

Singing globally at the Annenberg

By Sally Friedman

For the Courier-Post

Back in 2002, a South African choir that calls itself Soweto was created. From the start, its mission statement was as simple as it is profound:

“Sharing the joy of faith through music.”

And apparently, this group of singers has kept that pledge in its travels around the world, playing to standing-room-only audiences in many places.

“American audiences always show us such appreciation and it’s one of our favorite countries to tour,” says Shimmy Jiyane, choir director and choreographer of the Soweto choir, which is bringing its Grammy-award winning choir to Philadelphia’s Annenberg Center Sunday as part of a 30-city American tour.

“Concert-goers can expect the two-hour show to be high energy, and to carry a powerful message that is proudly South African,” says Jiyane, originally a founding member of the choir.

Part of this year’s concert tour will be a moving tribute to the life and legacy of the late Nelson Mandela, president of South Africa and one of the world’s most famous political prisoners.

With roots firmly planted in South Africa, the 24-member Soweto Gospel Choir combines traditional African music with spiraling harmonies with contemporary tunes, all as part of a colorful spectacle that includes movement.

Soweto has performed with Celine Dion, Josh Groban and Peter Gabriel, U2, Robert Plant, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, and many others in its dozen years.

The rhapsodic praise keeps coming.

Choir member Sipokazi Luzipo remembers how it all began for her.

“Auditions were held at a community center in Johannesburg, and I was one of the lucky ones chosen at the formation of the choir. Being part of it has been like a dream,” Luzipo, who hopes her “amazing journey” goes on forever.

“I’ve been able to travel the world, learn about different cultures and all the while having a job I love!”

Choir Director Shimmy Jiyane recognizes traveling seven months of most years is hardly a typical way of life. But he also describes a deep family feeling that binds the choir on the stage — and on the road.

“We’ve been together for so long, and through so much travel, and so many milestones. A few new members who were 18 when we started are now married with children,” says Jiyane.

Highlights for the Soweto Gospel Choir surely have included its two Grammy Awards and its Emmy, but most meaningful of all, says its choir director, was its meeting and performance for Nelson Mandela.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has been a champion of the choir, and performing for him was another source of great pride.

The choir also will be introducing its newest album,



“Divine Decade” (Decca Records) on its American tour.

“It includes songs we have sung over the past 10 years,” explains choir member Sipokazi Luzipo, noting the album also contains collaborations that have not been released before. “Genres cover African and international gospel, jazz, pop and even rock.”

Choir director Jiyane explains, “We wanted to show people our diverse range, and the fact that we sing in all genres because we truly love all types of music.”

That love is felt by worldwide audiences, and has left critics rhapsodic.

“Peerless voices.”

“Glamorous, dignified and deeply enriching.”

The New York Times arguably used the most superlatives in a recent review:

Soweto’s sensory-arresting performances are “a cornucopia of remarkable voices: sharp, sweet, kindly, raspy and incantatory leads above a magnificently velvety blend.”

That Soweto mission statement about “sharing the joy of faith through music” would seem wholly fulfilled.



Soweto choir has one performance for Black History Month at the Annenberg Center in Philadelphia. PHOTO

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IF YOU GO

The Soweto Gospel Choir will perform at the Annenberg Center, 3680 Walnut St., Philadelphia, on Sunday. Call (215) 898-3900 or visit annenbergcenter.org for availability.



With roots firmly planted in South Africa, the 24-member Soweto Gospel Choir combines traditional African music with spiraling harmonies with contemporary tunes, all as part of a colorful spectacle that includes movement. PHOTO PROVIDED