

**EXPERIENCE—JARMIL MAUPIN, LOS ANGELES
BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS IN SOUTH AFRICA
BY JARMIL MAUPIN
AS TOLD TO JAMIE LIPTAN, STAFF WRITER**

Jarmil Maupin finds a way to contribute to the development of the new South Africa.

In his 1990 poem to Nelson Mandela titled “Banner of Humanism, Path of Justice,” SGI President Daisaku Ikeda writes:

*The surging tide of liberty and human rights
has begun to flow majestically
from the land of South Africa
toward the entire world
and toward the new century.
(November 1990 Seikyo Times, p. 20)*

This March, I had the great fortune to be part of an American delegation invited to the 2nd Annual South African Renaissance Festival in Durban, South Africa. This experience has helped me gain a deeper understanding of my unique mission for world peace and greater resolve to work toward it.

Twenty-six years ago, when I was 11, my family began practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism in the SGI. My father, Bennie Maupin, a successful jazz musician worldwide, had been introduced to Buddhism in his travels. I joined the Young Men’s Division Brass Band and immediately found a new home, a place that inspired hope and vitality for the future. I can still hear the voices of my Brass Band leaders saying: “You can do anything you set your mind to, no matter what. Just stay focused and chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and all your prayers will be answered.”

Although I was a classically trained musician, I chose not to play professionally, as I could not see myself following in my father’s large footsteps. I needed to find my own gift, and I discovered that it was the gift of hearing—the ability to interpret and blend sounds. This came naturally to me.

Growing up and tagging along with my father to the studio and live performances, I was exposed to the more technical side of the arts. After high school, I attended Devry Institute of Technology, receiving a degree in electronics. That led me to a 15-year career in the aerospace industry.

After about 10 years of hard work to establish myself, I began to feel like my talents were being wasted behind a desk. At the same time, in my SGI activities and through my own projects, I was able to live out my creative life in supporting various events through sound production. I decided to leave the “comfort zone” of my career and completely dedicate myself to sound production.

For the past 11 years, I’ve operated my own sound production company. I’ve been able to contribute to many SGI activities through my experience in sound production, including designing several sound systems and training others to use them. I am in my fourth year as the technical director for Jazz at Drew for Drew Medical Center, a medical school in the Los Angeles area. Roland Betts, the executive producer, was immediately impressed

by my work ethic and ability to deal effectively with people, and we developed a strong working relationship. Roland became a sort of mentor, providing me the opportunity to work at a higher level and giving me the confidence to succeed. I've also been working for six years in the post-production arena of television and motion picture as a sound designer/sound effects editor for a major post-production facility.

This past January, in my role as technical director for Jazz at Drew, I was asked to travel to Atlanta to support a concert in tribute to the late singer/songwriter Curtis Mayfield and in celebration of the 71st anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth. It was also in conjunction with the first annual African American Renaissance Festival. Roland told me that due to the short notice—six days—and magnitude of this concert, he didn't feel it would come together without my help. He stated that if I were there, he felt everything would come together.

I felt so honored that my mentor saw such great potential in my life and allowed me to exercise it.

Once we arrived in Atlanta, it became apparent to me for the first time that Roland had strong ties to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the organization founded by Dr. King during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. In fact, Roland had been an integral part of Dr. King's organization, serving as a sort of advanced crew for Dr. King's travels around the country.

The scope of this event amazed me. The Impressions—the rhythm and blues group to which Mayfield belonged—performed, and Mayfield's daughter performed a dance in tribute to him. There was also a delegation from South Africa that included former President Nelson Mandela and Sbu Ndebele, Minister of Transportation.

The concert was a complete success. Afterward, Minister Ndebele invited us, along with the Impressions, to South Africa to participate in the 2nd Annual South African Renaissance Festival in Durban, South Africa. We immediately accepted.

The South African Renaissance Festival celebrates the rebirth of South Africa in the aftermath of apartheid. I was reminded of SGI President Ikeda's declaration that the 21st century would be the century of Africa, and specifically that South Africa, following the great example of Mandela, would be a shining example for the rest of the world. In light of this, I felt so honored to be a part of this delegation.

I asked my brother, Derrick Ollison, to go with me, in part for his assistance in my duties as technical director for the festival, but also to repay a debt of gratitude. Eleven years ago, it was Derrick who provided the financial backing for me to start my company and has since served as its executive producer. Without his support, I would not have had this tremendous opportunity.

The 24-member delegation included some of the most prominent civil rights leaders in America, most notably Andrew Young, former mayor of Atlanta and U.S. Ambassador to South Africa, and the Reverend James Orange, former trusted lieutenant of Dr. King.

