



Transculture Express.

The Artistania podcast with your hosts Frida and Abilaschan.

Episode 3: Multimediar, ball room and afro futurism - Mandhla

In the third episode, we talked with multimedia performance artist Mandhla Ndubiwa about the politics of identities. We learned about the meaning of ballroom culture and community, its role in Mandhla's existence as a black trans body, serving as a way to explore and expand queerness. We also discussed pop music and the legacies of afro-futurism.

Frida: Welcome to the third episode of Transcultural Express. We are recording this on the 1st of April. Yesterday was March 31st, and March 31st is also the International Day of Transgender Visibility. And that's a day dedicated to celebrating and centring transgender people and their contributions to society, as well as raising awareness about the discriminations that transgender people are facing every day across the world. And in that spirit, we want to celebrate and discuss transgender identities and experiences here today, on Transculture Express,

Abilaschan: We want to do this with our dear guest and artist and musician, Mandhla. Welcome Mandhla, and thank you for being here on the Transcultural Express.

Mandhla: Thank you so much for having me, I'm really excited to be here!

Frida: Yeah! Uhm, so we will get to know Mandhla and her music and her perspectives on living and working as a black trans musician-

Mandhla: Periodt

Frida: -and huh?

Manhla: I said periodt!

ALL: (Laugh) Hahah.

Frida: -and artists in Berlin. And we are also very lucky because we will have a performance Mandhla will perform some music for us, live here on the artistania stage.

Mandhla: A little exclusive.

Abilaschan: Yeah super exclusive- like really really exclusive three people kind of exclusive.

Frida: Yes, I feel really lucky. But before we do that, we have one kind of ritual. Yeah, we have a ritual contractual, yeah good. We have one ritual on transcultural Express and it is to ask every guest what was your last musical discovery.

Mandhla: Oh OK, this is actually- I thought like when you said ritual I thought were gonna like I don't know- stand up and breathe together or something or like stand in an oracle and then start like running in a circle um but we like just answer a question right. That's why I'm on a podcast, right? We need to talk. Actually this is- this is a really good question. I feel like it's Kismet because speaking about artistry and music and music making in Berlin two and also being a specific marginalised body and creating art, the song that I actually discovered today is by CAXXIANNE and who is a black femme- who is a rapper and does hip hop music, and they have an EP that they just released which is the first volume of I think a couple of EPs that are going to come out. I'm not sure, but it's based on astrology and star signs. And there's a song called Virgo on it, which I have been playing all day. I listened to it today in the morning and I was like, Oh my gosh, this is such a good song and it's kind of like playing up on the characteristics that have been homogenised mainstream. I guess. Also specifically right now 'cause everyone is all about star signs. Now you know, it kind of like every song has the mood that the star-sign would kind of give. So the Virgo star sign is like- the whole song I feel like encapsulates just this feeling of like uneasiness. But like wanting comfort, but like if you come for me, I'll kill you spirit, which I feel like is such a nice concept to think about, in music I feel like everyone has to speak about love, or speak about existence or speak about this, which is very like true, but I like seeing it in a nuanced perspective to be like, oh listen to have work or tracks. So CAXXIANNE is an amazing artist C-A-X-X-I-A-N-N-E and the song is called Virgo, that has been my most recent musical discovery.

Frida: Nice thank you. Are you a Virgo?

Mandhla: I am not a Virgo. How dare you? I'm kidding.

Abilaschan: And already talking about astrology, I knew that it would come to this moment.

Mandhla: Like what two minutes in? And we already like doing that. It's also true to form with me, I'm a taurus

Abilaschan: Red flag!

Mandhla: Cos my birthday is actually coming up pretty soon on the 11th of May, as we're recording this, but I'm a Taurus. Yeah, I'm a May Taurus specifically. Not an April, taurus...

Abilaschan: Yeah, there's also fine nuances, like late or like early star sign. That's true definitely. But yeah, mandhla-

Frida: So we're gonna add that song to our trans culture express playlist.

Mandhla: Please do, it's so good.

Abilaschan: Yeah Mandhla, after Frida introduced you as a musician and artist, you are a black trans artist and like all other people you're more than just than your gender identity. And how would you like to prefer, to identify or introduce yourself?

