

U.S. REVIEW ON THE WORK OF ERNESTINE DEANE-an excerpt from New Orleans arts magazine, 'Breath of Life' 2008

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**4. South. South Africa. Ernestine Deane**—they call her Ernie. If you are African-American (of the USA variety), as soon as you hear her, you know. No explanation necessary. Ernie's sound is an instant connect.

And like Manou, Souad and Saba, Ernestine Deane's music runs far, far deeper than the surface seems to promise. Apartheid had classified Ernie as colored. She rejects that particular politicization of skin color and simply refers to herself as "brown."

In their own way, each of these four women are seriously investigating identity issues. In the interest of healing, they don't merely finger the wound. They musically scrub off dirt-encrusted scabs, lance boils, release pus and other toxins, apply medicinal potions, and resultantly cleanse and expose their private and personal wounds to the antiseptic of public sunlight.

Because she sings in English, the political content of Ernie's music is much more evident to many of us in the diaspora; and because Ernie's stylistic preferences include jazz, gospel, reggae, hip-hop and R&B, her music is not only accessible but extremely attractive, except that her lyrics are consciously confrontational, almost severe in the oppositional stances she stakes out.

Although none of the four women make lush or highly ornamented music, Ernie's backing is

almost stark in comparison. Her voice is pushed way forward and, with the exception of sensitive sax or flute obbligatoes (particularly on "**Brown**" and "**Think Again**"), the backing instrumentation is spare. While the musical accompaniment is minimal, the backing vocal tracks are almost as strong as the music. Ernie layers and overdubs her voice, weaving a vocal tapestry that is both subtle and omnipresent. But why try to describe the beauty of her sounds when the sounds speak so eloquently for themselves.

Ernie's debut solo album, **Dub For Mama**, attains the level of serious Black music, a level both futuristic and ancestral. This is music not only appropriate for all ages, this is music for all the ages/eras that our people have seen, now see, and will see. Seen?

I am particularly impressed by the feature track "**Prayer For Cape Town**" (which is a variation on "Amazing Grace") and by the Yemanya-channeling of "Watersong."

But beyond the music itself, I relate to Ernie's process of music making. **Dub For Mama** is not only a conscious statement about identity and ecology, it is also an assertion of political and economic self-determination.



Born in 1974, Ernie grew up on the Cape Flats in Grassy Park, Cape Town, South Africa. (Cape Town is located on the lower tip of Africa where the Indian Ocean meets the Atlantic Ocean.) Her professional life as a singer started when she was fifteen working with the hip-hop crew Black Noise. A few years later she made her mark in South Africa as the lead vocalist for Moodphase5ive with whom she released two albums: Steady On and In Superdeluxe Mode. In April 2001, "Uneek," a Moodphase5ive single, held down the number one spot on the radio charts for three consecutive weeks.

Her benchmark year of development was 2002 during which she undertook an exploratory documentary about her family history and became pregnant for the first time. Her pregnancy became part of the documentary's focus. The documentary is simply called *Brown*.

*Brown* was co-produced by the South African media group Other-Wise and directed by Kali van der Merwe. "Other-Wise media is an association for non-profit established in 1996. Our aim is to produce awareness-raising, engaging and entertaining media on topics that are misrepresented or absent in mainstream media, creating a voice for those who are least heard." A synopsis on the [Other-Wise website](#) states:



As she embraces motherhood, Capetonian singer/songwriter Ernestine Deane embarks on an enquiry into her heritage. In the 1960s under the infamous Group Areas Act, her Grandparents were evicted from their functioning farm in Constantia, and relocated to the urban suburb of Grassy Park. Integrally wedded to the land, her grandfather continues to yearn for the tract that remains fallow and unused in one of the most exclusive suburbs of Cape Town. Their return visit unleashes the suppressed emotion resulting from years of marginalisation and loss. This touching and deeply personal journey investigates the past with the intention of

celebrating a new community, new nation, and new family. By exploring her past and her present, it carries Ernestine from emotional remembrance to musical realisation and celebration, culminating in the song, Brown.

