

African Breyani: A Musical Conversation Between South Africa and Ghana

By Dr. Natalie Rungan

There are some moments in life that only make sense years later...

I first met Ghanaian pianist and composer Victor Dey Jr in 2018 at the National Youth Jazz Festival in Makhanda (then Grahamstown). He was performing with Marcus Wyatt, and I remember that concert with such clarity. It was the first time that a song had gripped me in the way his music did. I described it as haunting, but that word has never been enough. What I experienced felt deeper than admiration. It was as though something in the music was calling to something in me, and that feeling stayed with me for days, and as it turned out, for years after that festival ended.

I tried to contact Victor afterwards in the hope that we might collaborate, but nothing came of it. Years passed.

In 2024, Victor returned to South Africa with the GH Jazz Collective to perform at the National Youth Jazz Festival. I was conducting the National Schools Jazz Band that year, and our schedules left very little time for conversation. But in a brief moment between rehearsals, I mentioned the song I had heard in 2018 and said that I still hoped we might find a way to work together.

Victor returned home and this time I was more intentional. I think I was also more confident in my voice as a composer and lyricist, so I reached out again. This time the collaboration began.

The result is *African Breyani*.

For me, this album represents several firsts. It is the first time I have collaborated with an African artist outside South Africa, and the first time I have produced an international album of this scale. The album was recorded in South Africa and Ghana, but its significance goes far beyond that. It has become a reminder of what is possible when African musicians choose one another.

Many people have asked me where the title came from.

I actually wrote the song *African Breyani* in 2023 and asked my colleague Prince Bulo to produce it. I had been watching an Indian movie and found myself reflecting on the tension I sometimes feel between my ethnicity and my home. My heritage identifies me to the world as Indian, but Africa is my home. As I thought about that, I began thinking about breyani.

Breyani is made from many different spices. Individually, some of those spices are bitter or “blah”, especially biting into elachi. But together they create something so rich, beautiful, and mouth-wateringly delicious. It is a dish known to most South Africans, regardless of their background.

The more I reflected on this album, the more I realised that it had been created in exactly the same way. Different musicians, different countries, different musical traditions, different histories, different personalities. Individually distinct, but together forming something none of us could have created alone.

That is *African Breyani*.

When I was growing up, I was rarely exposed to music from the rest of Africa. I believed, as many of us were taught, that if one wanted to become a great musician, the benchmark was Europe or the United States. I was never encouraged to look within our own continent for the extraordinary musical treasures that existed all around us.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes powerfully about the decolonisation of the mind, arguing that colonialism shaped not only political and economic realities, but also the way we see ourselves and value our own cultures. As I have reflected on this album, I have increasingly come to realise that one of the lasting effects of colonialism was the way it shaped our understanding of ourselves and our cultures. It affected the way many of us value our musical heritage. We were taught to look outward for excellence, often overlooking the richness that was already present across Africa.

If I am completely honest, my collaboration with Victor did not begin because he was Ghanaian. It began because I recognised something in his music through our shared language of jazz. But through working with Victor, Gaddiel Amoah, Frank Kissi, and Bernard Ayisa, I encountered a country that felt strangely familiar. I found musical languages that resonated with South African traditions. I found rhythms and melodies that felt less like foreign influences and more like relatives I had not yet met.

More importantly, I found friends who now feel like family.

Victor and I did not have to force the relationship or manufacture a creative connection. The music seemed to find us. Ideas flowed naturally, conversations felt easy, and the writing never felt contrived. It was not that we did not work hard. We did, but the foundation of the collaboration was already there.

African Breyani was never simply about bringing South Africa and Ghana together musically. It grew out of a genuine friendship and a deep sense of trust and respect that developed almost effortlessly. I often felt as though we were discovering the music rather than trying to create it. That, for me, is what makes this collaboration so meaningful. It reminds me that the most powerful musical partnerships are not only built on talent or technique, but on connection, openness, and a willingness to listen to something beyond ourselves.

In many ways, this album has been a journey home.

Not home in the narrow sense of nationality or ethnicity, but home in the broader sense of discovering that Africa has always contained conversations we were never taught to hear. Through this project I discovered that the distance between Durban and Accra is not nearly as great as I once imagined. The musical threads connecting us are ancient, resilient, and deeply human.

The timing of this album has also made me reflect deeply on the moment we are living in. Recent events in South Africa have exposed painful tensions. We are watching suspicion, fear, and division threaten relationships that should never have been broken in the first place. It is easy to speak about unity in abstract terms. It is much harder to build it. Collaboration is one of the ways we build it.

When musicians write together, travel together, argue over arrangements, laugh together, eat together, and create together, we begin to dismantle the stereotypes that distance us from one another. We stop seeing “foreigners” and start seeing fellow artists, fellow Africans, fellow human beings. That is why I believe projects like *African Breyani* matter. They remind us that Africa is not simply a collection of countries separated by borders. It is a network of stories, rhythms, languages, memories, and people whose histories have always been intertwined.

My hope is that *African Breyani* becomes more than an album. I hope it becomes an invitation. An invitation for audiences to hear the beauty of our interconnected histories. An invitation to reclaim the pride, curiosity, and creative possibility that come from recognising ourselves in one another. Like breyani, we are many ingredients. And together, we are something beautiful.