Mandhla: Uhm, I think me being trans is a part of my identity, but isn't the only thing that I am and I think like when with creating work and also trying to commodify yourself as an artist. Sometimes people like to pigeonhole you or like typecast you little bit and specific things. And I've realised also recently that like my identity is so political that whenever it's said as the first thing that said, there's already an idea that's expected of me. So whenever people say this is a 'trans' artist, or really, it is owed to this artist's political or or this artist has these notions on society or on existence, and, as much as I am a very political person, I'm also a musician first, so I would love to be introduced as an artist or as a creative. Oh, or as a multimedia performance artist, which I am, like it's not the first thing you do with cis artist. Like if it's something to be noted like this is a dark skinned black rapper or female rapper or something like that and it's

something to be said of a gap that is there in the market that needs to be filled, and how representation like infiltrates that. But like you don't really do it a lot with cis people to be like this is the black male rapper who's coming up on stage or this is the white female pop star was coming up on stage- like we talk about it when we have conversations around discourse and how like all of these other things affect what kind of artists they are. But it's not the first thing that happens, but with trans artists or just trans creators. It's always the first thing people want to talk about it, like you are trans. I just want us to be like multifaceted and humanised a little bit and be like taken outside of the box of like what we are politically, which is like everyone has a different idea of who I am. But even to give my music like a chance before they think of why I'm politically.

Abilaschan: Yeah, thank you for answering this question like I mean which will also like come further with the question that we're going to talk about and also the things that you are involved and within your artistic practice, how it politically it is. I mean, I was just thinking about when I- we were also doing our research about which projects you already have been involved and there's so many QDB POC centred initiatives and projects. There were also many occasions where we could have met earlier, actually because I used to live in North Westphalia in Cologne when I was looking that list I saw so many places which I was frequently visiting back then, and also these circles click somehow and it all makes

sense- especially in certain like like communities in spheres that we are moving around in spaces- right. So I was really happy to see that and also very happy to welcome you here and actually, when I was thinking about the moment, how we got to know each other, was I mean I saw you before? Uhm no, it was like this. I went to outweigh workshop and Mumbai Taj that was like just before the lockdown happened and I went through this open session and the workshop and there you were and I was just mesmerised by the energy that you gave. And so I was also wondering about how did you start with also voguing and ballroom. And how is it also significant for your artistic practice and your music?

Mandhla: OK, so ballroom has been a part of my life for a pretty long time. And it also is a really huge part of my existence as a trans body as well as like my discovery and comfort in being able to exhibit and display and be comfortable in specific elements of my femininity and being able to push it to a particular point or such as having a reference of anything a bit more representative, other than the cis gay narrative. And coming from Zimbabwe, which is where I am from originally from ohwahlaeio Ohio. When I was growing up they were only really three things to be: you're either gay or straight or bisexual, but if your bi it was just like on the way to being gay, but even ideas of transness or even just drag or anything like that was not a part of Zimbabwean life. And I think it existed. I think they are trans people everywhere, and I think trans people existed everywhere. But it was just very difficult for me to see them in the spaces that I was in. So when I was about 15, my uncle was working in a science job. Like chemical engineer ...somethingmath numbers like science... and he lived in South Africa and I was in Zimbabwe and South Africa is like the Beyonce of southern Africa and then, like Zimbabwe, is like the Kelly in the sense that we we bring something really good to the table and we have like a lot of talent. But sometimes we put in the back burner and then South Africa is the Beyoncé, so there's a lot more happening in South Africa. I love the comparison.

Mandhla: I love Kelly- I really do. And I feel like there needs a lot more representation for Kelly 'cause Kelly's amazing and so is Zimbabwe. We have Victoria Falls. That's one of the seven wonders of the world. Like shits happening in Zimbabwe. Like there's a lot of fucking things happening in Zimbabwe and I feel like yeah people should just give it a chance- anyway- so my uncle was working in this job and like Internet and Wi-Fi and computer stuff was also, it took a long time to come to Zimbabwe too because they all had to kind of trickle down and it was very expensive at that time. But my. Uncle had a computer like a laptop, this PC that had gotten at work and he had like changed over to a new one. So he came over to visit us and he was like I've got this computer do you want this computer and I'm like, yeah I want this fucking computer so he gives me the computer and then I have a computer in the house. I'm like OK, what am I going to do? But I didn't have Internet at the house so I would save up my money during the week and then I'll go into these things called Internet cafes. That we used to have in Zimbabwe and I'd go there on the weekend with all of my savings during the week and I would spend like 8 hours like in the Internet cafe and as soon as I had to computer, the first thing I Googled was gay movie, gay TV show, gay people, like I wanted to see like! I wanted to see where I was 'cause I mean obviously for very long time I felt very uncomfortable with the performance

