

The Tim Smal Show – 9 August 2020 transcript

Nibs van der Spuy talks about life in Lisbon, in reference to his latest releases 'A Circle of Swallows' and 'Live in Lisbon with Guy Buttery'.

Tim Smal (host): Hi folks and welcome to the show. My name is Tim Smal, thanks for joining me today. My guest on the show today is Nibs van der Spuy. Nibs is one of the most extraordinary and exciting world acoustic guitarists to come out of South Africa. Raised in Kwazulu-Natal, growing up listening to The Beatles and learning first hand from traditional Zulu Maskandi guitarists, he quickly soaked up a rich tapestry of his close surroundings and has formulated a truly consummate and original sound. Nibs, welcome to the show.

Nibs van der Spuy (guest): Hi Tim, thanks for having me on, it's good to be here. It's, kind of, crazy that I'm sitting in 38 degrees Lisbon while you in the Cape, in Cape Town – so thanks for the invite, thanks for having me on.

Tim Smal: You welcome Nibs. And I've certainly seen you perform many times live, so I've spent some good quality time with you face-to-face. But even though we are now oceans apart, we can still connect and chat, thanks to the wonders of the modern age and the internet. So Nibs, you have a new album out today – it's a new live record called "Live in Lisbon" and you performed it with Guy Buttery. So would you like to tell us a little bit more about this album?

Nibs van der Spuy: Well, it's our first album in eight years – our first release in 8 years. I mean, we are solo artists in our own right. Guy is an extraordinary fingerstyle guitarist – world-class fingerstyle guitarist, also from Kwazulu-Natal. I actually was his guitar teacher when he was at school for three years. And then, I mean, he always had the special "mojo" in his music from an early age, so I encouraged him. He brought his first album out – solo album out when he was 18. And I had been making albums with the band Landscape Prayers and I embarked on a solo career, pretty much, at that time, in the early 2000s.

And then we did plenty of shows together – I mean, as a duo – but, kind of, promoting our own brand of music. We'd used to do a Nibs van der Spuy / Guy Buttery concert, but afterwards they'd say "Which song was that? OK, that's on Guy's solo album" and "which song is that? OK, that's on Nibs' last solo album."

And then we were doing a festival in France in 2010 and then we decided "Why don't we do a duo album together? We're always doing all these shows together playing in weird and wonderful places around the world." So we hit the studio during a tour in 2011 and then we recorded our first album "In the Shade of the Wild Fig" which was really... it was critically acclaimed – it was nominated for a SAMA (South African Music Award) and it got wonderful reviews across the world. And that just happened, you know – we released it, we toured it, then we went on our merry way releasing solo albums again.

And then Guy came to visit me in Lisbon – my new home of the last six years, last year and we booked a wonderful place at this venue in Belém, which is, kind of, the cradle of Lisbon where it's where all the ships of discovery left 500 years ago. There's a wonderful venue there called Espaço Espelho d'Água which means "a space of the mirror on the water." So we booked a show there and it just... the ingredients of what makes a chemistry between the two of us so great – I mean, the sum of the two of us together is bigger than both of us individually and the magic was in the air that night. It was beautifully recorded

and, I mean, we forgot about it – we actually... that's the beauty of doing a show: we didn't know it had been recorded, the engineer had set everything up. And this concert was last September but we only got the masters... we heard that the show was recorded, so I got hold of the engineer and he said "Yes, we recorded it." So he sent us the separate files and Guy beautifully mixed them. But the source was so incredible. And it was such a good thing that we didn't know we were recording, 'cos you consciously aware that the tapes are rolling. So yeah, Guy has been mixing it the last three weeks and today's release day, which is wonderful (August 7th, 2020).

Tim Smal: Nibs, that's absolutely incredible. I had no idea that you had no idea that the album was being recorded. I mean, what a classic story. I mean, that is absolutely incredible, right?

