



Joseph Shabalala leads his singers

World music

Ladysmith
Black Mambazo
Barbican

★★★★☆

At the start of a long tour of Britain, Ladysmith Black Mambazo brought the music of their childhood to life in a joyful show that was remarkable as much for its simplicity and lightness of touch as for its musical excellence. It has been 25 years since the South African singers rose to prominence thanks to their role in Paul Simon's *Graceland*. But the a cappella harmony group, led by Joseph Shabalala, has been going twice as long as that and has delved even farther back into their cultural heritage for inspiration on their latest album, *Songs from a Zulu Farm*, a collection of traditional folk songs and stories that they heard while growing up on the farms of their native KwaZulu-Natal.

Bounding on to the stage, the nine singers, who included four of Shabalala's sons, set off with *Yangiluma Inkukhu* (The Biting Chicken), a song about a hostile fowl that prompted much pumping of arms and occasional clucking noises among the call and response vocal patterns. While Shabalala's voice soared and jabbered over the top of the arrangements, the other eight voices with their warm, bass-heavy harmonies blended together seamlessly as if they were the product of one instrument, as perfectly in tune and in time as a vocal ensemble could hope to be. In particular, the men maintained tremendous control of their breathing while simultaneously performing the vigorous sequences of dance steps that have become their visual signature.

These carefully choreographed, albeit loosely executed moves, involving a lot of high kicks and low prowling gestures, were a sort of distant, older cousin of more modern breakdance routines. It all looked deceptively straightforward and a little casual, until you compared them with the efforts of a couple of brave souls from the audience who were invited on stage, briefly, to join in.

A lovely rendition of *Homeless* from the *Graceland* album was greeted with a cheer of recognition and struck a more sombre note towards the end of a show that certainly raised the spirits with its homespun charm. With their mission statement of "Peace, Love and Harmony" spelt out on a backdrop behind them, the vocal troupe encored with a Zulu version of *Old MacDonald had a Farm*, complete with all the traditional farm animal noises, a moment that should have been a bit hokey but was rescued by the warmth and dignity of the performers.

David Sinclair

Tour details: mambazo.com