

Music Art Group Supported by the VUT's Research Directorate in the Advancement of Engaged Scholarship. "A tour to the Grahamstown National Arts Festival **2nd July 2015 to 12th July 2015**

*An interview with the Music Artists Organiser: **Sipho Nkosi** under VUT Corporate Multi Media and Student Event Organisers.*

The Vaal University Of Technology's Music Artists which started under the umbrella of the Back of the Caff Back of the caff, a radio show at Vaal University of Technology (VUT) initiated by students with the drive to interact with the students on issues that concerns them. This is done through discussing topics on topics and also edutainment, through music that is relevant and appealing to students today.

The Music Artists group was established in the year 2010, behind the Vaal University of Technology's cafeteria, where they used to perform various musical activities such as free style, poetry, songs and rap. This structure comprises mainly of Vaal University of Technology's registered students from various disciplines, such as amongst others Engineering, Public Relations, Fine Arts and others. They are drawn to each other by the common love of Music as a form of Art. These are all students who come from previously marginalised communities in various townships such as the Vaal, Soweto (Gauteng province) and provinces such as Limpopo.

The growth and evolution of the group (from a casual and informal structure) led to the formation of progressive groups such as Blaqseed, Acatears, Mol, Creative Expressions and Team Spoken Word, with specific specialty and interest in various musical genres such as Acappella, Acoustic Soul Music, Hip-pop.

They survived and marketed themselves with almost no resources through organising events, jam sessions where VUT students would be invited to support art in VUT. Entrance fee would be charged at various VUT's venues such as the Auditoriums, Lapas and Mgyuyo's Caefeteria. They would also visited other institutions such as Potchefstroom University in the North West. Upon recognition, the groups started gaining popularity. The group attracted bookings from externally and also within VUT's faculty Departments. Most recently, the group visited Rhodes University to learn how the institution is supporting arts and music, how it has Rhodes University institutionalised the support of emerging talent. They were taken through an orientation tour on how radio and their TV is run prom script to broadcasting.

The groups passion for using their talent and music, initiated a radio programme at VUT which served as a platform to engage and raise consciousness within the student society and sounding communities on pressing issues confronted by the students and the youth within surrounding local areas in the Vaal. At a scholarly level, these musical artists are using their music as a platform to mentor students through the development of career paths on fields such as events management, artist's management and coordinating. This would create readiness for the workplace for students studying in such disciplines.

Through their musical tour during the Grahamstown National Arts Festival, the musical group immersed their energies through embarking on outreach programmes such as visiting correctional services to perform for prisoners and also performed in hospitals for hospitalised patients as well as foster care houses. Their tour was organised by Fringe (which is part of the festival's organisers that provide a platform for emerging artists with the quest to motivate and promote their music).

They musical journey since the group's inception has not been immune to challenges. These involved amongst others how they would be unfairly paid on invitations to perform merely by virtue of being students and operating as an unregistered company. They would be given food and transport money. Due to a lack of resources that under the ownership of the group, they would attempt to hire equipment such as sound. Upon performance, they would be unable to raise sufficient funds to cover the expenditure incurred from hiring of equipment. Some venues would offer them speakers, but there would be no mikes. Funding for travelling and transportation has also been a challenge, thus posing as a barrier to their growth, popularity and exposure. As an example, the group manager, Siphonkosi on reflections on some of their challenges throughout the group's existence, was an experience when they all had to sleep in a car on their invitation to perform at MACUFE in 2012. MACUFE is Mangaung Cultural Festival annual hosted in Bloemfontein. In 2014, the group forced their through performing at the Grahamstown National Arts Festival without an invitation and were not even part of the festival's programme, but were however given a platform to perform. This is was one of the beginnings of Blaqseed's national recognition.

The group has operated against tides. But due to their passion and commitment to using their music not only for their own benefit, but mainly for contributing to social change through consciousness raising via messages they are conveying through their music and poetry, they are still growing stronger.

***In this article, the group would like to express their gratitude to all VUT stakeholders that supported them this year on their musical tour to the Grahamstown Music Arts Festival. With the support, they were able to subsidise the transportation, accommodation and food. To them, this is the first support of its kind since their existence.***

The support came from the Vice Chancellor's Office through Professor Moutlwana, Special Services Programme under the Directorship of Mpho Diago, Dr. Seroke's Office, the Research Directorate's Office under the executive directorship of Dr. Johnson Engaged Scholarship Programme as well as the VUT Alumni Office.

## **With such collaborative support at VUT institutional level, Blaqseed won a Standard Bank Ovation Encore Award for 2015.**

This Award has positioned Blaqseed to be part of the Cape Town Fringe, which will be taking place in October 2015.

With the potential that the Research Directorate discovered within this group, it therefore had entered into various dialogues with the Music Art Group Representatives to develop a model on how best Music as a form of Art can be used in the inculcation of a culture of Engaged Scholarship within the university. Already, the group through student to student engagement, through engaging with external communities, has not only brought to attention the need for faculty collaboration within the university on the need to institutionalise Engaged Scholarship, which is a scholarly tenet for Community Engagement but will serve as a model on how the academy, the university, can reposition the tradition of knowledge creation (which has historically been characterised by teaching and learning and research) towards using creativities such as arts to develop as well as driving innovative ways of information dissemination outside the academy.

A further engagement with the Music Arts Team, is going to take place through a series of seminars on political education in the contextualised to the dynamics of local communities as well as spaces occupied by the youth and students. This initiative is aimed at developing a cadre of engaged scholars.

The students will be able to use their talent, through music and poetry to raise consciousness within and outside the academy on challenges that are pressing to the students, the youth and communities. Their work will thus be done from an informed perspective shaped actual and relevant socio-economic issues faced by the South African society in the current political juncture. An exploration with such initiatives will strengthen and contribute towards the university's research agenda modelling how best to implement the legislative mandate that called for the institutions of higher learning's commitment to Community Engaged Scholarship. Furthermore, this also serves as means to prepare and to enable communities around how best to understand and cope with the challenges they are confronted with today.

The Research Directorate Community Engaged Scholarship is committed towards putting a hand in developing practical strategies that will be of benefit to the working class. Whilst acknowledging that as the working class benefits, the university's research agenda towards sharpening Engaged Scholarship is further advanced. This therefore embeds politics of reciprocity, partnership, mutuality in information creation and dissemination.

***Compiled by Modiehi Morakile***