Before I left, I sincerely prayed to the Gohonzon to realize what my true mission was in going to South Africa. I wanted to take full advantage of this incredible opportunity to participate in another culture. As soon as we arrived in South Africa, I had the overwhelming sensation of finally coming home after a long journey. At the time, I couldn't explain this feeling, but it was certainly real.

We were greeted at the airport by Minister Ndebele, along with a troop of traditional Zulu dancers and South African media. We were then taken to a beautiful dinner reception at Minister Ndebele's home.

The next day was scheduled as a rest day. Well, I got no rest. Our main contact in Durban and producer of the festival, Rakesh Maharaj, took Derrick and me to a beautiful playhouse where we were scheduled to watch a performance the following evening as part of the delegation. While we were looking around at the facility, Rakesh got a phone call from his mixer (the person responsible for running the sound system during the show), who informed him that he had contracted malaria, had to go to the hospital and would be unable to do the show. Later that day, Rakesh sheepishly asked me if I would be willing to mix the show. Without hesitating, I said, "Sure. I just want to get in at least one run-through."

The next morning, Rakesh called me at 7:00 from the hotel lobby and asked if I was ready to go to rehearsal. Until late that evening, we worked with 30 groups of performers with no sense of organization. Fortunately, my brother and I had brought along a set of motorola radios that became an invaluable tool in keeping everyone moving.

In South Africa, even after the fall of apartheid in 1995, there are still three basic classifications of people: South African whites, descended from Dutch and British settlers; Africans, those with the dark skin tone indigenous to southern Africa; and coloreds, or anyone with a skin tone reflecting an Indian heritage or mixed ethnicity. By this definition, I would be considered an African.

Most of the arts facilities, including this playhouse, continue to be run by whites while the labor continues to be done by the coloreds and Africans. It struck me that in America, we really take our opportunities for granted. Here in South Africa, a country whose government now guaranteed the freedom of all people, those in the minority still held most positions of influence.

An experience that really capsulized this inequity involved one of the engineers at the playhouse who was white. I had asked him several basic questions about the audio system, which he could have easily answered but chose to ignore before leaving, seemingly unable to tolerate the thought of an "African" in a position like technical director. This left my brother and me to test each segment of the system independently, just to be able to get it functioning properly.

I got a strong sense from the non-whites that they were impressed that an "African" person had the knowledge to accomplish what in their country was always done by whites. In fact, there is only one sound production company in all of South Africa, which is run by those in the minority.

Needless to say, the show was great. Everything looked and sounded fabulous. Rakesh expressed his appreciation, saying, "We could have never done this without you." Afterwards, of course, I was drained.

The next day, we had our first meeting with the staff of the International Convention Center of Durban, which was the facility for the show we had come to support. Again, our main contact, with whom I had corresponded by email, showed surprise at the color of my skin. Noticing his surprise, I asked, "You didn't think I was a black man?"

"No," he said, "I thought by your name that you were French."

I asked him if my being black would change anything. He replied that it wouldn't, but "we've never had an African— excuse me, Afro-American—running a show of this magnitude in South Africa." "That's interesting. Well then, this will be the first," I said.

He proceeded to test my knowledge and ability. For example, I asked if we could hang the speaker system from a cross beam obviously built for just that purpose. He mentioned that they didn't have any winches and he wasn't sure of the cross beam's weight capacity.

After pointing out the two winches sitting on the stage and calculating the weight capacity to be three times what we needed, we were finally able to hang the speakers.

Just as before, seeing this type of interaction seemed to give the Africans a sense of empowerment, delighted that a person of color could take such bold action. While working together so intensely, our sound crew, comprising whites, coloreds and Africans, became a completely cohesive unit. We were able to totally erase the barrier of race, transcending our differences to accomplish our common goal. This event also went beautifully, entertaining and inspiring 850 dignitaries from around the world.

At each of the following events, the local citizens were taken aback at the sight of an “African” in a highly skilled position. They continually told me how they could use equipment and knowledge like this and seemed so thirsty for this type of training.

This whole experience has shown me that I’m being called upon to reveal peace through sound. I want to go back to South Africa with something to help. It shocked me that the Minister of Transportation or members of the Parliament might make the effort to travel and speak to the citizens but not be heard due to an inadequate sound system or none at all. As President Ikeda says, in any great movement for peace, those behind the scenes must be of the highest caliber.

Even if they had one sound system, they could see dramatic change. If I could train just a few of the Africans that I worked with, they could start something great. In July, I am determined to return to South Africa with a portable sound system and train a few people to use it.

My Buddhist practice has helped me to recognize the importance of breaking down barriers between people and providing opportunities for people to challenge themselves and grow. I am determined to contribute whatever I can to the development of the new South Africa, empowering common people to build a beautiful nation for peace.