

Remarks at “The South African Jazz Songbook” Concert
Chargé d’Affaires Jessica Lapenn
(as prepared)

Good evening. It is an honor to join Chancellor Mbeki, Professor Makhanya, Professor Temane, Professor Devroop and so many people in the UNISA family in this beautiful hall! And I am thrilled to have this opportunity to offer my congratulations to UNISA for having served as a beacon of knowledge in South Africa for 145 years!

I am delighted to thank Gerben Grooten, Kevin Gibson, and the Johannesburg Festival Orchestra: without our South African musical friends, this event could never have happened. And I also want to welcome our visiting American musicians – Emma Adomeit, Chris Anderson, Bobby Ferrazza, James Ford, and Michael Orenstein – for making the trip to South Africa. Physically, we all know it is a long and arduous journey. But musically, they probably feel very close to home, thanks to the commonalities that make the South African music scene feel incredibly familiar and welcoming to us Americans.

Let me offer a warm welcome to all the legendary South African musicians as well as the dedicated music teachers who are here tonight and thank you for your commitment to sharing your skills and knowledge with your students.

It is wonderful to see so many musicians in the audience. We are proud to have students from the Committed Artists for Cultural Advancement, Youth in Trust, National School of the Arts, East Rand School of the Arts, UNISA Music Foundation School in Soshanguve, as well as music students from the University of Pretoria and the Tshwane University of Technology with us tonight.

It is also such a pleasure to have Vusi Mahlasela’s students, from the Music Development Foundation, and those students of the late, great Johnny Meko, from the Gauteng Music Academy, here tonight!

With all of UNISA’s academic disciplines, its enormous student body, and its peerless alumni, take a step back and consider this: we are commemorating UNISA’s anniversary *in song*. We are celebrating UNISA by celebrating South Africa’s musical heritage. Wow! That really tells you how important music is to the soul of a South African. I am incredibly pleased and so honored that you have invited American musicians to take part in this remarkable moment.

Throughout my time as the Chargé d’Affaires, I have seen how the arts highlight the close ties that exist between Americans and South Africans. But music -- vital as it is clearly is to the core of a South African, or American, or any human being - is ephemeral. If not recorded, it can disappear into history and lost forever. As soon as the last breath passes through the saxophonist’s lips, as soon as the violin’s strings go still, as soon as the last chord dies, the music is gone. It makes you wonder: if music is in our soul, but we don’t know the songs our grandparents sang, did we really know them? Did we really ever know our own people?

But! What happens if we record it, write it down, pass it along, and save it for those who come next? It builds those connections that would otherwise be lost. I think preserving and sharing musical heritage is one of the most important things we can do to understand ourselves, and each other, better. It is something we have done together for many years, and I hope for many more.

Jazz, especially, is a rich source for American–South African collaboration. It’s an amazingly powerful musical exchange, drawing on both of our musical traditions and enriching both. Americans think of jazz as a truly great “American” musical tradition – one that resonates with people around the world. We know, of course, that it draws from deep roots here in Africa. So it really is like much of America – with origins that actually come from elsewhere.

This afternoon, you are going to enjoy incredible music and a world-class concert performance. But much more is happening. By participating in this event, we are reaffirming our conviction that preserving and sharing our shared musical heritage strengthens the ties between our two countries. Some of you may know Benjamin Jephtha and Alfred Khutumela, who have joined us in the audience today. These fantastic young musicians, and many others, have visited America as participants in our Fusion Arts and One Beat exchange programs funded by the U.S. Government. They have partaken in events like this for American audiences on the other side of the Atlantic.

Beyond musical collaborations, we have worked with UNISA on an institutional level for many years. For example, not so long ago, we arranged a trip for Professor Makhanya and some of his senior staff to visit the United States, where they and their American peers could share and learn from one another.

Here in South Africa, Chancellor Mbeki, Professor Makhanya, and many UNISA staff have helped us make the YALI Regional Leadership Center, based at UNISA’s Graduate School of Business Leadership, a reality. Starting with its first

cohort in 2015, the Regional Leadership Center has developed the skills and talents of more than 2,400 young African leaders from 14 Southern African countries. They have taken that knowledge to heart, and home, and are now bringing positive change to their communities. That is good for Africa, good for South Africa, and good for the world.

Professional exchanges like those made possible at the RLC, or cultural exchanges as we're celebrating tonight, allow Americans and South Africans to come together and discover shared values and interests. Through cultural exchange, we have interactions and conversations that sidestep passing politics, but get at the heart of who we are as people.

It is sometimes said that a people who don't revere their cultural heritage are a people without soul. During my time here, I've come to understand South Africans' diverse and wonderful culture and one thing I have observed: South Africa has soul. Definitely. South Africa definitely has soul!

And as for the soul of America: I can point to the citizen diplomats who are with us today -- James Ford, Chris Anderson, Bobby Ferrazza, Michael Orenstein and Emma Adomeit -- and let you know they represent the best of us! They come here with a spirit of wonder, a purpose of collaboration, and a desire to pay respect to important shared historical traditions. They capture the soul and very spirit of America!

So, on that final note, please enjoy tonight's celebration of music, history, and the wonderful cultural ties that have brought Americans and South Africans together over many years. Here's to many more years of friendship and artistic collaboration to come!

Thank you.