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McCoy Mrubata and the band performing at Salmiya's Abdullhussain Abdulredah theatre.



# McCoy Mrubata live in Kuwait:

## A look at the life and influences of the famous jazz artist

By Aakash Bakaya

**M**cCoy Mrubata is a renowned, multi-award winning South African saxophonist, flute player and band leader. His childhood was surrounded by African hymns, the sounds of Zion churches and the brassy music of the Merry Macs band that used to rehearse opposite his home. His ambition is to keep jazz music alive and share his South African experiences through music with the rest of the continent and the world. Outside of the music, he considers himself a proud and grounded family man. This legendary jazz musician and his band performed in Salmiya's Abdul Hussain Abdul Redah theatre on Tuesday night. Kuwait Times conducted an interview with him when he was invited by Mzolisa Bona, the Ambassador of Republic of South Africa at his official residence a night before the concert.

**KT: You grew up in a pretty turbulent time in your home country; did those times influence you to become a musician and your music itself?**

**McCoy Mrubata:** It influenced me a lot. I come from a township that was very musical and there was protest in music as well. We use to regularly play in rallies back in the days. It's where I fell in love with music and it's where I told myself "I am going to be a professional musician one day".

**KT: But why jazz in particular? You've spoken about your Zionist influences early on in your career, was jazz and reggae gaining popularity in South Africa during that time?**

**Mrubata:** Yes most definitely. As much as I am known as a jazz musician, I have also played with Lucky Dube who is a reggae musician and Rastafarian and have played in many rock bands. I consider myself an 'open-minded' musician but jazz simply found me. I was surrounded by jazz as my parents played jazz records all the time and I absorbed the music at a very young age.

**KT: Who were the artists that inspired you the most?**

**Mrubata:** Oh there were lots of them. John Coltrane and Wayne Shorter were the main ones I would say - followed by many local musicians like Madoda Gxabeka and Winston Ngozi who were coming up at that time. Although they didn't teach me physically, I still regard them as my teachers. I use to watch them all the time to see how they behaved and how they practiced their craft.

**KT: Speaking of teachers, you also run and teach in a well-established music school. What are the main elements of music you focus on in your classes?**

**Mrubata:** We specialize in wind instruments mainly but we do focus on teaching theory and other instruments as well just to get them to understand the feel and flow of African jazz.

**KT: How do you think African jazz differs from the more commonly known American-infused jazz styles?**



South African Ambassador to Kuwait Mzolisa Bona introducing McCoy Mrubata and the band before the show. — Photos by Joseph Shagra

**Mrubata:** African jazz as a lot of elements of African folk music in it. In South Africa, we try hard to make sure this African-side of jazz sounds stronger than the American-infused kind. By stronger I mean, making sure the sound stays upbeat without swinging too much. There's still a tinge to the sound but you can make out the difference. Whenever we tour the US, people there often tell us how they can hear similarities and how we do it differently - we do it in our own way.

**KT: After such a long, illustrious career, what's your take on the global appeal of jazz today?**

**Mrubata:** It's still huge I feel. Two months ago, I was touring America with my band and the reception was as good if not bigger than it's ever been. I've also gone to several colleges in the US to teach and give lectures and they're still very attracted to the sound and to the instruments especially the saxophone and clarinet. The current generation tends to mix in some electronic elements into the music which we are more than happy to oblige.

**KT: Outside of live performances, have you provided music in other fields?**

**Mrubata:** I have scored a few documentaries and television productions back in my home country. I've also been a part of a musical theatre production in Norway. I acted in a stage show on John Coltrane the great sax player and was also involved in a musical on Bob Marley.

**KT: Bob Marley the Musical, what was that like?**

**Mrubata:** It was a live stage musical on the life of Bob Marley, filled with great acting and live musical performances. We mainly focused on his upbringing, his life in



Photo shows McCoy Mrubata, a multi-award winning South African saxophonist, flute player and band leader.

Jamaica and how he rose to fame.

**KT: Did you cover his assassination attempt as well?**

**Mrubata:** Oh yes that was a part of the show. The playwright was not scared on touching those controversial topics.

**KT: Kuwait has seen quite a few jazz artists come to perform in the last few years and has seen a growing interest for jazz; do you have any personal recommendations or advice for those budding jazz-lovers?**

**Mrubata:** I would say that they should look at jazz from a wider angle. The search for great jazz music shouldn't just end with the USA. If they are interested in my music, from there they could find other artists both in Africa and around the globe. I know America has worked hard to popularize the genre and we're all thankful for that but we too are always working towards widening jazz's reach in the world. I might be too old for open air festivals but I hope I can still be performing 10-15 years down the line and keep the music going.



