

Neil Gonsalves Bio

“From the proud traditional and popular forms of Zulu music, the Christian hymns from our colonial past, Indian classical music, South African, European and American jazz and all the sounds around me, I strive to synthesize these elements into a harmonious whole.”
- Neil Gonsalves

Neil Gonsalves is a South African Jazz/World Beat pianist, composer, band leader & educator. His music takes its influence from the rich diversity of cultural life that characterizes his homeland, the beautiful seaside city of Durban, in the province of KwaZulu-Natal on the east coast of Africa. His formal jazz training under Prof Darius Brubeck at the University of Natal, gave him the opportunity to be mentored by fellow students, Feya Faku and Lex Futshane among others and created opportunities for apprenticeship with local jazz stalwarts Sandile Shange, Gerald Sloan and George Mari. There was also opportunity for intercultural music making with groups like Indo-Fusion outfit, Mosaic, with whom Neil performed at the National Arts festival in Grahamstown for the 1st time. He has participated at the National Arts Festival many times subsequently, primarily as a performer and teacher at the National Youth Jazz festival.

Neil has long been the first-call piano player in Durban for visiting jazz musicians such as the late, great Winston Mankunku Ngozi and Robbie Jansen. He is still called upon as a sideman, most recently by McCoy Mrubata, Khaya Mahlangu, Salim Washington and Ernest Dawkins, with whom he performed at the Chicago Jazz festival in 2014 in Dawkins's Mandela tribute.

Neil's recording debut as a band leader came in the year 2000 with his band, Tonk. The music on the album features mainly compositions from his Masters recital in the year before. By this time, Neil had become a full-time lecturer in the music program at Technikon Natal, which had become a real hotspot for a music education that embraced local popular music, as well as jazz. Bheki Mseleku, Busi Mhlongo, the Cameroonian drummer, Brice Wassy were part of this scene as well and Neil had the benefit of further apprenticeship in their bands. So it is that African music, especially Zulu and Xhosa music is central to Neil's concept of music making.

It is ironic then that his debut album as a solo artist in 2006 titled North Facing is recorded with young Swedish jazz musicians in Gothenburg. Even so, North Facing delivered “a distinct home-town township feel, extrapolations from local dance tunes and shebeen specials given an edge by the introduction of sophisticated Euro techniques and Gonsalves' sense of humour.” (Gisele Turner). A feeling true to his artistry as expressed by Blue Note's first South African jazz artist, Nduduzo Makhathini and colleague Jonathon Eato; “Gonsalves brings a beautiful continuation to a lot of jazz music developed in South Africa.” In many, ways invoking “the spirit of home and its histories, whilst also allowing the listener space to think about what tomorrow might look like.”

Currently, Neil is lecturer in jazz studies at the University of KwaZulu Natal and also serves as the director for the Centre for Jazz and Popular Music (CJPM) at the UKZN. He oversees the concert programming and seeks out extra-curricular activities and opportunities for the Jazz and Popular music students at UKZN. A highlight of this activity was a 3-year exchange program with the Jazz department at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA in the US. This program included numerous joint performances and various other jazz and jazz education activities at UKZN and VCU, culminating in a CD release titled Leap of Faith in 2013.

Neil's interest in other music and dance forms continues in his collaboration with colleague and flamenco maestro, Demi Fernandez. The duo project also spawned a CD release, Latinfluence(2013) as well as tours to Mozambique and the Eastern Cape to promote the recording. Since then, Neil has become a regular feature with the Linda Vargas Dance Company, where he has featured as pianist, and excitingly as composer as well in their annual shows. A highlight of this activity was the 35th anniversary concert of the company, recorded live at the Elizabeth Sneddon theatre in 2018. He is also a long-time associate of Durban-based Jazz/R&B/gospel singer/songwriter, Natalie Rungan and appears on her 2020 release, “Caught in the Middle”. The lead up to the recording involved a series of socially -distanced online concerts recorded as part of the concert series of The Playhouse theatre, the National Arts Festival, and the Seabrooke theatre.

Neil continues to compose prolifically as evidenced in the debut performance of Rites, Rights and Riots(2016), excerpts from 2 open-ended song cycles F(r)ee Fall and Scenes from a Wedding, inspired by student uprisings and travels for a series of family weddings, respectively. This set against the backdrop of Trump's wall, BREXIT, gun violence in the United States, #Blacklivesmatter, and Elon Musk's self-driving cars and mission to realise human life on Mars. Neil's forthcoming trio release, Blessings and Blues features newer compositions inspired by the milestone of turning 50 and the accompanying reflections and dreams.

The Piano Passion Project is also the brainchild of Neil Gonsalves. It is a multi-generational, legacy project involving pianists, composers and educators whose musical lineage ties to Prof. Darius Brubeck, who started the first jazz program on the African continent at the University of Natal in 1983. The project has yielded a number of concerts, and two live recordings, Piano Passion(2018), recorded at Howard College theatre, Piano Passion Vol.II(2020), recorded at the Centre for Jazz and Popular in 2017. Neil features as one of the 1st-generation pianists in the Howard College recording, and the pianists in the CJPM recording are all his former students.

Neil has remained creative during the global pandemic and uploads new music regularly to his YouTube channel. He also recorded Concert for One, a freely-improvised solo piano record released in April 2020.

“Social distance is a genuine opportunity to recenter, refocus, rejuvenate, repent, remember and to return to ourselves. This album of improvised music is of the journey within, the yearning to reconnect. Please give it a spin (an old analog term) and let's reunite in music.”
- Neil Gonsalves

He has been busy with the machinations of releasing a new record, and Blessings and Blues is due for release in March, 2021.