Nibs van der Spuy: It is. It's a good thing. I mean, we knew the sound was great because we had a top engineer doing the sound for us [Salvador Miranda]. And I mean, it was only afterwards like – the lady who put the show together (the promoter) she said "Did you ever hear the recording?" I said "What recording?" She said "No, it was recorded." So I got hold of the guy on Facebook and he said "Yes, it was. Would you like the [recording]?" I mean he did a lovely mix of the show, but obviously Guy has got his little studio in Durban, so we just improved on what Salvador the engineer did. And it just came out incredibly, incredibly well – we really, really happy about it. And Guy just did a wonderful job of mixing it and mastering it and editing it. You know, so we... yeah, we are "over the moon" with the result.

It was really... it's lovely to know that, like, well, something happened – a moment of time, we weren't even aware of it. We just remember that the night was magical, so it was just an added bonus to get a message to say "Did you ever hear the recording?" and I said "what recording?" So here we are on the 7th of August and the album has gone live this morning exclusively on Bandcamp.com so people can pay their own price for it and it's also free. So people can receive a wonderful big fat audio file of it and not be compromised by tedious MP3 files... put it that way.

Tim Smal: I'm just really intrigued at the concept of discovering, only afterwards, that your show has been recorded – that's really incredible! And the artwork for the album, as well, is really incredible – who was the photographer that took this shot?

Nibs van der Spuy: It was a guy called... it's friend of Guy's who happened to be around so, the name eludes me now. But it's a beautiful, classic shot and, kind of, epitomizes that evening big time, you know... it really does. I mean, it was a beautiful setting and the lighting was just perfect. And you know, when everything just fits. And it was an intimate audience, I guess – about 50 people could only fit in that room – there was a lovely, beautiful energy. I mean, people that came around... well, there were South African people who happened to be in Lisbon who saw the advertisement, who came out that night. So you had a mix of South African people – some fans of ours, who had seen us around in South Africa – they happened to be in Lisbon, as well as new Portuguese people who had discovered our music.

And the concert was even introduced by the South African Ambassador in Lisbon – it was beautiful! She gave us such a beautiful plug and we felt really proud to be South African doing our thing in a foreign country. Well, it's not too foreign for me, because I've been here for six years but, it was good to share music with Guy and in a different country again. I mean, we've done many shows across the world, but this was really special – it was just a special vibe.

And I hadn't played with Guy for a really long time and you often wonder "Well, we haven't practiced." Well, we did play a few days together, but we hadn't been on the road for, like, 12 days straight and then you push the record button because you really know your stuff so well and it's like you comfortable with the arrangements and music. So I was a bit worried as we haven't played the songs and we're playing a whole bunch of new songs, but the magic was there that night, for sure.

And I had been playing a... I just got a brand-new ten-string guitar called a cuatro (a Puerto Rican guitar) – I'd been playing one for years, but this was a new one. So it was the first concert I did with it and I'm so glad I did because it's such a beautiful, rich sound as well. You'll hear on most of the tracks – I mean, 75% of the tracks I'm playing the cuatro. So it's got this shimmery... almost sounds a bit like a 12-string fretted – I mean capoed at the 7th fret, you know. So it's got that really sparkling, undulating sound to it, which fits perfectly with Guy's beautiful textural playing.

Tim Smal: I've definitely heard you play the cuatro live on some of your South African tours – I'm not sure if it's the exact same model that you played on this album, but it certainly is a beautiful instrument. Let's talk quickly about the tracks on this new album, *Live in Lisbon*. Obviously there are a couple of songs that you have written, a couple of songs that Guy has written – perhaps even a track or two that you've composed together... I'm not sure. But let's look at the tracks that you have composed on this album first: I noticed that "Trample on Lions" and "Madala" are on this album and, of course, those are taken from one of your most recent solo albums "Natalia."

Nibs van der Spuy: That's correct, yes. My solo album was "Natalia" which I'd recorded in England. I recorded with a wonderful producer called Mark Tucker, who had worked with Portishead and... PJ Harvey is another artist he had worked with. So I was really happy to work with him – especially a track like "Trample on Lions." I mean, when you hear it on the *Natalia* album, it's got such a huge production. I mean, massive production – I've never had such a massive production done to a song of mine ever. But the song started off like a Dylan-esque inspiration – say from from "Masters of War" from his "Freewheeling" album. And that's how I, kind of, envisioned to play it live.