In this file photo US musician Alicia Keys attends Billboard's 13th Annual Women In Music event at Pier 36 in New York City. — AFP

## R&B star Alicia Keys to host 2019 Grammy Awards

American singer and songwriter Alicia Keys will host the Grammy Awards next month, she announced Tuesday, one year after the gala came under fire over diversity concerns. Keys-herself a 15-time Grammy winner-will be the emcee for music's biggest night, which this year features a diverse slate of women and hip hop artists as leading contenders. "I know what it feels like to be on that stage, and I know what it feels like to be proud of the work that you've put in and to be recognized for it," Keys said in a video posted on social media. "I feel like it's the perfect opportunity for me to give the light back and lift people up-especially all the young women that are nominated," she added. "To me, it feels like sister vibes."

Keys replaces James Corden, the British-late night comedian who has hosted the awards the past two years. Since releasing her blockbuster album "Songs in A Minor" in 2001, classically trained pianist Keys has sold more than 30 million records and become a successful film, television and Broadway producer. Her appointment as Grammy host comes after the Recording Academy-which organizes the event-faced backlash that the show is consistently too male and too white. Academy head Neil Portnow said in May he would step aside when his contract expires later this year, after he triggered outrage after saying women artists should "step up." "A dynamic artist with the rare combination of groundbreaking talent and passion for her craft, Alicia Keys is the perfect choice as host for our show," Portnow said in a statement. Rap superstar Kendrick Lamar is leading the Grammy pack with eight nominations, propelled mostly by his work on the "Black Panther" soundtrack. — AFP

## 'Stye with me': Sam Smith has eye surgery in New Zealand

British pop singer Sam Smith has revealed he underwent an eye operation while holidaying in New Zealand yesterday. He took to Instagram to announce he was about to have surgery for an eye infection in Auckland and then documented the procedure with a series of pictures. Doctors had decided the painful style on his right eye needed to be operated on,

the 26-year-old said. "I'm getting it operated on in 20 minutes... super hyped that I get to wear this pirate patch," he messaged before the procedure. "I'm being super dramatic, it's like a 15 minute operation lol."

Smith's 2014 debut album "In The Lonely Hour" topped the charts in several countries and earned him four Grammy Awards, including Best New Artist and Record of

the Year. He also won Song of the Year for "Stay With Me", the breakout hit Smith harked back to in an Instagram post after a successful operation. "Stye with me," Smith wrote, alongside a snap of the singer sporting his new eyepatch. — AFP



## Rihanna sues dad to keep hands off her Fenty trademark

Rihanna has sued her father for trading on her Fenty brand name and suggesting that a business venture he set up in 2017 is associated with her. The "Diamonds" singer, whose full name is Robyn Rihanna Fenty, filed a lawsuit in US federal court in Los Angeles on Tuesday accusing Ronald Fenty and two business partners of fraud and false advertising over his Fenty Entertainment talent and production company. The Barbados-born Rihanna, who uses the Fenty trademark to sell cosmetics, lingerie and sneakers, asked the court for an injunction to stop her father using the Fenty name, and an unspecified amount of damages. — Reuters

## Cranberries debut single of last album to mark singer's death

Irish band The Cranberries released the first song of its final album Tuesday, exactly one year after lead singer Dolores O'Riordan was found drowned in a London hotel bathtub. The band dropped the new track ahead of the April release of their eighth and last album "In The End," after which the rock group—best known for 90s-era hits including "Zombie," "Linger", and "Dreams"—will split after three decades together. Band members Noel Hogan, Mike Hogan, and Fergal Lawler finished the new 11-song album using demo vocals O'Riordan completed in December 2017, they said on Instagram.

"We remembered how Dolores had been so energized by the prospect of making this record and getting back out on the road to play the songs live, and realized that the most meaningful thing to do was to finish the album we had started with her," the group said. "It was a very emotional process for us," they said. "Knowing that we would never get to play these songs live made it even more difficult." But, they concluded, "we felt that this is what she would want." The lead single has an unmistakable Cranberries vibe, a sorrowful but moving track that features O'Riordan repeating the eerily prescient lyric "It's all over now."

The group is releasing the music with approval from

the family of O'Riordan, who died aged 46. A London coroner ruled that she had died from accidental drowning due to intoxication, but found no evidence of injuries or self-harm. "I can't think of a more fitting way to commemorate the first anniversary of Dolores' passing and to celebrate her life than to announce to the world the release of her final album with the band," the singer's mother Eileen O'Riordan said in a statement. "I have no doubt that she is happy now and would be delighted with today's announcement." — AFP

