



# Miriam Makeba

Composer of the Week



Miriam Makeba  
(1932 - 2008)





Born in  
**Johannesburg,**  
**South Africa,** on  
March 4th 1932



Died in **Castel  
Volturno, Italy**, on  
November 9th  
2008



Miriam Makeba was a South African singer, songwriter, actress and civil rights activist who was known as "**Mama Africa**". She was a pioneer of African music and was one of the first female African musicians to achieve international success.





Miriam Makeba was born in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1932. Makeba's mother was a **sangoma**, or **traditional healer**, her father died when she was 5 years old and Makeba was raised by her grandmother.

She grew up in a poor neighborhood and began singing in her church choir at a young age. She sang in English, Xhosa, Sotho and Zulu. She said later that she learned to sing in English before she could speak or understand the language. Makeba's talent for singing was recognised by her teachers and fellow churchgoers and in the 1950s, she joined a vocal group called **The Manhattan Brothers** and began to gain popularity in South Africa.

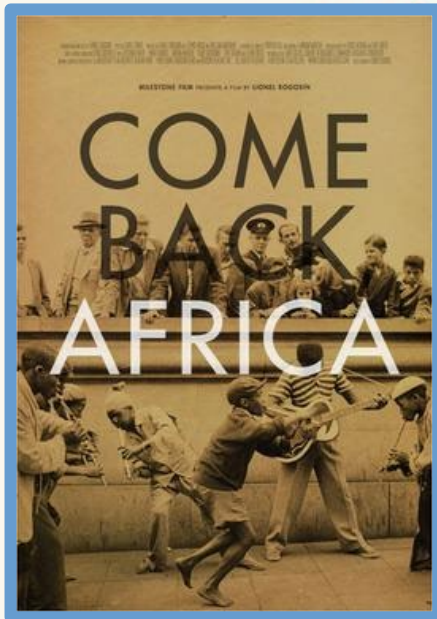


In 1956 she joined a new all-woman group, **The Skylarks**. They sang a blend of **traditional South African music** and **jazz**, something new at the time.

Miriam became known outside South Africa and she sang in Europe and America. She lived in London for a short time in 1959.







Miriam was offered some roles in films. One of these was called **Come Back Africa** which won a prize at the **Venice Film Festival** in Italy. The film was critical of life in South Africa under the **Apartheid System** which meant that black people were treated very badly and had very few rights. Later in 1960, when Miriam tried to return home for her mother's funeral, she was refused entry.

Imagine not being allowed to live in, or visit, your own country.

Makeba was described by many as a **style icon**. She wore no makeup, insisted on wearing African jewellery and refused to straighten her hair for performances.

She became a heroine to South African schoolgirls who were forced, by the **apartheid government**, to straighten their hair.



