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# HOME AND HEART OF ORLANDO

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Mbuli's home in Orlando East, Soweto, will be a heritage site. Picture: Bhekikhaya Mabaso/Africa News Agency (ANA)

Letta Mbuli



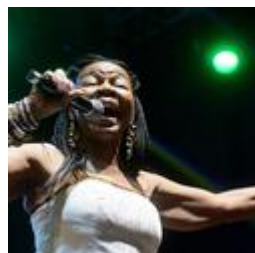
If it had not been renovated, the house could just have been like the rest on the street. But number 1670 is unlike any other on Molahloe Street in Orlando East, Soweto.

This is where Letta Mbuli, one of South Africa's foremost music luminaries was born and grew up. And on September 24 the house will be honoured with a Johannesburg Heritage Site Blue Plaque from Heritage Ways in partnership with the City of Joburg Immovable Heritage Department and the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation for being the cradle that reared a national treasure.

There will also be a Letta Mbuli Honorary Lecture at Northwards Place, 21 Rockridge Road in Parktown on September 23, themed "The Meaning of the African Diaspora in the national liberation discourse". On September 24, which will be Mbuli's 75th birthday, there will be a fun walk in Orlando East. The day culminates with the plaque unveiling at 11am.

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Tshenolo Mokhele, researcher at Heritage Ways, said: "The road to independence in Africa was influenced by various artists, some of whom went to foreign lands, hoping to spread the

message. While we celebrate the centenary of Nelson Mandela and Mama Albertina Sisulu, the South African liberation story includes other players.

“Where Mama Letta Mbulu grew up in Orlando East is a place that will be credited as a Mother of all Townships under the leadership of the late great civic leader Mr James Sofasonke Mpanza, who in the 1940s led the struggle of land grabbings. Materials such as the Letta Mbulu sites must also be considered for future inscription into the national liberation Route Register of Sites.”

Mbulu said she is humbled and honoured by the announcement. Welcoming the news, she said: “It’s difficult to express myself because I’m not the only one who was involved in the struggle with the music I was doing. But I do feel honoured and humbled, I did not expect it.”

Mbulu said the area was also known as Plantation and it held many memories.

“We struggled under apartheid. My brothers were chased by the police for pass laws and pass books. The cops would come looking for them at 4am.

“I lost my brother when I was 13. He was arrested and taken to Leeuwkop, where he was shot dead. When we tried to get his body, the authorities refused to release it; my mother had to get a lawyer.

“But there are also great memories I cherish. It was a musical family, both my mother and aunt were into music and that kept us going. I also come from a neighbourhood I have great respect for. There was camaraderie and the men and women held on to the spirit that every child was their child.

“Even under Bantu education the teachers were formidable and they taught us what they wanted us to learn and I’m thankful to them.”

Mbulu rents out the house and she often visits the community to see people she grew up with, or join in funerals and other occasions.

“Orlando is my heart. My umbilical cord is there, I will always be drawn to it.

“I thank God for the gift he gave me and how my mother nurtured it. I’m also indebted to James Mabena, the man who discovered me as a singer. There are a lot of people who played a role with this gift, but it’s the people of this country who made me aware that I had something special because every time I performed they applauded, approved and gave the confidence. The Americans just put on a stamp, but it’s my people at home who saw me grow up and bestowed the confidence.”

Vusi Maringa is one of three tenants at the house.

“I’ve always known whose house this is,” said Maringa, who was also born and bred in Orlando East.

He has been renting one of the back rooms at the Mbulu home for four years now and thought that it being declared a Johannesburg Heritage Site was a welcome development.

Maringa said he owned a sizeable collection of Mbulu’s music, along with that of her husband, Caiphus Semenya.

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