And then, I mean, Guy loved that track [Trample on Lions] and he didn't play... I mean, we've played on each other's albums, but he wasn't present for... although he did play on a track on that album [*Natalia*] but he didn't play on this track. But he loved the track so much and he just put a wonderful part to it, which isn't on the *Natalia* album. When you hear his guitar part, it's such a great hook, which kind of reels the song in. And that's the beauty of music, you know – like Guy and I write individually, but a lot of the songs, when we compose them, we can hear the other person in mind and you can hear the part they're going to put in beforehand, because we know each other so well.

But it always happens when you swing an idea to one another – we always, kind of, bring the best out of the song. Like Guy will say "Oh, I mean, on what you did on my, for example, the first track 'In the Shade of the Wild Fig' is when I heard a part but I didn't hear it as beautiful as that." So we, kind of, put our own personality to each other's compositions. So in theory, they're actually Nibs and Guy's songs – most of them, because we composing parts for each others' songs. But because we tour as solo artists, in that we on the road, our songs have to breathe in a different way when the other guy isn't there.

Tim Smal: And isn't it interesting, when you think about how certain tracks emerge as crowd-pleasers or crowd-favorites as time goes by, because when you released Natalia in 2016 – on that album, every single song is incredible... from “Paper Rose” to “Peace in Our Time” to “Zululand”... it's a really incredible album. But somehow, “Trample on Lions” always stood out to me as one of my favorite tracks. And so I'd always request it at the live shows and I thought it was just me – I thought it was just me that loved this track so much. So it's really exciting to see how that has emerged as a really popular song in your repertoire.

Nibs van der Spuy: To be honest Tim, when I released Natalia... because the production [of the song “Trample on Lions”] is so huge on the album – I just didn't play it. I thought “OK, well, that's an album song.” And then I thought “Well, I always just love playing it.” And it's got a, kind of a, weird rhythm. I'm a huge fan of The Allman Brothers Band – a Southern rock band – and on their debut album, they had a song which is... actually, I was so happy, I heard it on “A Star is Born” [a film] in the one bar scene with Lady Gaga... it's called “Whipping Post” – I love that song.

And “Whipping Post” – OK, the intro is in 11/8 – but the main body of the song is in 12/8, it's got a 12/8 rhythm, which I really loved. And a lot of Zimbabwean music is actually in 12-8. So I thought “I've gotta write a song in 12/8.” Well, it kind of naturally evolved. I think “we are what we eat” – we've got such huge inspirations and it's a part of our life fabric: you're going to emulate what's in your heart and soul. So “Trample on Lions” is in 12/8 for sure. And if you listen to The Allman Brothers' “Whipping Post” you'll hear why – you'll hear where the inspiration comes from. Even though it's, kind of, written that in that Dylan-esque feel of “Masters of War” from the “Freewheeling” album.

So I never used to play it, but eventually people say “Well, I really dig that song” so I thought... and I think I was playing it for my mother on the veranda one day in Durban and she said “Why don't you play that live?” so I said “Well, I didn't think of it.” So I think it was my mother who prompted me there. And yeah, I love playing it live now and people really seem to dig it, you know. It's quite a Biblical song, so I've plagiarized Psalm 91, which is kind of “being protected while you're on the road” and that's exactly what I do: being protected doing what you love in different parts of the world.

Tim Smal: Well, speaking about “being in different parts of the world”, as you mentioned earlier on the show: a few years ago you spread your wings and migrated North and moved to the Lisbon coast of Portugal. So you've been living there for a few years – I'd love it if you could tell the listeners about what it's been like living in Portugal, making it your second home, and even lead into a discussion about the record you released this year in 2020 called “A Circle of Swallows” which is essentially a “best of” album.