of masculinity and also being gendered as a male in society and how that kind of like affected my life. But also knowing that deep down inside there was like, a yearning for expression which was a lot more complex than the one that I was being given. So I googled that and the first two things that came up were 'Paris is Burning', 'Queer as folk' and 'RuPaul's drag race' like those are like three really- I feel like in terms of like Western media are like three very like specific like cultural references of queer media which are also like, kind of problematic. Like because Paris is Burning wasn't made in the most, in the best way, and the people who are part of their production, you know, did not get to really live off the fame and the money that came from that. And it was again white cis bodies taking and extracting you know, BIPOC stories, and queer as folk is only representing the privileged white cis gay perspective of what desire and sex and love is, in those aspects too. And RuPaul's Drag Race has its own, you know situations. Even though I love RuPaul's Drag race. But it's also a very complex show. But it was those three shows and like specifically with ballroom, like with Paris is burning. I watched it and I was like, OK, this is- I don't know what the hell is happening like I'm like in Zimbabwe and I'm like, you know, taking taxis to the Internet cafe and I have to walk like I don't know like 40 minutes from the last bus stop to like the house. And I'm like thinking of the things I've seen. I'm like I'm seeing people vogue. I'm seeing people I'm seeing trans people. I'm seeing trans people be confident, I'm seeing things that look so taboo and I was like oh my God if like a man was around here like wearing this in like town or something? They would be like ripped apart. And then watching RuPaul's Drag Race and seeing how like gender can be like deconstructed to like a couch cushion. And like make up, and the wig caps up but like specifically with ballroom, that like really like infiltrated my life from a very young age and then I would just watch like clips all the time online whenever I would go to Internet cafes. And then it started to like infiltrate- the queer scene a little bit because we saw it 'cause we were starting to get more references and then it became an identification tool for queer people in clubs. We couldn't say that you were queer, but you could look in the corner and someone's like, giving like a really bad like you know, like hands performance, but you're like, oh, they're the queer people. And then you go there and being able to like find the sense of community so it like transformed from like me like discovery of identity to like, you know, describe your community which is what form is about, was was transformed in such a different way in Zimbabwe and then I moved to South Africa. And I like got into the forum seen there for real for real where they started voguing and that was again. For me, like a thing where I was able to like have community while I was there and while I was saving up to come to Germany, and then I came to Germany and I was in the NRV for about a year and a half. And I was living in Camp Lindtfort, which is a couple of like, 45 minutes from Duisburg. So that area... No shade to anyone listening to this from Duisburg. I'm sure it has great things there, just not when I was there.

Abilaschan: Nice landscape,

Mandhla: Nice landscapes. They have this really nice museum there too.

Abilaschan: Yeah, that's true.

Mandhla: I was there for like a year and a half and there wasn't really anything happening. And then I like I was on Tinder then I met someone who was a part of the ballroom scene in Dusseldorf and then that's kind of how I got into the ballroom scene here in Berlin. And I think also just like how that infiltrates my work. Like again like my identity's so political. And I think ballroom in itself is a political act and voguing is a political act. It is an act of transgression. It is an act of rebellion, you know. And it is the embodiment of black trans femininity. I feel in whatever aspect you know, and my work is so much of that, and I feel like it is an embodiment of the black trans experience and ballroom is- too so to only have those elements be like coinciding or like parallel to each other in my performance makes sense.

Abilaschan: One of the many occasions that we could have met was also the Kiki ball which you organised, fund raising Kiki actions also took place where all the donations would have been also donated to QT-BIPOC communities in Upper End, South Africa, right?

Mandhla: Yeah, yeah, that was a ball that we organised, me, but specifically Georgina St Laurent from the House of St Laurent, who is the pioneer of the ballroom scene in Germany. And there was the Wedding Renaissance, which was basically a couple of days of black panels and workshops and performances that were happening in Wedding, which were kind of uplifting the black idea and the black mind and the black art. I wanted to be able to like nucleate this space, like really nucleate the things that I love about ballroom, which is community. This was more, so just like created for people to come. And just like vogue and have a good time and also not just feel so stressed out. And also the people who are watching just to be able to see it was specifically and predominantly BIPOC. And I was really happy because the white bodies in the ballroom scene here understood their place and didn't really have to be told and only BIPOC parties walked that ball. And it was such a beautiful like display of the black talent that we have here and just a safe space for them to not feel like they're sharing it with anyone or sharing it with any white bodies. Which happens a lot. But just being able to just like vogue with your people and be awarded for it and the whole room just wants to see you succeed like yeah. And we're fund raising money specifically for the HQ collective, which is the Harare Queers Collective, which has a like long running like Go Fund me, which they like usually extract money from because they take that money and they give stipends to queer and trans people for sustenance and then also raising money for the curve and Fortune Foundation as well as the Kiki House of Wake up and curve and was one of the pioneers of the ballroom scene in South Africa. And unfortunately, about a year and a half ago they were murdered and they founded a house, hey called the Kiki House of Lakow (17:43), which is also one of the first in Cape Town to organise a lot of balls and to also start a community there. And the house is still active, so we wanted to raise money to give to the House. So like some of the people in the House can have something at this time, and the Fortune Foundation can also have something for someone in the future, but also keep giving stipends to some QTBIPOC to be able to get some groceries and stuff.