Three important threads in the documentary are: her family history, her personal/social identity and her pregnancy. As noted on [her company's MySpace page](#), Ernestine "hosts community workshops using the film 'Brown' as a tool to encourage men, women and youth to find their creative expression and explore their heritage."

In 2003 she had a feature role in the South African film *Boy Called Twist*, which was a South African take on Dickens' classic *Oliver Twist*. In addition to acting Deane also sang and contributed original music for the film score.



A recent development is the theatrical collaboration *Womantide*. Working with singer/songwriter Tina Schouw and performance poet Malika Ndlovu, the three women weave music and poetry to produce a production that focuses on the feminine "in honour of the human spirit."

Under the banner "healing through creativity" Ernestine's main work is Konshus Pilot which is also the label for **Dub For Mama**. The website description is:

Though it was founded in 2005, the business has been formally operating since January 2007. The business is a multimedia company trading in intellectual property. Konshus Pilot promotes the age-old African practice of story telling through the medium of music and film, acting as a record label and film production company. The company only deals with conscious local

content i.e. music and films that promote belief systems, heritage and identity. Konshus Pilot makes these formats available to disadvantaged communities, (particularly women and youth), via workshops, open day functions and motivational speaking. Konshus Pilot publishes music and distributes music and film content to the mainstream distribution and promotion networks i.e. retail stores, radio, television and the internet. The company also licenses music for film scores, soundtracks and advertising.

The main objective of Konshus Pilot is to bring the music and film products directly to the disadvantaged communities who can best benefit from their uplifting content.

Konshus Pilot is a Cape Town based multimedia company that promotes modern-day storytelling with conscious content, through the media of music and film, making it accessible to communities via the 'Brown' workshops, beyond the mainstream distribution network of broadcasters and retail stores. Konshus Pilot deals only in original content that promotes pride in heritage and identity as well as 'healing through creativity'. The company is aware of the huge impact of music and film on South African youth, particularly those in disadvantaged communities. Konshus Pilot is committed to producing content that instills in the youth a pride in their South African identity, encouraging these communities to embrace and tell their own stories rather than looking abroad for role models who offer no real upliftment beyond the façade of glamour they portray.

Konshus Pilot is owned and managed by the creative husband and wife team, Brian de Goede and Ernestine Deane

A lot of artists claim individual ownership but too often it is solely for the purpose of individual aggrandizement and has nothing to do with community development. Obviously I think this effort is key to not only our development as human beings but also to the development of the music. When our art is viewed strictly as entertainment and/or commerce, the quality of the art is diminished and the value to the community is lost.



Ernestine Deane's vision of collective and community-based development is extremely difficult to sustain in the era of global capitalism, and it is particularly difficult in the new South Africa that has yet to resolve a number of old problems; color conflicts and access to resources based on social class and racial caste increasingly looms as a central contradiction manifesting itself in a myriad of manners including high rates of crime and AIDS, persistent poverty and violent xenophobia.

Stand firm sister Deane. Keep pushing that subtly nuanced and simultaneously politically conscious music you are making, that community you are healing and constructing. Your work is hugely appreciated. On the one level your efforts are personal, based on your own decisions within your particular circumstances, but on another level your work is emblematic, exemplary

of the work that all conscious elements must do. We must seek, identify, collect and nurture ourselves if we are to have any future worth living.

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While it may seem that I have loaded a lot of sociological baggage on this musical train circling the perimeter of mother Africa, the essential two-part inner truth is that 1. As bitter as they may be, issues of identity and inequality are major issues of the day and 2. The best of our music has always, always dealt with these issues, precisely because the best of our music is the best of our selves and we are at our best when we are being (or struggling to be) our true selves.

**—Kalamu ya Salaam**

### **Vastness of Africa**

OK, that was an epic overview. Where do I even begin? I guess at the beginning.

