

**Song Exploder**  
**Sampa the Great - Let Me Be Great**  
**Episode 246**

Hrishikesh: This episode contains explicit language.

Sampa the Great is a songwriter, rapper, and singer from Zambia. She was based in Australia for years, but came back to Zambia in 2020, shortly before the pandemic hit. And then, when she couldn't travel, she decided to make her next album there, in Lusaka. The album is called *As Above, So Below*, and it was produced by Mag44.

In this episode, Sampa the Great and Mag44 break down the closing song "Let Me Be Great," which features vocals from legendary West African singer Angélique Kidjo, winner of 5 grammys and one of Time Magazine's Most Influential People. I got to speak to Angélique Kidjo in her studio in Paris, and I spoke to Sampa the Great and Mag44 in Lusaka, and together, the three of them tell the story of how they made "Let Me Be Great."

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Vocals: "Yeah I told you cause its what you need to hear / Young Tembo we, great / Ahhh, yeah / Let me, let me / Ahhh, yeah / Let me, let me")*

Sampa: I am Sampa Tembo, also known as Sampa The Great.

Mag44: Hi, I'm Magnus Mando, also known as Mag44.

Sampa: I actually was a huge fan of Mag44. Loved his work. He was part of a label called Lota House.

Mag44: Lota House, yeah.

Sampa: The stuff they were doing when they came out, to me, was like, oh my gosh, Zambians can do music like this? This is wild! Like, to me it, like, set the standard in my head, as this high school kid who wanted to do music beyond where I'm from. And Mag was given my songs by my cousin Steven.

Mag44: Yeah.

Sampa: And my cousin told him that this is an artist who's amazing. You'd want to work with this artist. And Mag -

Mag44: *(chuckles)*

Sampa: - literally ghosted the messages and was like, I have important celebrity things to do. I don't have time for this little university girl who's tryna rap. Tell your side of the story.

Mag44: (*chuckles*) Yeah, to be fair, anyway so, so yes. This is the way my line of work is. I, I get a lot of people who say, oh, there's this artist who's amazing. And he just said, oh, there's a cousin of mine who's an amazing artist, who's doing amazing things in Australia.

Sampa: Right, right.

Mag44: So then I'm like, ah, okay. You know. It's very difficult for me to, sort of, listen to every single person.

So now, when I heard her music, then I was like, wow. This person is not just being a pop artist. She's someone who's trying to change minds and change hearts.

Here in Zambia we've got this term called "Zambia Kuchalo," which is, basically, taking Zambia to the rest of the world. It's something that we say, but not a lot of us do something about it. And Sampa definitely had that energy. Cause I'm like, this girl, every performance, she has the Zambian flag on her mic stand. And you know, those are things that sort of made me feel like, man. Like, I wasn't even thinking production-wise, cause I thought that ship already sailed. [*chuckles*] I thought, like, I thought now she's too big to even think about me. So I was just, now, just happy to just watch on her Instagram, just to see her evolve and change things.

Sampa: At one point in time, you reached out to me via DM, or I reached out to you? And I was just like, in future, I'm gonna work with this person.

It was sort of us just like, sending music we're listening to, to each other.

And when I relocated back during the pandemic, you know, I couldn't get back to Australia. And I think at that time it was like, okay. If I'm in Zambia, I can't get back to Australia, what am I gonna do here? And I just decided to work on music. We decided to work on music, and that music slowly turned into a project.

Mag44: Sampa was big on, like, let's almost create a new genre with this album.

Sampa: I sent through a soundscape to Mag. The guitar sounds I wanted, the drum sounds I wanted, the minor chords that I wanted, and how, generally, I wanted the album to sound.

