

Pop icons, paraphernalia and shifting paradigms

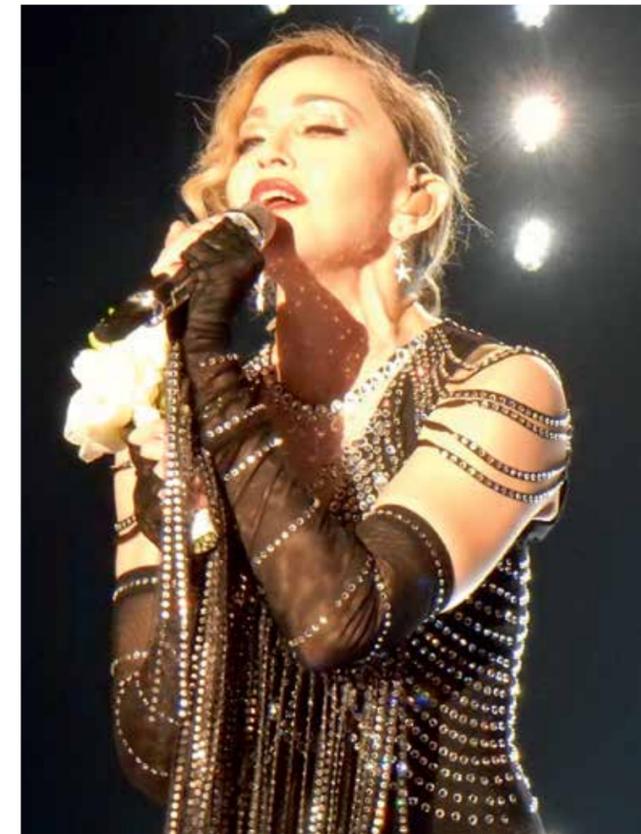
A bridge must be built between the visionary and the decision-maker, between seeing and foreseeing, between creators and economists.' – Javier Pérez de Cuéllar ('The Cultural Dimensions of Development', *The Right to Hope*).

Years before there was internet, or cellphones, or any of the plethora of current social media platforms which abound, there was a curious thing called 'Pen Pals'. At some point in the 1980s, my sister, Nazli, was an active participant in this international programme that connected strangers from the four corners of the (then analogue) globe for a range of reasons in the (now largely archaic) mode of exchanging hand-written letters via actual snail mail. For the purposes of this column, that throwback is only of any interest because it happens to be how I first became acquainted with the music and brand of the eternally iconic Queen of Pop, Madonna.

When Nazli was a teenager, her walls were covered in Madonna posters and paraphernalia courtesy of her German pen pal Karla. As the '80s rolled on and Madonna morphed, so did the pictures on Nazli's wall – as well as the cassette tapes she played in her bedroom: *True Blue* saw the ripped fishnets and layers of lace left behind for a different look and a somewhat different sound (which Nazli was less a fan of – but I was hooked). 1987's *Who's That Girl* may not have been the greatest movie ever made but the song was undeniably awesome. By the time *Like a Prayer* was released, I was a full-blown teenaged acolyte sporting the requisite crucifix earring in my pierced ear to prove my adoration.

Fan or not, there is no getting around the fact that Madonna is arguably not the most talented singer or the best dancer any of us have ever seen. But she is a phenomenal businesswoman and her career epitomises the dizzy heights that can be scaled when creativity is matched with business savvy. Madonna was the original Lebo Mathosa. She was Bonang before Bonang publicly announced her interest in auditioning for the role of Mathosa in BET Network's planned biopic *The Lebo Mathosa Story*.

'As an artist and a businesswoman (a T-Shirt and a Suit), Madonna is a topical example of how creativity and business can be combined intelligently,' David Parrish commented