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MIRIAM MAKEBA 1960

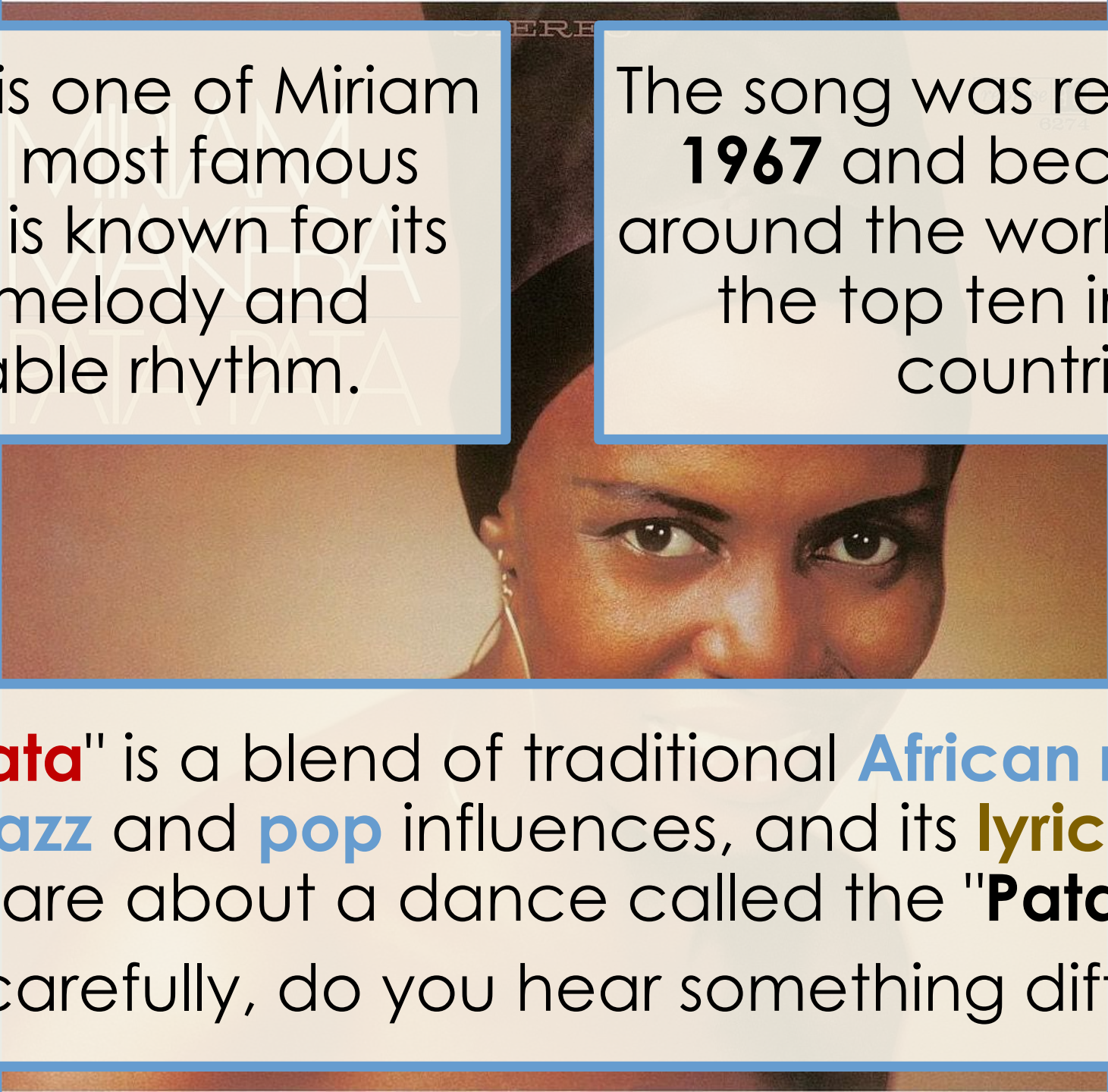


"**Malaika**" is one of Miriam Makeba's most beautiful songs. Sung in **Swahili**, it is a love song that tells the story of a woman in love with a man who cannot afford to marry her. Released in **1960**, it has become a classic of African music.



Miriam Makeba spoke out against the **apartheid** government in South Africa and her songs told of the hardships she, and her people, were suffering. As a result, most of her music was banned in her homeland.



A close-up portrait of Miriam Makeba, looking slightly to the right with a gentle smile. She is wearing a dark headwrap and a gold hoop earring. The background is a soft, out-of-focus brown.

"**Pata Pata**" is one of Miriam Makeba's most famous songs and is known for its catchy melody and danceable rhythm.

The song was re-released in **1967** and became a hit around the world, reaching the top ten in several countries.

"**Pata Pata**" is a blend of traditional **African rhythms** with **jazz** and **pop** influences, and its **lyrics** (the words) are about a dance called the "**Pata Pata**". Listen carefully, do you hear something different?





Did you hear a '**click**' in the song?

**Clicks**, are **speech sounds** that occur as **consonants** in many languages of Southern Africa. They are similar to the '**tut-tut**' we use in English or the '**clip clop**' sound we make to imitate a horse.



The next song is called **Qongqothwane** (**Knock-knock beetle**).

This is a traditional song of the **Xhosa people**, probably taught to Miriam by her mother, sung at weddings to bring good luck.

It is more widely known as “**The Click Song**”.





Throughout her life, Miriam used her fame to speak out about the apartheid regime in South Africa and the hardships black people suffered.

She spoke about this several times at the **United Nations General Assembly**.




In **1990**, when **Nelson Mandela** was freed after **27 years in prison**, he encouraged Miriam Makeba to return to South Africa. She then returned, after **31 years in exile**, and became a **goodwill ambassador** for South Africa to the **United Nations**.



Makeba continued to perform and record music throughout her career. She **collaborated** with many artists, including the famous American singer and composer, **Paul Simon**. She was always known for her powerful voice and her own unique blend of traditional African music which was influenced by the music of the time.





**Be careful, think about the  
effect of what you say. Your  
words should be  
constructive, bring people  
together, not pull them  
apart.**

Miriam Makeba

  
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