Frida: We wanted to ask about. More about the intersection of art and politics, right? And you described it in in terms of your of your relationship to ballroom and voguing. And I actually read or I heard you say in another interview that not all trans people or people of colour or black people have to be political or like make political statements right? And I wanted to ask you if you could elaborate on that. Like what do you mean by that 'cause you also said in that interview that for your artistic practice, your politics is your art.

Mandhla: Yeah, I think this is also like a bit of a reference to the answer to what I was asked before about like how I would like to be referenced as an artist. I feel like with the way like specific identities are pathologized like in society, when you put that in the forefront, they really expect a specific reaction and specific with the trans identity. There is really only one idea of transness in society. I feel where when you say you're trans, they already expect an idea of politics because your existence is so hard and it's so political, you know, and that's something that's very difficult for every trans person. You know 'cause some trans person. Sometimes trans people are just trying to survive. Some just want to get a job and live a good life and not have to go to a protest. Some of them don't want to have to answer your questions about the gender binary all the time. And then there are people who have the energy for it. Like I think that is, that's why like being an activist, which is why I take it so seriously. Which is why I don't like to be labeled as one like first and foremost, because that's a job and people do those jobs and you, like you, have the emotional capacity for it. The mental capacity for it, and you have the time and effort to do that work. And there's people who do it. And there's people who also supported and do it in minor ways. But there's this expectation that when you are trans, like everyone has to be able to do it and should be doing it. And if you're not doing it, then you're not like progressive enough, and I don't think that's fair. You know, like with mine because I do like my art is so reflective of the things I do go through and the things I go through are inherently political. Like if I talk about desire and I talk about how my body is desired in comparison to how other parties are desired or how people have been taught to desire my body. When I speak about that, it becomes a political statement. So me just talking about my art becomes political and I understand that relationship and I'm not trying to ignore it, but I also want people to have the nuances where if they're watching a trans artist, and maybe they don't talk about the trauma, that's also OK.

Frida: Yeah yeah, there's space for that as well.

Abilaschan: Yeah, I mean I was just also thinking like talking about. Uhm, politics of bodies. I mean, even within your introduction you were also saying, like speaking from this marginalised body with this also means like in the way how you try to display this in your art is also working very multidisciplinary in different medias, or mediums that you use, like you also describe yourself as a multi media artist. What makes you want to explore these different topics through either audiovisual means or performance art or dance or music?

Mandhla: I think, I don't know. I've always been like a really visual person. I'm a very visual person and also just like I love all of my senses to like tingle when something happens. Like even when I listen to a song, I think of like a moment that I'm in, and like things that I see and I envision, sometimes also, which is, I feel like a very common thing, like when you like like a song and then the music video is like really good, it like amps that song up... you're like, oh now I'm envisioning this moment during this chorus and it like gives this moment, you know? I've always been really interested in like finding how like different mediums are also able to like communicate a specific idea as much as like a song does in the melody or as much as like a video does in a colour scheme or how like movement also sends a message. And also like wondering why not? Like why not being able to do everything at once, you know? And I think it's also because my performance, my performance style kind of came from not really knowing the place that I fit in terms of like mainstream art. As a trans artist, there's always conversations around like my space in like very musical like environments two, and a German context. I'm like very in love with drag culture and just the art of drag and transformation and how to also like incorporate that and then also have my musical elements so like. It changed to like doing a little bit of drag where they make me sing and then I was like but I also want to do projections and like I want to do stuff with it so like when I'm singing there's something happening. Then when I'm dancing there's like text there. I studied, which is also I moved here to Germany, like I studied in information and communication design. So like all of the elements of like video editing and like what you're editing and like creating stuff to something, I learned a lot at school and I just wanted to be able to like incorporate all of these different elements to intimate performance so people can have like, 50 things, and like a sensory overload and be like, there's so many things happening. Because like, a performance is nice being watched on stage when someone is singing, but when there's like 50 other things happening too, it just takes you into a moment. Because with the drag and the music and then also my visual art too, with what I was creating at school and also being seen a little bit in terms of like the art gallery spaces in Cologne and Dusseldorf. I started doing a lot of exhibitions and stuff and whatever space you want to put me in, like I can like work it... and I had an exhibition in Sweden last year where I was in a gallery space and I was exhibiting there, but it wasn't really like a performance space. It was like you, you exhibit. Leave it there for a couple of weeks and then you come back to it. And I was like how am I able to tell my story as a musician and as an artist in this space and still be able to feel like I'm giving these people the same experience they get every single time they watch me live, and also just trying to understand how my art changes into those spaces has also been, I think a huge factor in how I'm also trying to add like very different elements to just make it a lot more than the norm.

