

Madosini, a South African national treasure whose music kept a rich history alive

By [Boudina McConnachie](#)

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Renowned African musician, songwriter and storyteller Latozi "Madosini" Mphahleni passed away late in 2022. The cultural and indigenous music activist, who laughed as often as she played, was loved by everyone she met. She has left behind a rich legacy of Xhosa music, heritage and history. She also taught and nurtured a new generation of bow players, reinvigorating an art that was dying.



Latozi "Madosini" Mphahleni

The iconic South African Xhosa bow performer was born on 25 December 1943 (though she herself was uncertain of the precise date) in a village called Mqhekezweni near Mthatha in the Eastern Cape province. Home to the Xhosa people, the region is rich in cultural heritage and history. It is also the birthplace of many of South Africa's most recognised struggle heroes, including former presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki.

Madosini (mother of the Dosini clan), as she was more commonly known, used indigenous music to promote her Xhosa heritage. She mastered instruments like the uhadi (gourd resonated bow), the umrhubhe (mouth resonated bow) and the isitolotolo (jaw harp).

What she produced from these instruments is unique in its variety and in the range of feelings it evokes. Her songs are poems which speak eloquently of a rich personal and cultural history. They take listeners back to the music of the earliest inhabitants of southern Africa.

Madosini came into contact with myself, my colleagues and our students at Rhodes University in the Eastern Cape, sharing her knowledge with our music school and touching our lives.

Her contributions to the study of Xhosa music, culture and folklore are invaluable. Her drive to value indigenous knowledge will remain an inspiration to many around the world.

The musician

Madosini began performing, composing songs and making instruments at a young age, learning from her mother, who was an expert in their playing and construction. Due to an illness, Madosini did not attend school and never learnt to read or write. This did not hinder her success, however.

She went on to collaborate, using a variety of musical genres, with many well-known South African artists. Among them were Ringo Madlingozi, Pops Mohamed, Thandiswa Mazwai and Sibongile Khumalo. She also worked with many international artists, including Flynn Cohen and Gilberto Gil.

Notably, she worked with the great South African singer-songwriter Miriam Makeba and British rock singer Patrick Duff, with whom she toured the globe. The South African composer Hans Huysen created *The Songs of Madosini* (vocals, uhadi, umrhubhe, isitolotolo, clarinet, string quartet and narrator) for her in 2002. And Madosini's original compositions were used in the South African movies *Yesterday* and *The Shore Break*. Other recording samples were played in various films and documentaries.

Mastery of the bows

Although Madosini became known to popular audiences mostly as a singer and storyteller, it is her lifelong mastery of the uhadi and umrhubhe bows, as well as the isitolotolo, that have attracted musicologists like myself to her work.

The players of these instruments exploit the most primordial source of musical pitch, the overtone series, in a way that is both intimately connected with the earliest human society (the San people) and also unique to Xhosa music. Overtones offer an alternating tonality shift between the harmonics of two fundamentals.

Madosini not only built and performed on these instruments since she was a teenager, but also taught them in person to young musicians and travelled extensively to share her world-class talent with international audiences. Until they met her,

many had never had any association with Xhosa people beyond Nelson Mandela.

The educator

Rhodes University and the International Library of African Music worked extensively with Madosini for many years and awarded her an honorary doctorate in music in 2020. Due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions at the time, the physical celebrations of this honour were deferred. In 2022, she was formally robed and hooded in full view of her family and her community at Mkhankatho village.

She stressed the need to educate and train young people – not only to value indigenous knowledge, but to ensure that Xhosa instruments and stories remained relevant. She said in a 2018 interview:

The youth have forgotten their roots. They don't know where they come from and it really saddens me to see our cultures and traditions slowly die out.

Queen of Xhosa music

As the queen of Xhosa music, Madosini was undoubtedly a towering figure in South African culture. Her role as a traditionalist in a fast-changing society presented a golden opportunity for research and exploration into indigenous knowledge systems. These are integral to the preservation of South Africa's cultural heritage.

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