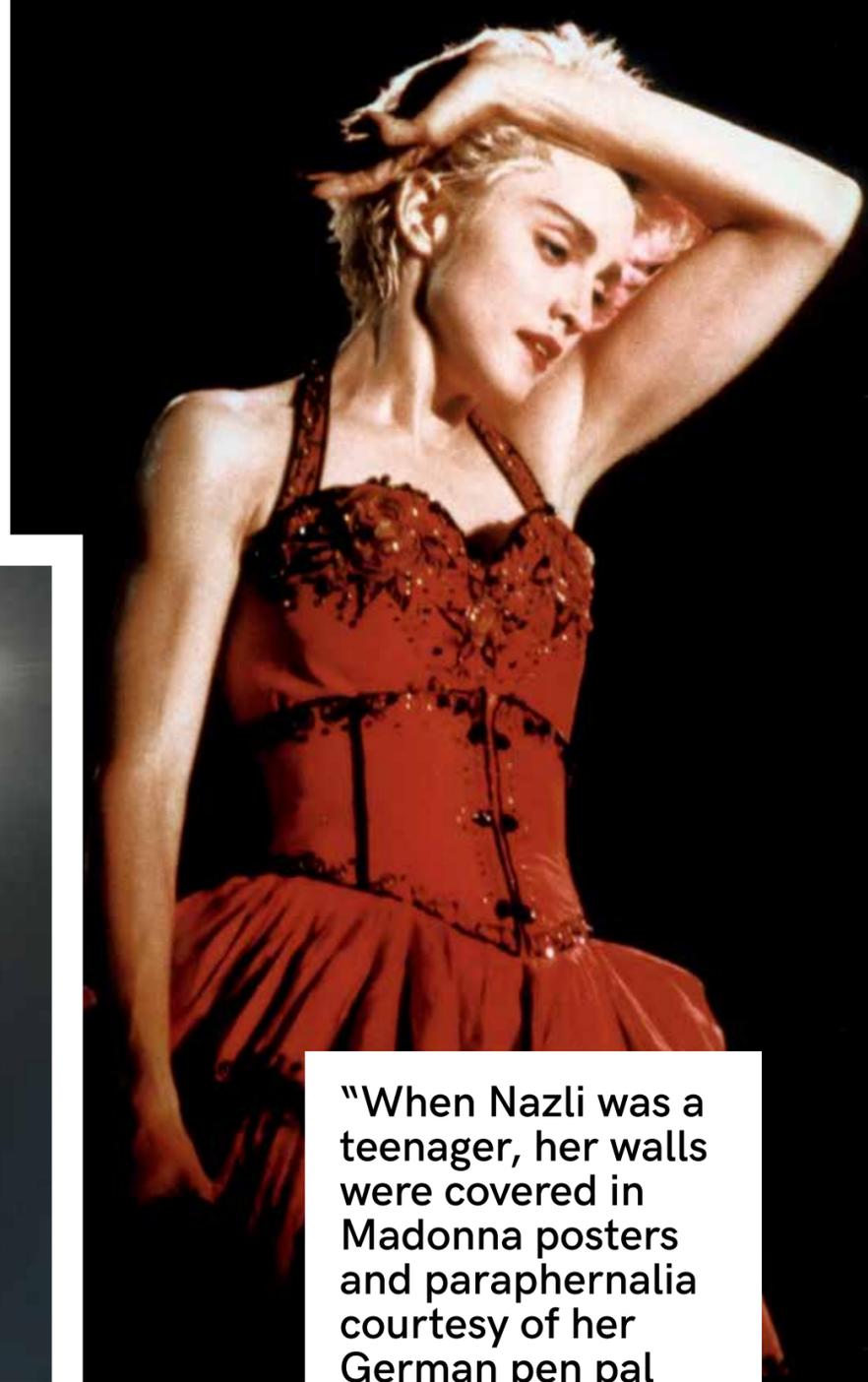


Madonna, Rebel Heart Tour, 2015

when she took the decision to terminate her contract with Warner Music in 2007. She had been with them for the whole of her career up to that point and seemingly out of the blue opted to sign with tour company Live Nation. At the time, Madonna is quoted as having said, 'The paradigm in the music business has shifted and as an artist and a businesswoman, I have to move with that shift. For the first time in my career, the way that my music can reach my fans is unlimited. I've never wanted to think in a limited way and with this new partnership, the possibilities are



Madonna, True Blue poster



Madonna performing in Rotterdam in 1987

"When Nazli was a teenager, her walls were covered in Madonna posters and paraphernalia courtesy of her German pen pal Karla. As the '80s rolled on and Madonna morphed, so did the pictures on Nazli's wall – as well as the cassette tapes she played in her bedroom"

endless.' Recognising that technology would greatly reduce her income from traditional music sales, the material girl changed her business model and found an appropriate new business partner to secure her future income from performances and related products instead.

At the time of writing this, Madge the rebel is once again making headlines. According to *El País*, a Spanish-language daily newspaper, the 60-year-old singer, who has been living in Portugal for the last two years, was unable to secure the necessary permissions for a horse to have access to the inner sanctum of a 19th-century palace for the purposes of shooting a new music video. In retaliation, Madonna has gone on to accuse the Portuguese of being ungrateful. Reciprocally, the Portuguese have, in turn, accused Madonna of that same transgression. Who is right and who is wrong is less interesting than the way in which Madonna continues to manipulate the media and to use controversy to put herself in the limelight... especially when she has a new album about to launch. Smart lady.

Not unlike Madonna, Business and Arts South Africa (BASA) embraces both commerce and creativity as the building blocks of our future. Launched as a joint initiative between government and the business sector in 1997, the founding purpose of BASA was to stimulate the development of the arts in South Africa and to promote strategic and mutually beneficial partnerships between the private sector and the arts. More than two decades later, that remains our core purpose and mandate. Over the next decade, the role of BASA will be to amplify that role and to clarify our dual position as both a bridge between the private sector and the creative industries, and as a catalyst for sustainable collaborations. CF



Business & Arts is a monthly column by ASHRAF JOHAARDIEN, an award-winning playwright, producer and arts manager. He took up the role of CEO at Business and Arts South Africa (BASA) in March 2019.