Abilaschan: That sounds like a lot of impressions that we would like to somehow display but, this is a podcast/audio format. Our listeners will at least be able to experience the sounds of your performance and your music.

MANDHLAS MUSIC/ART PLAYS

Teil 2

Applause

Mandhla: Thank you so much.

Frida: Mandla, thank you so much for, for playing. That was a really beautiful performance.

Abilaschan:It was so mesmerising.

Mandhla: Thank you for so much for having me. I really appreciate being here. It's been like the first time in a while that I've actually even been able to do something like this so I really appreciate the opportunity.

Frida: Yeah, that was just really immersive, at least for the three of us who were here.

Abilaschan: All the things that you mentioned before. I could really like sense it in this way like having an idea of the lyrics maybe with these cosmic orbit celestial semantic fields of word that you use, but also the way how you performed it- it really...got me into this mood somehow. And also I'm really grateful to experience it.

Mandhla: I really appreciate that.

Frida: I think also it was very touching and you also spoke about that, that you want to create this kind of immersive thing, and drag your audience.

Mandhla: Specifically with performance style is- my favourite types of music to listen to or like, Albums are usually concept albums because I feel like a normal album is nice too. But concept albums always feel like a complete body like from beginning to end, It's just always like they have like creating an experience. It's always been something I've always wanted to. Like try and do, so you say I hope that it is translated, so I'm glad it did for the three of you. Like three out of like a million, but it's fine.

Frida: Yeah I was wondering, maybe you could describe kind of your, uhm, path like your musical path like towards becoming the musician that you are now today. Uhm? What brought you here? Like which influences? And yeah, musicians, or kind of yeah.

Mandhla: My musical upbringing kind of started because my brother used to rap, and he was a conscious rapper, he was like really going through it. You know he was like: the system, my parents, hate everybody, you know. He was ten years older than me and he was like the last sibling that I had that was very close to me. Like, my sister's 13 years older than me so, my brothers like, the last person I can kind of cling onto. But like with conscious rap too- or more so rap with a message- it's very important to be able to lyrically put things together to have a great flow; to have a good and impactful, complex idea. Also with like the history of conscious rap too, which my brother loved, like from the 90s. Like we listened to a lot of Public Enemy. We listened to a lot of Raekwon, lot of Ice Cube and

just like a lot of a lot of Naz, a lot of music that was just very much like Rakim like music that was saying a message but was like very much like thinking about flow and the lyrics and everything. So I remember like an exercise I'd have my brother where like he would like make me freestyle about a tree when I was like six or seven years old.

Abilaschan: No pressure!

Mandhla: Listen- it was some of the most like intense moments of my life. Like we'd be like jumping on the bed and I'm like, whoo and he's like freestyle about the tree and I'm like- a tree is green, photosynthesis. I don't know. Maybe I wasn't saying photosynthesis when I was six, but, it was along the lines of that! I remember like at a very young age like my brother really being like, a song is nice but like it's very important to make sure that you write it well. That every single line is impactful and you're trying to send a message with this, you know. And then also like music is so much deeper than what we listen to, like it says the message. You can express your emotions. So like the idea of creating music came really from my brother and I was influenced a lot like as a child, I was influenced a lot by my music that I digested. So like mainstream pop music and I love the simplicity as well as the euphoria and like very like small moment of serotonin that like a pop melody gives you. That's like my upbringing just from like what I was listening to when I was growing up. Then my father is in love with South African jazz music and we would like, I lived a really outside of the city so it was like 40 minutes to like go to school, and my dad would drive us and we'd be listening for 40 minutes like, South African jazz music like pumping in the car... right. So all of these like, different like influences, I feel like have created the kind of artist I am. Cause as I grew, I started to lean a little bit away from pop and more towards like Neo soul and like- alternative- like R&B music...kind of? Because I really love like moody sounding music, or music that really like is supposed to make you feel something. But also theres just something so powerful and the black experience and also black sound that Neo soul gives to me, as a black femme also. With the thoughts that I have, and also how I carried myself and my spirituality, that all of these elements have kind of like created the music that I make now. But there wasn't like a lot of representation for trans bodies like in this space also, I've also like tried my best to be incredibly honest and not very surface, instead of being like oh I love this person, and we like skipped in the field... but to be like this is the deeper sense of what's a situation between the two of us. Why won't you speak to me like a girl, because you see me like a man? Like, these references, trying to put them into be like I'm still trying to give a Neo soul riff, but the lyrics are inherently me. And also trying to find ways that like fuses together, like which is a very specific sound like Neo Soul is a very specific sound. R&B's a very specific sound, but also trying to make it sound a little more than the norm- to be like... how does Neo Soul sound in an orbit? Or like in an empty room where you feel like you're crying by yourself? You in this very very deep emotional moment and everything feels like a haze and you feel like in a fever dream. How does a song sound like in that moment? And that's really what I've really tried from all of the elements, like the honesty from like lyrical rap and conscious rap, and the intention and social intention off that music. The beauty and fluidity of sounds and instruments in South African jazz, like it's a whole experience. You're supposed to

