

PRAISE FOR  
BLK JKS/AFTER ROBOTS



"Let the mythologizing begin."



"Africa's best new band."



"Forward thinking."



"A triumphant debut that's reinventing the very embodiment  
of rock'n'roll."



"A hugely creative, expansive and forceful piece of work."  
4 stars



"Dynamic, mature and fully formed. Utterly Compelling."  
4 stars

# Rolling Stone

August 20, 2009

## ARTISTS TO WATCH



## BLK JKS

Fiery guitars, dark jams: Africa's best new band

**WHO** South Africa's most exciting rock band, BLK JKS, formed nine years ago and was an oddity from the start: "Not too many black kids in Johannesburg listened to the Cure," says guitarist Mpumi Mcata, who founded the group with vocalist-guitarist Lindani Buthelezi (he sings in English, Zulu and Xhosa). BLK JKS grew up under apartheid. Buthelezi says he was tear-gassed often, and bassist Molefi Makananise recalls being shot at with rubber bullets. But they say there's nothing political about what they do. "It would be great if we could open people's minds," Mcata says. "But we'd rather make some mind-blowing music."

**SOUND** Their fever-dream debut, *After Robots* (out September 8th), incorporates everything from South African *kwaito* to guitar shredding—tastemaking DJ Diplo dubbed them the "African TV on the Radio."

**SPIN THIS** "Lakeside" adds a peppy groove to a slow-building Sonic Youth-style jam.

JOSH EELLS

Mpumi Mcata, Tshepang Ramoba, Lindani Buthelezi, Molefi Makananise (clockwise from lower left)



# FADER

AFRICA

52

THE FADER MAGAZINE  
MARCH 2008

COMPLETE  
CONTROL  
**BLK  
JKS**  
TAKE OVER  
SOUTH  
AFRICA

+  
NEW LANDSCAPES  
**ESAU  
MWAMWAYA**  
RESHAPES  
GLOBAL POP

THE INDESTRUCTIBLE  
BEAT OF KWAITO  
HIPLIFE UNRESTRAINED  
FASHION IN MOZAMBIQUE



# SPIN

September 2009

## REVIEWS [ALBUMS]

### Kid A(frica)

The Motherland's brightest bohos birth a new rock era

**T**HE REACH OF Western monoculture, the end of apartheid, the Internet, mp3 file-sharing...we may never know what seismic historical shift to thank for the musical stew that is South Africa's BLK JKS. But in the 21st century, this quartet has been loosed from history and geography. Rather than build upon Ladysmith Black Mambazo or Thomas Mapfumo (who defined South Africa's Stateside musical influence in the 1980s) or attempt an East-West melding à la *Graceland*, BLK JKS emulate the grandiose rock gestures of their peers and contemporaries: TV on the Radio, Radiohead, U2.

Already experiencing success at home when tastemaker Diplo encountered them, BLK JKS (guitarists Lindani Buthelezi and Mpumi Mcata, bassist Molefi Makananise, and drummer Tshepang Ramoba) soon were entering New York's Electric Lady studio with Secret Machines' Brandon Curtis as producer for their 2009 EP *Mystery*. Flashing all the (slight) overreach of a much-anticipated debut album, *After Robots* still exuberantly delivers. "Banna Ba Modimo" bests the Mars Volta at their own game: anthemic, knotty, horn-laced, explosive. "Skeleton" is a prog-dub concoction lanced by Buthelezi's falsetto, which recalls TVOTR at their most eclectic, while "Lakeside" evokes them at their catchiest. And epic centerpiece "Kwa Nqinjetje" reimagines *OK Computer* if it had been unwittingly downloaded by teens in a Johannesburg township. Let the mythologizing begin. **ANDY BETA**



# People

weekly

September 21, 2009

### BLK JKS

*After Robots* | ★★☆☆

**ALT-ROCK** Fans of TV on the Radio's art rock will dig the edgy, psychedelic Afro-beat of BLK JKS (pronounced "black jacks"). These South African natives perform in both English and Zulu, while fusing kwaito—a disco-R&B style out of Johannesburg—with rock. Charming guitar strumming and layered chanting ignite the opener "Molatladi," but it's the stimulating lyrics that distinguish "Banna Ba Modimo," the forward-thinking highlight. —J.H.