Nibs van der Spuy: I, kind of, had a revelation... I mean, I have playing in the North for a long time and just doing so many trips a year from South Africa. And I always thought “You know what, I love South Africa so much – but I also need a... I would also love a little lock-up-and-go Northern home.” And I always had dreams and visions of buying an apartment in Paris, because I love Paris so much and “the French connection.” But I'll never be able to afford an apartment in Paris, let alone the rent. So yeah, over the years I saved money and I mean, the time was right. I mean, I arrived here just loving Lisbon – my younger sister had moved here from England a few months previously. I came after a French tour, I came to visit the Lisbon coast. And there was this familiarity – I mean, I love Mozambique and I've spoken Portuguese for years... language is my second passion.

So for me, the communication was really good and I just loved the way of life here – it was so slowed up and I loved living on the ocean. I loved the architecture, the tiles, and I loved... there was like “an Africanism” about it as well, you know. And it just happened, you know. Within 4 months, you know, when fate happens and within four months you get your residence card and you've bought your apartment and you can't understand what happened... it just happened! And I love living here – I've got such a wonderful creative space here. I don't have a car – I've got a bicycle, so I live on the river where the Tagus River meets the Atlantic Ocean. And that's where... it's got this ancient charm... that's where these ancient caravels, 500 years ago, set off to discover the New World. It was between Spain and Portugal, so the Portuguese left from here.

And there's a connection: Vasco da Gama left, pretty much, where I played the concert with Guy – in Portugal they say “Belém”, English people say “Belem” – and Vasco da Gama left the shores of, pretty much, where we played the gig, in 1498 and set out on route to India. And on Christmas day, he arrived in Durban Bay – the Bay of Port Natal where Durban became a city. When he arrived, Durban wasn't a city – there were indigenous people at that stage. So for a week, he set anchor in Durban Bay. And people in South Africa don't even know it. First of all, OK, it's called Kwazulu-Natal – Kwazulu means “the place of the Zulu” or “people” in Zulu. And Natal is the word for Christmas in Portuguese. So it's because of Vasco da Gama, I live in the province of Kwazulu-Natal – the place of the Zulu Christmas, basically. And that's because of Vasco da Gama. And yeah, so definitely a connection there. He decided to go north and he was en-route to India. And people always think “Well no, he was on his way to Mozambique” because Mozambique is a former Portuguese colony – but no, the Portuguese arrived in Mozambique, I think a decade later, for real. So it's quite interesting... kinda interesting, the history.

And also, while we're talking about my albums – I released a compilation album this year called “A Circle of Swallows” which is, kind of, a “best of” album. There are two sides of the story: I mean, I'm not good with what's happening now with the whole streaming business, so I've got a young team who helped me get my stuff online. And they said “Instead of putting your last album (which was like five years ago), just do a 'best of' and put the best songs from all your albums on and then it's a good way of, like, repackaging old stuff with maybe a few songs from Natalia (which I did) and then just putting it out there” which I'm glad I did. So I thought “I needed another connection.” And in Kwazulu-Natal, the swallow is such a powerful bird, which... I mean, I go every year to where the barn swallows roost in the... close to the Umhlanga Rocks basin in a place called Umdloti (Mount Moreland). And I always see them and then all, of a sudden, they migrate north and I'm thinking “Are the same swallows I'm seeing in Portugal from that same basin in Kwazulu-Natal?” And I called it “A Circle of Swallows” because you always return – they always return, I always return home. And also, the swallow is such a spiritual symbol of Portugal – it is the most spiritual symbol of Portugal. It signifies unity, family and belonging and good luck. So I thought “That's a pretty cool title.”

Tim Smal: Incredible. Now Nibs, a few months ago when you were in Cape Town, I managed to catch a live show of yours at a lovely intimate venue – in fact, it was a house concert that was organized by Paul Kahanovitz from Slow Life. You performed a couple of songs that you've been working on for a new album, and if I'm not mistaken, you mentioned that many of those songs were written in Portugal and inspired by a lot of your time living in Lisbon. So I'm really excited to hear more (if you are able to share with us) about plans for a new album, because those songs that I heard were absolutely incredible.