dance to it for a while, or like listen to it for a while, you know. and all of these different elements has really like encompassed the kind of artist. But I wanted to say one thing really quickly speaking about concept albums. The Velvet Rope by Janet Jackson, I feel like is one of the best- like not the best, but it's one of my favourites because also like what Janet did in terms of queer representation, within like the sphere like the cyber sphere of that time and there's like an interlude on that album where she's on the phone with another famous person and she's orgasming on the phone and there's another like interlude which speaks about like the HIV and AIDS pandemic, and how that affected America, and how they also like changed, how people saw queer people. And like the velvet rope is like the rope at a club and it's like this distance between you and society and it's like what's going to let you in and everything about that album is so like powerful. So every song as you listen to it, it all flows into the next and kind of creates this idea. And like, just as like a little like you know like artistic goal like I want to one day create like my velvet rope. Like something that just sounds so like you know, complete and intentioned but also whole. You know,

Frida: Oh, I think you will. One day,

Mandhla: I hopes though it's like huge, like feature-full. I love Janet Jackson

Frida: Yeah, OK, so she's definitely one of your kind of musical idols or inspirations.

Mandhla: Musically, yes, I love Janet Jackson music. I also love Janet Jackson's identity in terms of a musician. I want there to be peaks and valleys in a performance too so when I do have elements of voguing and stuff there when I incorporate that and make sure for like 3 minutes. I'm like going hard. Then I'm like giving as much as I can to give that much at the peak so that the lows feel really low and the heights feel that kind of high. But like with, I would say with Janet is someone that I would like reference there, but in terms of musically specifically; I love Ella Fitzgerald, I love Nina Simone, I love Erykah Badu, I love Jill Scott and for me also in terms of like writing....in terms of just like, the melodic pattern of Neo soul I love the way Jo scott writes and I love the way Erica writes too and I also really love in terms of concept albums to the Rumours album by Fleetwood Mac is also one of my favourite albums also and I think that in a sense is also something of like creating an experience which doesn't sound like Neo soul but you're still being able to be encapsulated in these sounds and these harmonies and these are riffs and Stevie is like one of my favourite white girls too so...

Abilaschan: So many ideas and role models. Then in the music defined when you were growing up, speaking or thinking of these elements of the Neo soul that you were talking about, in which you were like also navigating with your music and then also this concept or idea of Afro-futurism also comes up to me. Maybe you can briefly explain to our audience what it means in the concept of like aesthetics and the meaning for you.

Mandhla: I think I think....I think I'll speak about it more and in less of an aesthetic thing because I think that is quite... It's not much of a look or a performance or a behavioural

thing. I think it's a it's a it's a feeling and it's an identity thing. I think also with Afro Futurism and how I see it for my body conceptually. For me my existence and how I've been able to exist being here in Germany as an immigrant with my life experiences and being able to sit in this room and have these kind of conversations at this level of language. Whatever that means in quotes and all of the rebellion of things that were not supposed to happen. I am the future for Africans that was never expected and exists, you know? So everything I do and everything I perform, just sitting here and whatever I'm wearing is Afro-futurism because it was not expected for me to be here. So everything I do is revolutionary and everything that any other African does is revolutionary and pushes this agenda. I feel like mainstream media wants to make our futurism be a specific hair type or being an alternative, like a black body or specific things which I which I, like I understand, but I don't feel like it is an aesthetic thing, but I think it's more of like who are you as a person. And how does that like effect your work. And with me specifically, like I feel like my music is a hybrid of all of the experiences that I've learned, which makes it afro-futuristic, like I have all of these Neo soul links and also a lot of like Western references too, but a lot of references of my music are innately from people back at home like Letta Mbulu and Caiphus Semenya, Hugh Masekela, Jimmy ????. These are people who are like like who have helped me shape the kind of music that I make now. And there also like- all of these elements of how they write in my language, not necessarily in English, how you flow with specific words and all of these elements are things that I bring into the space that- like a multitude of people can experience because of globalisation, and they are getting an innate look into what my African experience is and how radical it can be or not and complex, and that in itself I think, pushes the future of what Africans can exist in. Instead of this bubble that I'm like living in Zimbabwe with my pet elephant. And I wear like lion skin going to school. You know we're like my existence, you wouldn't expect you know a black dark-skin trans third World African, to be making Neo-soul music in Germany but they are...and that in itself is so afro-futuristic to me.