# FADER

September 2009

### BLK JKS *After Robots* (Secretly Canadian)

My friend Niki once took my picture at a BLK JKS show without telling me. The photo might have been shot during one of Tshepang Ramoba's crazy drum solos or while Lindani Buthelezi was bansheeing into the mic. Besides the red glow of the stage there isn't much light, but you can still make out the outline of my open mouth, eyes glued to the stage like a happy zombie. If matching that level of live show mesmerization on wax was ever a consideration, then *After Robots* stands up pretty well. Hypnotic Brass Ensemble do much to beef up the sound on tracks like "Banna Ba Modimo" but rabble-raising aside, it's nice that moodier songs -- held together by Buthelezi's melancholy-- get their moment too. **CN**



**Blk Jks: Jo'burg's compelling rock voice.**



**MOJO**  
*The Music Magazine*

"Dynamic, mature and fully formed. Utterly Compelling."  
4 stars

## BLK JKS After Robots



### Hard-hitting and beguiling mix of South Africa with the progressive.

As black South Africans playing guitar rock, Johannesburg/Soweto four-piece BLK JKS (Black Jacks) have been feted by DJ/mixer/producer Diplo, and produced by Secret Machines' Brandon Curtis, they record at NYC's Electric Ladyland and have a branding deal with Edun, Mrs. Bono's clothing company. The music? Their debut, last year's *Mystery* EP, was OK, if a bit shoegazy. This first album, though, is fantastic: dynamic, mature and fully formed. Opening-cuts *Molalatladi* and *Banna Ba Modimo* merge cyclic pre-township mbaqanga-style guitar with a dense swirl coloured in with brass. As intense as *In Rainbows* Radiohead, melody always shines through this crashing, energised maelstrom. *Shot By Both Sides* bubbles up from *Mystery*'s closing moments, *Discipline*-era King Crimson is in there too. But those are signposts; BLK JKS' own voice is utterly compelling. -Kieron Tyler

**NME**

"A triumphant debut that's reinventing the very embodiment of rock'n'roll."

**BLK JKS**

**AFTER ROBOTS (SECRETLY CANADIAN)**

**8**



Hailing from Johannesburg and with a knack for ethereal melodies and mbaqanga rhythms... exchanging pillow talk with Diplo... a debut record teased out by alt.rock stalwart Brandon Curtis of Secret Machines. Really, there are a million other things to say about BLK JKS other than they're four black men playing rock music. Not least the fact they've made a triumphant debut that's reinventing the very embodiment of rock'n'roll. They succinctly combine the folk-rock psychedelia of Love ('*Molalatladi*'), the vocal warmth of Seu Jorge ('*Tselane*') and the prog-rock urgency of The Mars Volta. It's the kind of ostentatious musical tapestry that you crave from the aforementioned El Paso outfit. **Ash Dosanjh**  
**DOWNLOAD: 'Banna Ba Modimo'**

**theguardian**

## BLK JKS, After Robots



It may be no great novelty any more to hear alt-rock bands taking on African influences (cf Yeasayer, Vampire Weekend et al), but it's still uncommon to hear it happening in the other direction. This terrific Johannesburg band are one such, taking on the forms and functions of proggy, left-field rock as a means of making something new from the music they grew up with - dub, jazz, afrobeat, South African *mbaqanga*. The result is a dense, towering sound characterised by wild, squalling guitars and galloping, kaleidoscopic rhythms that hover compellingly between frenetic tension and joyous release. There's something of the Mars Volta's surging maximalism in its sheer complexity and noisy exuberance, but the swelling chants, booming brass and overarching sense of melody could only be the result of influences absorbed at home. All context aside, *After Robots* just plain rocks - a hugely creative, expansive and forceful piece of work. -Tom Hughes



August 1, 2009

## MUSIC

ROCK BY JASON LIPSHUTZ

### AROUND THE WORLD

BLK JKS Showcase A Musical Diaspora

When the South African four-piece BLK JKS headed to the United States to record their first full-length album last January, they left the blazing Johannesburg summertime for the depths of winter in Bloomington, Ind. Unused to the cold but eager to record, the band borrowed sweaters and spent 10 hours a day pounding out live takes until an album materialized.

"I saw it as an exorcism," guitarist Mpumi Mcata says. "We've been growing in the five years we've been together up to this point, and recording was like trying to remember our past. We needed to get something out of us quickly."

After a feverish three-week recording period, BLK JKS (pronounced "black jacks") emerged with "After Robots," an aggressive epic that showcases jazz, prog-rock and pop through a rhythmic African lens. Set for a Sept. 8 release on Secretly

Canadian, "Robots" is BLK JKS' proper introduction to U.S. audiences after months of mounting hype. Just Music will also release the album Sept. 1 in South Africa.

Before the band set its sights on the States, BLK JKS cut their teeth touring in South Africa, and by 2007 they had become a staple at festivals there. "I was on the Western Cape that March, and people told me about this band from Johannesburg that was the best in the country," says manager Knox Robinson, who's been with the group since August 2007.

