last year, the Durban University of Technology – the former Technikon Natal – honoured me with a Convocation Silver Award for my contribution to art," she says, proudly.

In 1990, Mtshali joined Durban's Playhouse Company as an ensemble member of the opera company, and understudied eight major roles in operas and musicals.

As a promising young singer in 1992, she was appointed as a junior member and soloist with Capab Opera, based at the Nico Malan Theatre in Cape Town, and in 1993 won the Gwen Streichter Prize to study vocal technique with noted former opera singer Virginia Davids.

Mtshali returned to Durban in 1996, crushed that the opera company had been dissolved: "The light was switched off and my lifetime dream was shut down at 25. I was among those artists who lost their jobs and homes.

"I had no family or anyone overseas to go to when most young opera singers left for other countries to continue their operatic journey."

So Mtshali pursued other singing styles, and created a one-woman cabaret show, a tribute to another of her childhood idols, Tina Turner. She also entered the 1997 Durban Eisteddfod singing contest and received three first prizes.

As a back-up, she took courses in public relations, computer, management and counselling skills.

It was in 1997 that she was first approached to appear in outlandish outfits and blonde wigs in *Abbamaniacs*, playing a flamboyant landlord and wannabe star.

"After 15 years I am still loving being in the show," she says, adding that she is also still involved with her popular Durban Divas vocal troupe.

Durban Divas was formed in 2000 and became a mentorship programme for more than 18 woman singers from different genres who were given an opportunity to perform alongside Mtshali as soloists and in an ensemble.

In 2005, at the Mercury Durban Theatre Awards, Mtshali received a certificate of acknowledgement for this mentorship programme, and in 2007 a certificate for "performance excellence" from the Department of



Durban diva Pinkie Mtshali ... the *Abbamaniacs* star's first solo album is due at the end of next month. She is now writing three musicals, one of which she hopes will be staged at Durban's Playhouse next year.

Arts and Culture, for the work she does with the Durban Diva ensemble.

She then developed a passion for choral music. "Not just gospel. Coming from a classical background I grew to love Negro spirituals and made a commitment that, before I turned 40, I would do a special study on this particular music

"For five years I saved, then in 2009 went to America for a two-week course attended by thousands of gospel music lovers in Cincinnati, Ohio, where I sang in an ensemble of more than 1 500 voices."

Mtshali attended many classes – including tambourine playing, music theory and ensemble work – and enjoyed presentations every night.

"I still get goosebumps when I go down memory lane – and given a

chance I'd do it again. I now plan to get a sponsor to host a collaboration of American spirituals and African music locally."

Mtshali is a very busy woman – besides all this and the album, she is writing three musicals, one of which she is hoping the Playhouse Company will stage next year.

"It is titled *Kaleidoscope: SA Story*, and reflects different ethnic groups and cultures, and how we celebrate as a country."

Mtshali's long-term goal is to continue to mentor fresh talent, and her ambition is to direct. Other dreams are to sing the role of Santuzza in the Mascagni opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and to write a film based on her life. She's given herself the wing. Now watch her soar.