Frida: Yeah, I think that's a really interesting kind of angle to look at it. Yeah, and not so much kind of essentializing this- this idea as like 'a thing'. But to say,

Mandhla: There's a lived reality, as contradictory it might seem for like mainstream society or media. This is like the proof and being political in the resistance of existence. Then when you're speaking of your specific experience here in a German speaking context. How would you say like when you see- look around in the artistic or creative sphere like are there any other like black bodies- or find any other like other people that you click with. I think also relating this experience, is also very important to relate it to like any normal social experience because I feel like a lot of people like to homogenise the black experience or even like the black trans experience to make it seem like all of us would be friends or would get along and I'm lucky enough to be in a space where I do get along with most of the black artists here who are pushing a specific narrative however I've flagged the way we've been socialised- This is very normal of how like you know, normal people socialise and social spaces. The people that you relate to relate to other people you don't, you don't. It's something that I've been like learning too, as an artist because I've

been very much pigeon holing like OK, this is a black space of black artists, so therefore it is my space, and like there's nuances to black experiences into how I have conversations with people, how we express our afro-futurism which sometimes might not click. So I've had a few clashes like in specific spaces like in town. But like they haven't been like. Enough for me to like really like, pay attention to them because I have gotten so much love and have a huge community here and I think it isn't like the only thing about black people. But when it does come up, it needs to be noted and I think community and the essence of coming together and just looking out for one another and just seeing each other in the room. It's specifically with Black femmes, it's something that I've been able to like also, like indulge in with being here. And also, to be able to see nuances of this too, like I think. Also, I say like ??? or afro-futuristic is because like globalisation has like changed me as a person. Like I have like never been able to experience all of the people and I didn't see that people that I sit with and have conversations with like I light a cigarette outside and I'm talking to someone and then we have a conversation. It's like how the... how did you end up here and now we start having this conversation...like the plethora of experiences to draw from are like so many and I'm so like, you know, interested as a couple of artists actually in town. One of them is called Garlexe Noir Feliz, Adriane Blonde, who is the founder of the House of Living Colors, which is a QTBPPOC collective that I am a part of, so i'm like plugging....

Abilaschan: Shout out !!

Mandhla: Shout out! (makes horn noise) Shout out! I'd like to say hi to my mom.... I'm kidding!

All: (Laugh)

Mandhla: But yes, Adrienne? is an amazing artist like performance artist, musician, dancer, choreographer, actor ...like does everything and they have a really unique perspective of how they like perform of how they make the music and how they perform their drag. And I also- Liar al Congo is a body who does poetry in this town, and they also create space at One More Poetry, which is a space, which usually happens when things are open, where it is just basically a space for QTBIPOCS to come and share art and share thoughts and share feelings. But like another thing about Adrienne? is, it was created because it was so difficult like he said for these communities to find each other and how we are able to create these spaces where networking as a black artist, mostly to get opportunities and get gigs for black artists has been so difficult. So it was more so like an idea of like having people with a specific artistic relation coming together, but also a networking thing, we're going to come as a group, you know, and as a collective and share the resources that we have so... I think also like plugging them a lot here is kind of like this idea that we have of wherever you go, you're always taking people with you and make sure you like drop them 'cause you never know what they could bring up.

Frida: And was it with the House of living colours that you did the residency at the Sopheon theater?

Mandhla: Yes, Yes... that's the reason why I came to Berlin. I always say like- Berlins cool and whatever. But I feel like my existence in Britain is very un-consensual because I came here for this residency...

Abilaschan: (Laughs) Really, is it...?

Mandhla: I mean I appreciate being in Berlin and there's a lot of things in comparison to a lot of German towns where I feel like I get a lot more, that's a conversation for another day though. So I came in for this residency last year and I was here from October last 2019 up till March and when we finished in March, that's like right when the pandemic happened. So I had left my things in Cologne temporarily. But then when the pandemic hit like I lost my job and I lost my place 'cause I had to find someone for the room and stuff like that and like, in a matter of weeks, like I was now a Berlin person. So I was kind of sitting, hoping things would die down, and then I'll be able to go back and they never did. So I had to like now submit myself as a person here and just get on with it. Kind of...that's why I mean like it's un-consensual 'cause I couldn't even like have enough time to like have like a goodbye situation back in Cologne like a celebration and stuff which I would have wanted.