In March 2008, the four-piece landed on the cover of Fader magazine and was invited to perform at that year's South by Southwest festival. Attracted by the Fader story and the band's demos on MySpace, Secretly Canadian GM Kevin Duneman met with Robinson in September and signed the group in December.

Instead of recording the album in South Africa, the band headed to a studio in Bloomington, near Secretly Canadian's headquarters. The move allowed BLK JKS to stay in close contact with their label and to bring on Secret Machines frontman and African music enthusiast Brandon Curtis as the album's producer. The recording session was followed by the release of an EP in March, along with sets at this year's SXSW

and Sasquatch festivals.

The nine-track debut draws from a wide array of styles, from the danceable tribal chants of "Molalatladi" to the moody guitar rock of "Cursor." The album's genre-hopping is founded on an appreciation of African-influenced arrangements, a trend that has recently been highlighted by indie acts like Vampire Weekend and the Dirty Projectors.

"The way people pick up dif-

ferent African styles has been happening for a long time, from African church songs influencing jazz in the 1920s," drummer Tshepang Ramoba says. "It's interesting to see them now coming to the forefront a little."

For Secretly Canadian, BLK JKS' unique sound and international appeal require a more complex marketing strategy than the U.S.-based indie bands on its roster.

"We want both the world music and indie music section of iTunes to be aware of them," Duneman says. The label also plans to reach out to indie retail chains and closely monitor the album's sales in Europe and Africa. "For this album, we have to make sure it's available everywhere but emphasized in the right way," he says.

After playing select shows on the East Coast last month, BLK JKS will embark on a full-fledged U.S. tour whose details will soon be announced. While the band is anxious for "Robots" to be released, it's just as excited to return to the road. "The album might be weird to some people, but you come to the show and see it come together," Mcata says. "The album is the menu, and our show is the main course."



# Billboard

## BLK JKS "After Robots"

After an EP attracted the attention of the indie label Secretly Canadian, the four-piece band BLK JKS (pronounced "black jacks") left its native South Africa in January and headed for Bloomington, Ind., to record its debut. The band says it put its Johannesburg roots front and center as it crafted a collection of dub-based prog rock tracks. Following the success of American acts influenced by African rhythms, such as Vampire Weekend and Ra Ra Riot, "After Robots" marks the culmination of the trend, with songs like "Lakeside" and "Molalatladi" offering spastic percussion and multilingual vocal chants.





# BLK JKS are traffic-stopping rock'n'rollers

The South African four-piece talk to **ARWA HAIDER** about finding their own trippy way

We dreamed of playing our music around the world. And for the past year, we haven't stopped," says guitarist Mpumi Mcata, one quarter of artful Johannesburg rockers BLK JKS (pronounced 'black jacks'). 'I think this is a case of "be careful what you wish for,"' he quips goodhumouredly.

The band - Mcata, vocalist Lindani Buthelezi, drummer Tshepang Ramoba and bassist Molefi Makananise - have spent 2009 touring incessantly, including electrifying British dates over the spring and ongoing US shows following their high-impact set at the SXSW festival.

Following their well-received Mystery EP, BLK JKS's debut album, *After Robots*, gives an even broader sense of where these South African talents are coming from.

Ramoba does note some international variations in their audiences. 'Playing in South Africa feels like a party,' he says. 'In the UK, it seems more of a personal reaction. When we played in Newcastle, everybody was staring at the stage - not even moving to the bar, just concentrating on the [music](#).'

Not moving at all seems a bit of a waste because there's an intensely danceable energy to BLK JKS numbers such as *Lakeside*.

Their album's rich and raw musical scope entwines psychedelic rock'n'roll, hi-life rhythms, folklore (the track *Tselane* is influenced by their grandmothers' storytelling), jazzy tempo shifts and vocal harmonies - there's a lot going on but it works to invigorating effect.

It also works on different levels; they blend surreal and everyday themes, peppering their lyrics with Johannesburg slang.

Even their science-fictional album title actually refers to road furniture ('robots' being local jargon for 'traffic lights').

'When we use certain words, we know that they'll be understood in South Africa but it's interesting when we're abroad. It's a bit trippy, you start to lose sense of what you're saying,' laughs Makananise.

The music we make is very honest to the place we're from. But who knows what happens next - are we gonna write an album about Hong Kong? BLK JKS's imagery isn't deliberately polemical (it's more imaginatively far-out than anything), yet they argue that they've become politicised by default in many places.

'In America, just us being on stage playing rock seems a statement,' says Mcata. 'It feels like there's more need for dialogue around racial issues in the States, which is interesting because we already know that the freedom declared in courts doesn't always translate into real life. There's always energy around what we do but we're not gonna "bling" or follow industry models.'

