

# just Festival review: Simply Soweto Encha \*\*\*\*\*



‘Nine years ago we began a journey full of hope, love and laughter’ says Morgan, charismatic lead singer of a band oozing charm. As the five members of **Simply Soweto Encha** filter onto the stage of **St John’s Church**, the audience begins its own journey; an unforgettable hour which begins and ends in South Africa.

In Simply Soweto Encha the only instruments are voices. This is a totally a *cappella* band, a band whose singers can call up the sound of trumpets and double basses, drums and cellos just by exercising their vocal cords. From the opening songs about their youth in the townships – the first of which includes a comic turn in which two of them pretend to check out the local talent – through swing and bebop numbers, redemption songs and a traditional African war dance, the band never stops singing – or moving. This show is slick but retains a freshness and sincerity that keep the audience engaged throughout. The energy of the expertly choreographed dancing is stunning – and remember, they’re not miming, they keep up the singing without missing a beat.

There is comedy – a song about going down to the river to impress the girls doing their laundry sees each member perform a wildly over-the-top solo complete with wiggling hips and rolling eyes. There is romance; in ‘*Give Me A Chance*’ the singers’ voices become backing instruments (complete with actions) as the lead comes down into the pews looking for his lover. There is sadness as the band sing for family members who have died whilst they have been on the road, ‘This is our goodbye, until we meet again.’ Eye contact is a big feature in every number – these dances may be intricately planned, but

there is still immense warmth and communication as the singers reach out to draw the audience into their stories.

From the soft notes of a lament, Simply Soweto Encha move seamlessly on to 'music our parents used to get down to in Soweto in the 1980s' (yes, they're that young); when they launch into '*I was going down*' Morgan could almost be James Brown – the voice, the facial expressions, the powerhouse dancing, they're all there.



The bantering between the band members may be scripted but it's still sharp and funny. Sibu's impressive *basso profundo* seems to be able effortlessly to conjure up all manner of sounds – as Morgan says, other bands have to lug all their kit around on tour, 'we just have to carry Sibu.'



The most moving part of the show is a tribute to 'My dear black president.' Sibu reads **Nelson Mandela's** famous speech before the band moves slowly into song, 'In 1963 the people's president was taken away by security men all dressed in their uniforms of brutality....' The closing refrain is especially moving;

'I will die for my president

I will sing for my president

I will stand and say Viva My President'

And then we are back with the dancing and clapping as the fast pace of *Simply Soweto, All From the Ghetto* sends the guys into a rolling, in and out formation in which they seem perilously close to falling off the stage. They don't of course: this is tightly controlled stuff – the skill lies in making us think it isn't.

This is an excellent show full of energy, emotion, fun, and outstanding music; you'll come away singing and you'll also come away inspired by the spirit that has carried the townships through to the freedom that Nelson Mandela strove for.

***Songs From Soweto: An A Cappella Journey*** is a film documentary made earlier this year about the band. It includes interviews with band members and other Soweto residents who discuss what their lives were like during the apartheid era, "Even in the 1980s we were not allowed to use the same buses or the same toilets as white people. If a white person told us their name we were still not allowed to use it in public, we had to address them only as 'sir' or 'madam.'" The band speak about how they feared their music would not be accepted outside the townships, and how their overriding aim is to bring a message of hope to the world. The film has been sponsored by the **British High Commission in Pretoria, SA.**

Simply Soweto Encha will perform at 8.30pm every night, except 14th, 21st, 23rd and 24th August, until 25th August 2014, at The Church at St John, Princes Street. Tickets cost £15/£13 and are available from [Brown Paper Tickets](#), Miller Row, Edinburgh, online or on the door (subject to availability.)



*Songs From Soweto: An A Cappella Journey* will be shown at 4pm on 14th and 23rd August at the **Scottish Arts Club**, 24 Rutland Square, tickets £7.50.

