

Home Ground; with Mandisi Dyantyis, Amy Campbell, Richard Ceasar, Nomfundo Xaluva, Dan Shout, Mark Ginsburg
Mike Campbell Big Band
Album review by Mike Rossi
24 May 2024

Album order: **Southeaster** - M. Campbell, **Home Ground** – M. Campbell, **Etosha** – D. Shout, **Mabaphile** – M. Dyantyis, **Outside In** – M. Ginsburg, **Hout Bay Hustle** -M. Campbell, **Dance With Me** - R. Ceasar, **Bayathetha** – N. Xaluva, **T’s Brew** – M. Campbell, **Mr Happy** – A. Campbell, **Home Ground radio mix**

The 2024 release (recorded in 2022-2023) of **Home Ground** by the Mike Campbell Big Band is perhaps one of the finest big band albums to come out of South Africa in recent memory. The music throughout not only takes the listener to a specific time and place, but reflects the vast landscape and varied musical culture within Southern Africa. **Home Ground** could perhaps be subtitled *Home Grown* as a majority of the participating musicians on the album are or have been associated with the Jazz Studies Degree program at the University of Cape Town, which was introduced by Mike Campbell in 1988.

The personnel on the album includes top flight South African talent both young and old, all of whom have flourishing and established careers locally and many internationally. There is a nice mix of well thought out and exciting solos throughout, combined with stellar vocal features that showcase Mandisi Dyantyis, Amy Campbell, Richard Ceasar and Nomfundo Xaluva. The instrumental line up comprises of saxophonists Dan Shout, Justin Bellairs, Marc De Kock, Danel Dippenaar, Georgia Jones, Zeke Le Grange, Jean Strauss and James Green. The trumpet section comprises of Dave Thomson, Lorenzo Blignault, Marco Maritz, Christin Rohl, and Darren English. Trombones feature William Haubrich, Murray Buitendag, Siya Charles, Kelly Bell, Ryan vd Rheede, and Nick Green. The rhythm section includes Michael Bester, Bruce Muirhead (guitar) Andrew Ford, Mike Campbell (piano & keyboard), Shaun Johannes, Stephen De Souza, Mike Campbell (acoustic & electric bass), Kevin Gibson (drums), and Lilivan Gangen (percussion).

Mike Campbell states in December of 2023 that “this collection is a kind of “musical photo album” depicting my journey in big band music over the past few years, and featuring some of the people who I’ve worked with and whose music and performing talent has been especially meaningful and rewarding to me.”

The album throughout is full of good taste with Campbell as the arranger and main composer. Here Campbell shows his years of experience in honing his thoughtful, melodic and often gentle side. There are glimpses of traditional and contemporary big band writing techniques with the opening *Southeaster* reflecting some Bob Mintzer influences, while *Bayathetha* reflects more traditional tasteful big band accompaniment under the warm vocals of Nomfundo Xaluva. The family torch is passed on to Amy Campbell on *Mr. Happy*, which showcases some strong vocal work and cuteish lyrics reminiscent of jazz pop of the 1980s. It for sure puts one in a “happy” space bringing a chuckle and smile to the listener. Richard Ceasar contrasts the previous vocal tracks on *Dance With Me* with his upbeat, sublime guitar/vocal contribution over an infectious samba groove in perhaps a nod to the great George Benson with his popping guitar lines and warm voice. *Mabaphile* by Mandisi Dyantyis, on the other hand combines traditional South African “folk music” with jazz elements, that in a strange way reflects music of southern Italy and its long history of dramatic Neapolitan love songs. At times, his operatic vocal approach comes from a deep source within. Dyantyis also reveals his instrumental brass talents with a singing trumpet solo.

The instrumental tracks feature the big band across a wide range of styles with a good representation of solo talent. Dan Shout displays a tasteful use of dynamics within a well-constructed tenor solo on his *Etosha*, which reflects the vast open landscape of Namibia. Further standout solos are added to the album mix with Bellairs on alto sax, De Kock and Le Grange on tenor sax, English on trumpet, Ford on piano/keyboards, Haubrich and Buitendag on trombones, Gibson on drums, and “homegrown” Ginsburg (guesting from Australia) with his composition and twisting tenor solo on *Outside In*. The ensemble playing is well

executed, and kudos to Dave Langemann, Jethro Harris and Tim Lengfled for the overall recording and wonderful and warm balanced sound throughout the album.

Mike Campbell, along with an important career as a pioneer in the field of Jazz Education in South Africa, has a long track record as perhaps the country's most established and successful big band arranger and composer. The phrase *musical taste* comes to mind when listening to his ever clever musical hand at work. His arrangements never overpower the listener or over complicate the musical landscape at hand. **Home Ground** by the Mike Campbell Big Band, is a big band "photo album" of a different flavour. It's full of surprises and will bring much enjoyment to the listener while not focusing one particular soloist or style throughout. There is something here for everyone to treasure. Get it now via all digital platforms and enjoy!

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