Mcata and Buthelezi grew up together, messing around with music and football. They were later introduced to Ramoba and Makananise, who had a more focused jazz/roots background - and BLK JKS' debut set was part gig, part art installation in an abandoned jail in Jamestown.

'It was June 16, 2004,' recalls Mcata, precisely. 'We'd only known each other for three days - we got to meet properly after we'd played that gig.'

The first sign of the band's success was when they could give up their day jobs. Another was when their fanbase began to extend to international artists such as US DJ/producer Diplo and Brandon Curtis of indie rockers Secret Machines, who produced *After Robots* in New York last winter.

'It was a great experience working with Brandon,' enthuses Buthelezi. 'We were open to a learning curve - everything felt fresh, kinetic. It was also nice for four African men to be in the American snow,' he adds. 'You soon realise why people have snowball fights.'

BLK JKS feel independent of the latest generation of Western rockers such as Vampire Weekend or Foals, who have borrowed inspiration from African roots, but that doesn't make it any easier to define their own musical style, as Mcata explains: 'I feel as close to Sonic Youth as the work of John Coltrane or South African jazz musician Philip Tabane. They all have the same elements - something ancient and rooted in the universe,' he says.

'South Africa has a very cross-cultural vibe but it is also left to its own devices - in Johannesburg, you really have to find your own way musically. There are a lot of bands and underground culture happening right now and it's a beautiful thing. It's not a "scene" but we are all brothers and we're taking up arms... or guitars, or drums, or whatever.'

*After Robots (Secretly Canadian)*





# BLK JKS AFTER ROBOTS

Molatladi  
Banna Ba Modimo  
Standby  
Lakeside  
Taxidermy  
Kwa Nqinjetje  
Skeleton  
Cursor  
Tselane

Just a short time ago — in a last ditch effort to supply a borrowed van with wheels to make a club gig — the four members of **BLK JKS** took turns hand-over-hand pushing a tire through the darkened, kinetic streets of Johannesburg, South Africa's Soweto township. For bandmates Lindani Buthelezi, Mpumi Mcata, Molefi Makananise and Tshepang Ramoba it's a simple and tough philosophy: every gig, everything at stake. They have shared stages in North America and Europe with artists as celebrated and disparate as **Femi Kuti**, **Santigold**, **Dirty Projectors**, **Michael Franti** and **Cody Chesnutt**; they have played festivals like **Sasquatch** and **Soweto Arts Festival**; and Ramoba has been celebrated by Billboard as "the best musician" at SXSW. It's an inspiring juxtapose from that day when a Jo-burg gig hung in the balance. But to witness the frenetic energy and soaring celebration of a BLK JKS gig is to know that they have maintained that same ideology.

It's been too long since anyone was able to bring this much soul and heartblood to progressive rock, a medium that has been left cold and dry by a misguided focus on technical show-offery. But by entangling the music they love — township blues, fringe jazz and renegade dub — into the DNA of prog, BLK JKS have provocatively pulled afro-futurism into a new century. *After Robots* has all the ingredients of a party record — young, joyous musicians; surging, afro-drumming; aggressive horn blasts (supplied by the cultishly famous **HYPNOTIC BRASS ENSEMBLE**) — but this is not party music. It's at times disorienting and overwhelming, but it always maintaining a cool, alluring mystique. It's in Mcata's patient, complex and enviable jazz chord vamping. It's in Makananise's from-the-pocket-to-the-stars bass approaches. It's in Buthelezi's blues-inflected phrasing and searing guitar leads. It's in Ramoba's super-polyrhythmic, flailing beats.

In January 2009, BLK JKS set foot on US soil for just the second time, holing up with **Brandon Curtis** (**SECRET MACHINES**) in the quaint, spirited town of Bloomington, Indiana, to record the music that would become *After Robots*, their first proper album. Ten-hour days turned into fourteen as the band relentlessly exorcised their collective ideas and ideals about music. The process was an overwhelming sensory experience in its own right. To discuss certain musical passages for which there is no accurate English befit to describe, BLK JKS seamlessly shifted from accented English to their differing tribal languages. Then —giving up on words altogether — they'd dive back into a fine-tuned performance of a song. It is the band's tendency to work it out on the spot that is most impressive about their approach to recording and structure.

*After Robots* triumphs on its own strange set of genre-ending rules, and BLK JKS are undeniably a band of our times, embodying the duality of our violent and hopeful new world, these days of mystery and wonder.

CATALOG #: SC197  
RELEASE DATE: SEPTEMBER 8, 2009  
FORMAT: CD / LP / DIGITAL