

## **In Honor of Amandla's Tenth Anniversary (1998)**

We have been involved in some amazing events. It was exhilarating to share the stage with Archbishop Desmond Tutu and sing to 2,000 people as we rallied against apartheid. It was thrilling when Pete Seeger introduced us to several thousand people at Lincoln Center. And it *was* a peak experience to sing for tens of thousands at the rally in Boston to welcome Nelson Mandela to the U.S....and to sing “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” to and with Mandela backstage. These events blaze across my memory like comets!

But the events that have helped me sink roots into this life have often been in out-of-the-way places with anonymous people.

\* \* \* \* \*

In 1990, Amandla went on a three-day tour through northern New York and Vermont with a black South African singing group called “Barwa” (which means “the people of the bush” or the “indigenous ones”). One April Saturday morning, we found ourselves standing on a crude stage in a cavernous gymnasium in a maximum-security prison in a tiny village called Dannemora, NY. The village consists entirely of the prison, with thirty-foot walls, surrounded by houses in which live the guards and their families. As the prisoners filed into the gym, one of our black South African friends standing on the stage drew in his breath sharply. He had been imprisoned for political work in his own country, where ALL the people in his prison had been black, and now he was seeing a painfully familiar sight: a group of men in prison uniforms—nearly all of them with dark skin.

We had been warned by prison authorities not to leave the stage for any reason during the performance, but during our second or third song, our South African friend couldn't take it anymore. With tears streaming down his face, he stepped off the stage and walked down the aisle between the seated prisoners and did not stop until he reached the back wall, where he rested his forehead, his body wracked by sobs. All eyes were on him, including those of the guards who stood surrounding the prisoners. The guards simultaneously lifted their rifles to an intermediary position. But then something extraordinary happened. The prisoners—these “hardened men”—began calling to the sobbing man in soft voices. A few, then more ... calling in soft voices:” C'mon back, Brotha... it's OK, Bro. C'mon back ...” Nearly 200 men, murmuring in tones so soothing, it could've been a lullaby. “It's alright, Good Brotha... C'mon back, now.” The guards remained rigidly poised; the prisoners continued calling to their South African brother until their humming message of love reached him, and he turned around and took in the sight and sound of this group of human beings calling out to him with everything they had. The top of his shirt front was soaked with tears. With a deep sigh, he took one step and began a long, slow walk back to the stage. A grin spread over his damp face as the prisoners clapped rhythmically to accompany each step he took. When his foot reached the top step of the stage stairs, the guards put their rifles back down to waist-height, and as our South African friend gazed out over the prisoners, my heart broke open into a sweet kind of freedom.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few years later, we sang in a stifling auditorium in 100-plus degree temperatures during a July concert. One of our singers was very pregnant and looked like she might faint. I thought I might faint myself!! All I could think was: “Please let me survive this gig so I can just go home and take a cool shower!” I was preoccupied by sweat trickling down my back. But I forgot the heat when a woman approached me after our last song and, taking me aside, told me a shocking story of childhood abuse (her own), and then told me that when we’d sung “Circle Round for Freedom,” she’d felt tears welling up in her soul and down her cheeks ... and had experienced a moment of such unity and grace that she truly believed she *would* be able to heal. In the face of that, I couldn’t think of a thing to say, so I just took her hand in mine. Our song had done something big—bigger than me, bigger than any ONE of us.

\* \* \* \* \*

Christmas morning of 1996, about 15 Amandla singers gathered to sing at a local nursing home. We wanted to try to bring some comfort to people shut in and shut out on Christmas. But what happened was beyond my imaginings!

We sang a few Amandla songs and a few Christmas carols. Some residents nodded their heads; some clapped and sang along a bit. One man, though, seemed either asleep or in a coma. He was strapped to a special chair. He didn’t open his eyes, except when an attendant would occasionally prod him and then point to us. He would then immediately close his eyes again and drift back into what looked like stuporous sleep, mouth hanging open.

Toward the end of our time there, I asked Koco if he wanted to sing a Christmas song from his native Guatemala. He shook his head, grinning. But two seconds later, Koco stepped forward, unzipped a pouch on his belt, and pulled out a harmonica. He proceeded to play the jauntiest version of “Joy to the World” I’d ever heard, foot tapping, head bobbing up and down. I glanced over at the man strapped into his chair. His eyes were open—WIDE. His mouth was closed. Then I watched as a slow smile formed on his lips, and then branched out into a full-fledged GRIN. His eyes shone, and his face looked completely different in this configuration. Afterwards, a staff member said to me: “I been here six years. NEVER seen HIM smile!”