Nibs van der Spuy: Yeah, thank you so much. First of all, I say I'm on my bike... I mean, after this interview, I've got my guitar ready and I'm going to get on my bicycle... OK, it's really hot weather – we've been having, like, between 35 and 38 degrees days here... beautiful long summer days. The sun sets at 9:45 pm here. So I've found my new creative grounds along the river here – pretty much, a little bit down river from where we recorded the concert. I live in my little village, which is actually eight kilometers from Belém, where we recorded the concert. So that's, kind of, closer to Lisbon and that's, kind of, where the... that's at the... deep within the river mouth. I live exactly at the river mouth where the Tagus River – which starts in Spain by the way, a few hundred kilometers past Madrid – it comes out in Lisbon and I live at the river basin where the Tagus River meets the Atlantic Ocean. I mean, as I'm doing the interview now, I'm looking out of my window and I'm seeing all these beautiful old wooden fishing boats... it's like glass – the ocean is like glass at the moment... it's beautiful. So I've got this beautiful “nooks and crannies” along the coastline which I go to on a daily basis.

A lot of my new songs have been born from sitting... I go to this late 17th century park, it's called Jardim de Cascata – it used to be the Queen's summer garden. And it's on the... it's pretty much like, a little setback from the ocean, but you can see the ocean there. And it looks like Versailles – I don't know if you've seen, like, the patterns of The Gardens of Versailles? So a lot of the gardens in the late 17th century were based on Versailles. So I go there everyday and I sit under these oak trees and these old, old structures, and sometimes I'm the only person there for an hour – I mean, sometimes you'll have a senior citizen walking their dog through there and you think “Oh cool, well that's a bit of action.” But sometimes I'll have the park to myself. So this little garden was flourishing 250 years ago and it's remained dormant for over a hundred and fifty years. And they've redone the garden to its old specifications in 1999, as well as some other landmarks on the river.

I mean, it's either that or I'll go to this 16th century fort on the river and I'll go and sit on the walls of this fort and take my guitar there. And I've been inspired by this ancient spirit and ancient culture, which is so powerful. And so a lot of my songs have to do about destiny and fate: the swallow, the ocean, the ship, the boat plays a big role in my new lyrics, you know. And it's, kind of, I'm meant to be there at the right time.

So going back to recording the album: I was meant to record it in May and I'm recording with, funny enough, Guy Buttery – the guy I just recorded the live album with. He's got a beautiful home studio. He did my rough demos of the songs, which I'm going to send to you after the show. And so we're going to go for a very intimate bedsitter album with maybe, very close-up vocal and intimate guitar, with some string arrangements. And I've also been discussing doing some vocal... I'm using this beautiful a capella choir from Kwazulu-Natal – they sing all the traditional beautiful Zulu songs and I just hear them in the mix. My songs are written here on the Lisbon Coast, but I've got to have a reminder of home within them as well. So that's the plan.

And I'm so glad I've, kind of... I wasn't meant to record in May – although it was my intention, because I've written a whole bunch of new songs which I'm really proud about and I would have been quite angry if I recorded the album without including these new ones. So, there you go.

Tim Smal: Well, I'm certainly looking forward to the new record. I hope it will come out this year, but perhaps next year in 2021. But I'm sure the listeners will be able to get hold of it in due course. But just to mention, of course, for the listeners that they can find your entire discography on bandcamp.com and the website link for that is

nibsvanderspuy.bandcamp.com – so they can go and hear all of your albums from over the last decade or so.

Well Nibs, thanks so much for being an inspiration to so many people – you're an excellent songwriter, you are a world traveler with lots of stories and so much to offer the world on so many levels, so thank you so much for joining me on the show today. And I really look forward to hearing your new album when it comes out, with all those amazing songs that you've written... and I can envision what it must be like living in Portugal. And hopefully one day I can even make the trip myself to see what's going on in Lisbon.

Nibs van der Spuy: That'll be great, you'll always be my guest Tim. And thank you so much for your time and thanks for thinking of me today. And especially on release day with Guy, with our “Live in Lisbon” album. But yeah, thanks for having me on – I really, really appreciate it, it means a lot