

‘I spent my first birthday in prison’



Hailed as the next Beyoncé, South African-born Mpho is taking the UK by storm. Here, the daughter of Siphon ‘Hotstix’ Mabuse tells of her extraordinary transition from jail baby to child exile to music star

‘**G**rowing up, there was always music in our house. My mom has a picture of me when I was about five, with three friends on a stage. On the back it says, “We are pop stars”. Little did I know those words were prophetic.

Mom named me Mpho, which means “gift” in Sesotho. It’s just what she called me, but I try to look at life as a gift in general anyway. I’m determined to make the most of all the opportunities and talents that I have. That’s why I decided to pursue my love of music, despite all the challenges a career in this industry presents.

I was born in South Africa, during the height of the apartheid struggle, to a white mother and a black father. When Mom became pregnant she was fully

aware of the political implications. In those days, if a white woman gave birth to a mixed-race child in a local hospital, the staff would treat it like a rape case and call the police. When I was born, my grandmother sent a local priest to try to convince Mom that she’d sinned and should give me up for adoption.

My mother met my father, Siphon ‘Hotstix’ Mabuse, through mutual friends at a music festival in Johannesburg. He would later become a hugely popular musician and produce for Miriam Makeba among others. A romance blossomed between them: my mother, a white teacher from Belville in Cape Town, and my father, a musician who was raised under very different circumstances in Dube, Soweto. They were only together for about six months before my mother, then 29, became pregnant with me. It was hard for them – they couldn’t live together legally and they couldn’t marry; they were not supposed to have a relationship of any kind.

I think the situation was really frightening for my dad – a young black man having a relationship with a white woman at the height of the country’s racial tensions. My mom, on the other hand, was fearless and outspoken about her disagreement with the policies of the apartheid government. She was a teacher and would often help students who were in trouble with the police.

A week before my first birthday, my mom was arrested and imprisoned. She was accused of being a political terrorist – and having a mixed-race child could have only added fuel to the fire. When she was arrested, the police sent a coloured policeman to offer to adopt me. His wife couldn’t have children apparently, and he said it would be much safer for me to grow up in his environment. My mom refused. She has so much strength, she never backed down for an instant. There was never enough evidence to prove her guilty of anything, yet we were held in jail for two weeks.

There are still so many questions I don’t know the answers to. Whenever I sit down and go over the stories with Mom, more details come out about what she experienced. I’d really like to talk to my dad properly at some point and figure out what his life was like; to get his side of the story.

When she was released from prison, Mom went back to Jo’burg and, thankfully, I was allowed to stay with her. But she and my dad went their separate ways. I think he felt like he didn’t have a choice. Plus, he was a drummer in a big band [Harari] and he was on his way to becoming famous.

My mother then met my stepfather, poet and activist Eugene Skeef, at a writer’s conference.

He had worked closely with Steve Biko and other political activists from the Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s. I learnt a lot about the political situation in South Africa just from conversations I overheard between Eugene and Mom.

I remember the day Mom told me we were going to move to London. She’d made the decision after one of her activist friends and her young daughter had been killed by a parcel bomb.

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I have some very vivid memories of life in South Africa. I remember my friends and my toys, the smell and the landscape. I was very upset about leaving a particular friend of mine, the grandson of a woman who was like my nanny. I didn’t have many other friends because I was an “illegal” child. It wasn’t like everyone came around to my birthday parties.

It was cold and grey when we arrived in the UK, but I’m used to it now. Growing up in Brixton, south London, was such a transition. The first thing that struck me was how different I sounded to everybody – I had a strong accent and I was the only South African child in the whole school. Even though the school was predominantly black, there wasn’t anybody else who looked or spoke like me. Most of the kids were Caribbean; there were a few other African children there but they were mostly West African. I got the piss taken out of me. I came home crying over my accent and sat in front of the mirror practising the south London accent I have now.

Racism was still a part of our lives in the UK. My mom and Eugene nearly got beaten up once because they were a mixed-race couple. My mom remained politically active and has been involved in the Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp since the 1980s. She’s recently returned from her second visit to Gaza. We don’t always see eye-to-eye, but we’re very close and she’s a great inspiration to me.

A lot of my mom and Eugene’s friends were killed in South Africa during the apartheid years. I distinctly remember listening to their late-night conversations about would happen

MADE IN SA
Below Mpho, aged three, with her mother, who ‘never backed down for an instant’ in her fight to keep her mixed-race child. Opposite Mpho the pop princess wants to be known in SA for her music, not her famous father.





when Mandela was released from prison, about what protests needed to happen and who was going to be involved. When he was released, I watched it on television. My mom cried.

There is a strong community of South Africans in London who, back then, spent a lot of time trying to figure out how they were going to make changes happen so that they could go home. But by the time the change came they had set up home in London, so they felt torn. Because they had kids who were still in school, my mom and Eugene made the decision to stay in the UK.

My dad didn't have a big influence on me musically, it was more Eugene and the people around him. My mom and Eugene didn't push me, but they did encourage me. I took guitar and dance lessons, and I went to the BRIT School, a famous music academy, from age

16 to 18 (Amy Winehouse and Leona Lewis went there too).

It was very competitive – so many kids came from stage schools – but I met some lovely people there.

I had my first child, Rae, when I was 19. Her father and I hadn't been together long and we broke

up when she was four. The pregnancy was a shock because I was so young, but I would never trade being a mom and what I've learnt from the experience. When I had Rae, I had to ask myself, "Are you going to settle down and get a 'real' job or are you going to show her that you can still be who you are?" I'd been gigging in London but getting a break was proving to be a struggle.

PROUDLY POP

From top Mpho's debut album, *Pop Art*; age six; performing at the Oval House Music School in London; 'It's funny how intertwined my music is with my politics and my upbringing,' says Mpho.

I had to decide, "Do I really want to be broke? Is it worth it?" Turns out it was worth it.

The 2006 track "Booty La La" [with the group Bugz in the Attic] was the first song that made anyone sit up and take notice. I describe it as a modern P-funk [a kind of funk sound heavily influenced by jazz and psychedelic rock]. It was really exciting, but it definitely wasn't the only kind of music I wanted to make. People always try to stereotype black singers. I've been compared to Beyoncé, for example, even though I think we're very different musically.

Now that I'm pregnant with my third child [Mpho's second child Lukah was born in 2007] people in the industry are freaking out: pregnancy doesn't exactly go hand in hand with the sex-goddess

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archetype. I am a singer, but being a mom is also part of who I am. I just try to incorporate it into my work. The kids come on tour with me and I'm very lucky to have a supportive husband [drummer Josh McKenzie, 24]. He's British-born but has Caribbean parents. We met on a gig and have been married for three and a half years now.

Being a mother has really inspired my music; it definitely drives me. My music is about saying what I believe, not just writing catchy lyrics that I think could become a hit. Every song on my debut album, *Pop Art*, is a story, whether it's about me or someone else. The message I'm trying to convey is that self-esteem is the foundation of a happy life. The title represents that I'm a pop artist – I know that term is often used in a derogatory way, but I'm not ashamed of it; it's where I come from.

I haven't spoken to my dad for a while, although when I'm in South Africa or he's in the UK, we do try to see each other. We're not very close – or at least, we're not as close as I'd like us to be. But it's cool, we don't have a terrible relationship. One thing's for sure: I don't want any success I might have in South Africa to be related to being Siphos 'Hotstix' Mabuse's daughter. I want it to be because of my music.' **mc**

