



ALBUM OF STORIES: Siemon Allen's exhibition is a treasure trove of information

Picture: ESA ALEXANDER

Record labels make music for the eyes

Artist creates a 'world within a world', writes *Karen Rutter*

IT'S weird to think of Dollar Brand, the Dark City Sisters, Dudu Pukwana and Die Antwoord hanging out together. Musically speaking, it would be unlikely to mesh. But in Siemon Allen's astonishing art exhibition they do indeed hang side by side, albeit in the form of record labels. (Note to younger readers: yes, we are talking primarily about vinyl records here. Those shiny black jobs that existed before music was stored on CDs and MP3s.)

Allen, a Durban-born but US-based artist, archivist and collector, has created a "world within a world" with his exhibition titled *Labels*, in which 5 000 photographs of record labels have been inserted into a suspended clear plastic curtain.

This flexible wall of images winds around two antique pianos housed in the Iziko Slave Lodge, forming a sinuous and curiously private space.

The effect is felt on two levels: first, as an awareness of the colour and physical presence of the labels stretching towards the ceiling; and second, on a more directed plane as the eye focuses on the information on each label.

Arranged in chronological order, beginning in 1901 and ending about now, the labels are also positioned according to colour, resulting in streams of bright orange, green and blue stripes interspersed with patterned or simply plain designs. The big industry names are there — EMI, Atlantic, Gallo, RCA — but so are the obscure independents with names such as Buffalo, Gudlagudla, Chocolate City and Highway Soul.

Some were no doubt part of a larger, established parent company, but others must have been solo outfits — flamboyant titles reflect ardent dreams of making it big in the music business.

It is in the close scrutiny of the labels, which note details such as song titles, artists and sometimes even producers, that the historical value of this collection becomes clear.

It is an extraordinary display of African jazz, kwela, mbaqanga and pop titles, intermingled with Afrikaans boeremusiek recordings and "easy-listening" orchestral scores. It moves from the sedate-sounding Benoni String Quintet through Spokes Mashiyane, Juluka and Tete Mbambisa to Flippie van Vuuren en sy Orkes, The Kalahari Surfers and Zola.

Some of the band names from way back are so offbeat that they're practically funky — such as Manxele Qwabe and the Cruel Witchdoctors — whereas some are a sober reminder of the context in which the recordings were made, such as The

CAPE TOWN

VISUAL ART

LABELS by Siemon Allen

Where: Iziko Slave Lodge, Adderley Street, Cape Town

When: Until December

Bantu Glee Singers. There are plenty of gospel and choral outfits, such as the People of Promise Singers, Kente's Choristers and the Jabavu Orpheus Choir. And one finds some interesting information in the small print, such as ex-Rabbit guitarist and now major movie-score composer Trevor Rabin co-producing saxophonist Mike Makhalemele's work. Other labels remind us how many great musicians have gone — Winston Mankunku, Sipho Gumede, Brenda Fassie — and the huge collection of Miriam Makeba recordings is particularly poignant.

Of course, a large majority of these titles would have been recorded during the apartheid years when radio stations and music venues were strictly segregated. There was a place for Dennis van Rooyen and his Hammond Organ and another place for Afro-jazz diva Dorothy Masuka, and never the twain would ever have met.

The exhibition makes this simply obvious in the presentation of the labels — which is rather tragic, from all perspectives.

Labels is a quietly monumental work, reflecting Allen's passion for collection projects — his previous have included stamps and newspapers — that disperse information while interrogating a national identity. It was first featured at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011 at the South African Pavilion, where Allen constructed a 14m-tall curtain wall with 2 500 labels. It then moved to the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town and is now at the Iziko Slave Lodge in an expanded form. The exhibition is linked to another of Allen's projects, a comprehensive database of African music that can be seen at flatinternational.org.

For those with an interest in South African music, and equally those who are curious to experience a different sort of art installation, *Labels* provides an intriguing encounter.