

Why talent is not enough

Reputation guru Thebe Ikalafeng explains why musicians should take branding and entrepreneurship seriously

Musicians are renowned for being passionate about their craft, often at the expense of everything else. In days past, their talent alone was enough

The market and the media were limited, giving an artist the time and space to focus solely on their passion



But even then, the likes of Miriam Makeba and Brenda Fassie knew – whether by nature or nurture – that to succeed they had to be distinctive, in content and/or style. They stood out and have remained relevant and profitable – some even posthumously, as in the case of Elvis Presley, Tupac Shakur and Michael Jackson. Jackson, according to Forbes, is the highest-earning (deceased) musician – earning \$145 million in 2012. Elvis Presley, who died in 1977, earned \$55 million last year, more than teen sensation Justin Bieber and many other living artists.

Many of these musicians have leveraged their talent and appeal to diversify their income streams. It's not uncommon for artists to endorse or partner with brands for mutual benefit, such as Pharrell and Kanye West's collaborations with Louis Vuitton. These artists are not just creative geniuses, but entrepreneurs who understand their value. Global megastar Beyoncé, for example, recently signed a \$50 million deal with PepsiCo to be its official brand ambassador.

Others have leveraged their appeal to make the world a better place for all, extending their brand beyond the arts or creative industries. Yvonne Chaka Chaka, who once churned out bubblegum pop hits, and global rock star Bono have extended their reputations to become respected humanitarians. Multiple Grammy-winning singer Youssou N'Dour is now tourism and entertainment minister in Senegal. Makeba was the first African artist invited to speak out about the injustices of apartheid at the United Nations.

That's the power (and benefit) of branding. Branding is no longer the preserve of corporations, services and products. It is now

the ultimate differentiator of talent. Musicians now talk about themselves as brands.

Marian Salzman, Executive Vice-president of American advertising firm JWT, observed: "As a brand, you're instantly recognisable and respected."

The musician as a brand

A brand is simply a promise made and a promise delivered. Followers of a musician are attracted by their artistry (and packaging) and the implicit promise of delivering on that promise on each record and public engagement. Jackson's genius – his brand promise – was established by his inimitable moonwalk and the bestselling album *Thriller*, just as *Weekend Special* established the diminutive but impossibly talented Fassie. Before she became a brand ambassador for Nedbank and the like, we were introduced to Zahara through the magic of her voice on the 600 000-plus selling *Loliwe*.

In today's brand-driven, multimedia, multi-artist world, it's not easy to stand out as easily as Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Brenda Fassie, Angelique Kidjo or Salif Keita did. To a large extent, these artists benefited from being pioneers of their generation in a relatively isolated world with few media options.

In today's borderless world, where one 140-character tweet can reach 40 million people in a second, it's harder to stand out – even though it's easier to be heard or seen. Today, for every Zahara who cuts through the clutter, there are millions of others who never get a chance to record a demo. To stand out, artists have to brand themselves. They have to package their talent and



deliver it in a unique and memorable way that distinguishes them from their competition – and, more importantly, in a way that makes money.

The overarching assumption is that as a musician, you have a talent on which to build a career. It sounds obvious, but the world is littered with “shower” or “karaoke” superstars who mistakenly fashion themselves as talented. With talent in the bag, it is easier to build a brand.

This requires investment and patience, like a bird builds a nest. Enduring acts such as Bon Jovi, the Rolling Stones and Masekela have built and invested in their brands over a long time. Have a realistic goal, a strategy, a network of collaborators and advisers, and media channels – Twitter, Facebook, websites – to tell your story and reach your community.

Musicians today are businesses. As Jay-Z put it: “I’m a business, man.” Forbes magazine estimates that Beyoncé and Jay-Z earned a whopping \$78 million combined in 2012. Their peer, rapper 50 Cent, is reputed to have made \$500 million when, instead of taking a fee to endorse Glaceau Vitamin Water, he opted and ultimately sold his stake when Glaceau sold the brand to Coca-Cola for \$4.1 billion.

Artists are building their brands and visibility and making money not only (and less so) from their craft, but also through sponsorships, endorsements, investments, merchandising and appearances – in which their music doesn’t necessarily feature.

Know what you’re signing

It is important for musicians to understand the medium of doing business – contracts. Many an artist has been left a pauper or disillusioned, and has blamed their record company, while the truth is that they didn’t understand what they signed up for in the first place. Thus, one of the most important investments for any artist is to surround themselves with trusted advisers – and to understand the business of music as well as their craft.

Consequently, it is important to understand that a contract means there’s a two-way responsibility – mutual obligations. When musicians engage with other businesses or brands, they are essentially leveraging each other’s images and reputations, and have a responsibility to protect them. Hip-hop artist Rick Ross learned the hard way when sportswear company Reebok dropped him for using offensive lyrics that the company believed were inconsistent with Reebok values. Similarly, Lil Wayne was fired as a Mountain Dew spokesman amid controversy over his crude lyrics in the song *Karate Chop*.

To mitigate risks, it is important to understand not only what your brand stands for, but to align yourself with brands that reflect or

complement your brand – where your mutual brands are always in sync. It’s the same principle that guides successful music collaborations.

Finally, your brand is your reputation – your biggest asset. Reputations are built on trust. And trust is built over time. As business mogul Warren Buffett put it: “It takes 20 years to build your reputation and five minutes to destroy it.” To create enduring brand value, it must be built, enhanced, protected and remain relevant over time.

To succeed today as a musician, talent is not enough. An artist must be as passionate and aware about their brand as they are about their craft. Long after you have been prolific in writing new and relevant music, the brand will take care of you.

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What makes a great brand?

1. **Clarity:** Be clear and focused on your craft, your values and your market.
2. **Authenticity:** Be true to yourself rather than conforming to others’ expectations of you. The fastest way to fail is to try and appeal to everyone.
3. **Distinctiveness:** Stand out or step out. It’s important to be differentiated from your peers or within your genre, e.g. Brenda Fassie (township pop queen), Bob Marley (dreadlocked reggae pioneer) and Whitney Houston (the voice). As the Grateful Dead’s Jerry Garcia put it: “You don’t want to be the best in the world at what you do, but to be the only one in the world who does what you do.”
4. **Consistency:** It’s important to understand your core attraction or value and to deliver on that over time.
5. **Accessibility:** Be available and accessible to your community of followers, e.g. Lady Gaga and her 40 million “little monsters”. Communicate, connect and build a relationship.

Photos: Thebe, Yvonne Chaka Chaka, Salif Keita