

# Miriam Makeba - Singer

Miriam Makeba (4 March 1932 - 10 November 2008)

Would we call a woman a role model simply for winning a Grammy award? Probably. But Miriam Makeba – the first black African woman to win a Grammy was so much more than that. Music, which she described as “a type of magic”, became the platform from which she literally helped to change the world.

This extraordinary singer, virtually unheard of outside her own generation, was known as Mama Africa and the Empress of African song.

And though she spent more than 30 years in exile from her homeland for her political ideals and beliefs – her fight against South Africa’s apartheid regime never wavered.

And her huge contribution to changing the face of modern Africa was recognised by her friend, Nelson Mandela himself.

Born in a Johannesburg township Miriam grew up in one of the most inhumane political systems of the last century – where the colour of your skin dictated where you could live, the schools you could go to, the land you could own – and even who you could marry.

For black girls like her, born in to absolute poverty – life looked very bleak.

Music became her salvation and after her singing was praised at school this amazing young woman joined South African group the Manhattan Brothers. Five years later, during a tour of the United States, she became famous outside her homeland.

But she was forced to sacrifice her family for her ideals and was forced into exile for taking part in an anti-apartheid documentary. She only discovered her passport had been revoked when she tried to re-enter South Africa for her mother’s funeral in 1960.

During her life Miriam went from poverty to global celebrity, feted in some countries and banned from others. She was a giant of a performer who sung for Hollywood actors and US presidents. But her campaigning never ceased. She used her fame to promote her cause. She believed her fame brought with it responsibilities.

“You sing about those things that surround you,” she said.

“Our surrounding has always been that of suffering from apartheid and the racism that exists in our country. So our music has to be affected by all that.”

She became associated with radical activity not just against apartheid but also in the civil rights movement and then black power, angering some white people.

“People have accused me of being a racist, but I am just a person for justice and humanity,” she said.

“People say I sing politics, but what I sing is not politics, it is the truth. I’m going to go on singing, telling the truth.”

To much of the world, Miriam became almost saintly, but when she returned to South Africa after Mandela was released from prison and apartheid was coming to an end, many younger South Africans had no idea who she was or what she had struggled for on their behalf.

We at Pinkstinks believe it is not only all South Africans who should be grateful for Miriam, but everybody everywhere. She helped rid the world of a terrible tyranny. And she did it with amazing music.