So first off, I'm fairly certain I saw Manou perform with Zap Mama. I think it says a lot about her as an artist that even though she played as part of Marie Dualne's band for that long, she has still come up with her own sound. Every once in a while I hear a little of the Zap Mama vibe in the way the vocals are layered, but overall, Manou's doing her own thing. I really, really like what I hear. I'm into rhythms, first and foremost, and Manou's music has a lot going on rhythmically. Even in the quiet segments of songs like "**Pôlyne**," there are still polyrhythms working. I particularly like the way the background vocalists sometimes sing melodies and sometimes do a rhythm thing with their voices. This is very good music. Forward-sounding and authentically modern while still sounding in touch with tradition. I dig it a lot.

I like Manou's music more, but if we're going on voices alone, I'll take Souad. What a voice! I posted a track from her before and it was all based on that lilting sound she has. It's an angel-sweet overtone with a bitter undertone that serves to keep her from ever sounding too sugary. Unlike Kalamu (and Souad herself, apparently) I prefer her studio work to these live

tracks, but I am happy to hear that she's just as strong a singer live as she is on record. I want to say too, that I know what Kalamu means about the Arabic thing. I usually don't like hearing people sing in either Arabic or German - both languages sound very guttural to me, meaning, not at all melodic. But when someone sings well enough, it really doesn't matter. Souad's Arabic is beautiful. I actually like it more than when she sings in French.

A lot of mixed (no pun) feelings about Saba, huh? I don't have any mixed feelings about her lifestyle or racial heritage or sound or anything. Honestly, I don't have a clue as to how authentic or inauthentic her Somali is. How would I know? Strangely enough, one of her songs, "**Furah**," is my favorite out of all of the songs Kalamu posted (by all four of the artists, I mean). The other three aren't really doing it for me. Why? I dunno. The other ones have a sort of repetitive sound, rhythmically. They sound a little too "easy," I guess. "**Furah**" is a great record though. I've listened to that one about about ten times in the last two days.

Before I say anything about Ernestine Deane, I want to comment about the breadth of these sounds. I've mentioned before that we have a tendency to think of Africa as though it's a single, quantifiable "thing." Of course, it's anything but. It's a vast, vast continent; in some ways, it's silly to even talk about "African music." I mean, really - listen to these four singers. All four are young, progressive, attractive female singer-songwriters of African ancestry. Sounds like a lot of similarities, right? Except that their music sounds nothing alike. Even if you have no interest in African music, I think you can easily hear the difference in these styles of singing and playing. So that's that - the vastness of Africa and African music.

So, Ernestine. I have to give Ernestine the nod as the most polished and balanced performer. She clearly knows what she's doing, what she wants to express, how she wants to sound, how she wants to be heard. That's not a qualitative statement. I mean, I'm not saying she's "better" than the other three singers; I'm saying she sounds further along on her chosen musical road. I know why Kalamu picked "**Prayer For Cape Town**" as the feature. It has that emotional depth and is also easy on the ears. I like it. I like "Brown" too - good groove. And "Water." It's a little ponderous, but I think I could eventually get past that and really like it. She's a talent.

The last thing I want to say before we wrap up what must surely be the longest single post in the history of blogging itself is about Ernestine's vibe. She sounds like she lives close to the

sea. Before I knew who she was (or even knew her name or where she was from), I asked Kalamu whether or not she was from an island country. He told me no, but she was from a town that was right on the water, near the intersection of two oceans. I wasn't surprised. There's this melancholic, slightly morbid (I can't think of a better word) vibe to her sound. She sounds like New Zealand singers and Icelandic singers and some Jamaican singers. Like they're floating down into the depths and don't really care whether or not they drown. I'm not saying they sound similar to one another and I'm not even sure I'm making sense, but there's a certain sadness that ocean people seem to have. I don't know what that's about.

**—Mtume ya Salaam**