Abilaschan: I was also thinking about when you were talking about organising itself as a network and community and also bringing your people to those spaces. Talking of spaces and also like where your performance art, for example is happening. When we were having a look on your reference list there were like so many varieties of spaces in which you've been moving around or performed: Kammerspiele in 2019. Oh, or the exhibition in Sweden that you mentioned before. Like how was it also like to have the residences in these spaces and move around? And then what was your observation on those spaces- thinking of your, embodied position that you're in

Mandhla: One thing that I also- I think why it's very important for me to continue this idea of community and carrying over people into specific spaces is because...my existence and where I am is largely because of the goodness of black femmes and people around me. It's also largely because of my talent, but it's also more so because our people, being in specific spaces and saying a word for me, or putting in a word for me. Like at the Kammerspiele, a really good friend of mine, an amazing performance artist too, Keith singer King, and they used to work at the Kammerspiele, and they were curating some work there and they got me in and they like did that as a favour. More so to be like no one has seen you. But like if you can get into the space and do something then something can come up from this, and they've also used that space so much as a way to like pivot a lot of artists who don't have...

Abilaschan: A leap of trust, as of course yeah

Frida: and to get the access right ?

Mandhla: And to get the access you know- and also like me coming here to Berlin. The residency was Adrian giving me an opportunity to be like you can do this. Come out and let's work and see what happens, you know? So it's engraved in my mind where it's like you can go to so many places yourself and when privileges is something that's so easily accessible, yeah, then it's very easy to get into specific spaces when you inhabit specific bodies and you're trying to to get to a particular place. It's very important to have people in your corner and also have people that you can call. And also realise that like your foot in the door isn't your only foot in the door. Like you putting your foot in is to open the doors that it's like 50 feet and that you don't have to do this work in like 10 years and I understand like you know, not a lot of people have to go into every space and then like breakdown every wall to be like bring in all my trans friends... dun nun nuh, you know.. like about the politicalness. You don't have to always be an artist whose political if you're black, if you're trans or not. But I'm just in all of these spaces and a lot of the spaces I was in- not all but a lot of them- are because of people who really helped me out and it's only something that's very important to carry on, and it's something that I have seen also performing in these spaces too, like just how important these small communities of network are. There's a bunch of houses of living colours that exist out there, but just don't have a name, of friends who are together who have groups who do things together, 'cause they know how hard it is for third World immigrants to survive here... they know how hard it is to write an invoice when you don't have the right paperwork, they know how to, they know all of these different things to be able to finesse it to be more comfortable for you and have the support and have the resources for that. And it has really been so influential for me and so powerful for me, community has constantly come through for me... Recently I was going through an immigration crisis and I came out to the Community also to ask for some help and they came through for me, really, really quickly and in a way that I never expected. And like this, it's just, I'm constantly shown by spirit and by my ancestors and by people around me that communities are the most important thing and it's like a notion that I have to carry everywhere and is constantly shown to me. Like my existence in this podcast is because of community. You know, I don't know how I would have been able to meet you guys if it wasn't because of that.

Frida: Yeah

Abilaschan: I was so grateful for this Community bringing you to this stage and also to like have this conversation and bringing out all these very precious messages to us so very very great. Thank you Mandla, to have you here and share your music and also your very fruitful thoughts with us. Thank you very much.

Mandhla: Thank you so much for having me. I really, really appreciate this is. This is one of my first podcasts, like if not one of my first podcast so I don't know how this is going to sound. Probably gonna hate my voice. I don't know.

Frida: It's gonna be great.

Mandhla: I really appreciate it. Thank you so much for having me, and I'm also really, really grateful to be in some of the Guinness of this podcast and the first two chapters. And I want to say like thank you so much Tim, for like everything, for the sound! It's been great. Again- like also to be in this space and all of us to meet in terms of community. I don't even know how we would have probably been able to meet in any other space, but like, so many connections have been made in this place too, so I'm really grateful for that. It's been a great, great experience for me. Thank you.

Frida: Thank you so much for being here Mandhla!

Abilaschan: And that being said, I think we're coming to the end of this episode of Transcultural Express. Stay tuned!

(All laugh)

Transcultural express trans culture expresses produced by leader Nyandarua Moe and Abolition balamurali music by Nina Lachin.