

Impact Statement

Adrian Rodgers, Grade 12

Unsung Hero "Miriam Makeba", 2025

Acrylic, charcoal on paper, 19.5 x 25.5 inches

Westover Comprehensive High School, Albany, GA

Unsung Hero: Miriam Makeba

Miriam Makeba was an amazing inspirational figure whose life and music symbolized bravery and commitment. With a unique voice, she used her gifts not just for amusement but to speak out against apartheid in South Africa. Makeba was exiled for her campaigns that pushed for racial equality, yet she never ceased to fight for her people. She used international programs to reveal the atrocities of racial injustice during her time of exile. Her steadfast dedication to human rights, even in the face of personal trials, is a monument to her heroic character. It showed just how much strength she truly possessed. Additionally, Makeba surpassed limitations for Black women in the music industry, creating a path for upcoming artists. Her legacy demonstrated resilience and courage. It reminds people around the world that art can be a powerful tool for the oppressed. Miriam Makeba continues to be an inspiration to individuals that need change in dire circumstances. This is why I chose her to be my Unsung Hero.

Miriam Makeba contributed to a positive change in the course of history by developing her talents at a very young age. During her early years of life, Miriam sang in a school choir at a Methodist elementary school. As she honed her skills, she entered the professional industry with a singing bunch called the Cuban Brothers. Afterward, she joined the Manhattan Brothers, where she sang mostly vernacular verses over what was commonly known as American swing. This led to Miriam becoming a founding member of an all-women singing group, "The Skylarks." In 1952, she was cast in Alf Herbert's African Jazz and Variety production that displayed upcoming Black talent. It was usually presented to white spectators except on Thursdays when Black spectators were able to attend. This is where film producer Lionel Rogosin met Makeba and encouraged her to feature in his disputed documentary film, "Come Back, Africa". This film revealed the harsh conditions Black South Africans had to endure while living under an apartheid government. Makeba's appearance attracted a lot of attention, including an invitation to attend the film's premiere in Italy. She agreed to participate, but she never knew it would lead to her exile. While advancing the film in London, Makeba met African American singer and activist Harry Belafonte. He would play a pivotal role in her music career in the US. Together they formed a duet on their Grammy-winning album "An Evening with Belafonte & Makeba."

Miriam's artistry goes beyond her abilities as a singer and actor. Her persistence in a foreign land stood as a form of activism against the apartheid government that tried to

silence and erase her from her culture. Her life in the U.S. paralleled the lives of the Black people in South Africa. These were the same people suffering from inequality, racism, and extreme injustices. The struggle against apartheid in South Africa was the same as the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Every time she had the opportunity, Miriam used her voice to create awareness about the circumstances in South Africa. She even delivered speeches at the United Nations in 1963 and 1976. While she fought to secure equality for Black people, she didn't forget who she was. She sang in her native language and dressed in her native attire, which showed Africans that they should be proud of their identity. Miriam's legacy enabled future generations to live a life that is true to oneself without fear of anyone else.

When I was creating my artwork, I wanted to draw Miriam in her younger years because it showcased her beauty. Additionally, her youth provided the foundation for her to be recognized internationally later in life. I used a black charcoal pencil mostly for creating shadows, which gave the foundation for the drawing. I also used white charcoal, an eraser, and a blending tool to create more definition in her face, jewelry, hand, and upper body. I didn't know what I was going to do for the background until I learned that Miriam was from South Africa. So, I decided to create a mural that was inspired by South African designs. Within the mural, I painted the flag of South Africa, and I drew the continent, Africa. I did this to emphasize her culture and where she came from. At the bottom of Africa, I placed a music note to indicate her music career that started in South Africa. Lastly, I painted my favorite quote from Makeba, "I don't sing politics; I merely sing the truth." I believe this quote should inspire people to live a life of authenticity in whatever they do. By learning about who Miriam was as a person, I will do my best to follow her example. Her actions make me want to live a life full of integrity. Moreover, I want to do my best to be true to myself despite any persecution. In return, I will respect anyone from any cultural background that is different from mine. Lastly, I want to start encouraging other individuals to be true to themselves instead of being someone they're not.

References:

Staff, TIME. "Zenzile Miriam Makeba: 100 Women of the Year." *Time*, Time, 5 Mar. 2020, time.com/5793625/zenzile-miriam-makeba-100-women-of-the-year/.

Xaluva, Nomfundo. "The Legacy of Iconic Singer Miriam Makeba and Her Art of Activism." *The Conversation*, 4 Mar. 2022, theconversation.com/the-legacy-of-iconic-singer-miriam-makeba-and-her-art-of-activism-178230.