Mag44: So, none of us were thinking that we're gonna go into the studio and just make a purely RnB, or purely hip hop, or purely Afrobeat. We knew that, no matter what's gonna happen, there will be a fusion of sounds here.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*saxophone stem\**

Mag44: So, I went into the studio. Got the sax player, Arthur, who is an amazing guy. So he played that sax line.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*saxophone stem\**

and then I started building the beat, with the two other guys who were with us. So that's Sam Nyambe and Sammy Masta.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*guitar stem\**

Sammy, who's the lead guitarist, and then Sam, who's the keyboard player.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*keyboard stem\**

You know, the saxophone gave me that, like, real Afro beat. Like the old, Fela Kuti Afrobeat. And of course, you can't have Afrobeat without the shaker.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*shakers\**

Now we thought, okay, how do we add elements of what is Zambian? And the guitar did that very well.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*guitar riff\**

That's kind of like Kalindula, but it also has a Lozi sound. Lozi, which is one of the tribes here in Zambia.

Mag44: So when we built the beat, I think I sent it to you. [chuckles] I sent it to you, and then she didn't respond. So I was like, ah. Like, I mean I think this is probably the greatest beat I've ever made [chuckles] in my life.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*full beat\**

Sampa: When I first heard "Let Me Be Great," it was after two weeks of back-to-back studio time. So I'm already, like, flying high. I'm like, we've made the bulk of this album. Oh this, this music is dope. And I'm leaving, I think I went to Botswana, or did I go -

Mag44: Oh, you know what I think you went for? I think you went for the NPR -

Sampa: Oh, the Tiny Desk! Is that what we did?

Mag44: Yeah, the Tiny Desk. Yeah. Yeah.

Sampa: So, that was for a month. And there's usually a disconnect after, you know, you leave the studio after working on music for a long time. And then I get sent this beat.

ST and Mag44: *(chuckle)*

Sampa: And lemme tell you what was going through my mind. I was just like overwhelmed. I was overwhelmed, and thought, I don't know if I could write to this because it's really grand.

The song was very uplifting, very bright. And I was like, okay, how does this fit into the story I'm trying to capture for this album? How does this music align with the music I'm trying to express for this album? And I was like, this is not dark enough!

S + M: *(chuckle)*

Sampa: We're talking about struggles!

Um, but again, the aim of this project was to show all facets of me. So, show the influence from Botswana where I was raised. Show the influence from Zambia.

And show me outside of the range of anger or defending culture, which was usually the case for the past projects.

Cuz I was based in Australia. So a lot of the messaging around the past projects was, okay, I'm defending my Zambian culture.

Or you're introducing them to Black music that is usually put on the side, in Australia. I'm showing, you know, Black African artists in Australia, in the mainstream.

And a lot of it became what I call "defense music." My lyrics, I found, the themes were always circling around defending my culture. And that's dope and all, but when that is a constant thing, you can't actually enjoy the beauty of your culture because you are always in defense mode. You're always defending it. And I just wanted to do more than that.

And when I got "Let Me Be Great," it was, like, the opposite. [ chuckles] It was so bright, so beautiful, so grand, that I knew that I had to prepare to write for it.

So the times where I wasn't responding to Mag, was me actually thinking, how am I gonna execute bringing the message that I want for the album in its entirety, but still catering to the part of me that finds the joy and love of my culture, outside of the defense of my culture. You know, and that's a beautiful theme that I couldn't explore previously.

I'm one of those artists who sort of record gibberish on their phones, just to get the initial reaction to a beat.

*\*voice memo\**

And I know I'm gonna go back, listen to that flow, and add words to the flow.

With the verse, I wanted to take on a more spoken storytelling than fully rapped. And, you know, all the ad libs and all the bravado; It didn't need that. The music was doing that for it. All I have to do is give the listener a direction of what the story was about.

You know, we struggle with this journey of pursuing our passion, but we are victorious on the other side, if we continue at it.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Vocals: "These certainly are the signs / Many men left to their own devices / Tell the story, leaving out the cries")*

"Many men left to their devices, tell the story, leaving out the cries." You know, you always hear about someone being victorious, but you never hear the sad part of the story. You never hear the sad part of their journey.

And then after that, it was like:

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Vocals: "Sucks to be the boss / The hunter should be licking at my balls / I'm lion, I'm king / )*

My mom doesn't like this line: "The hunter should be licking at my balls."  
*(chuckles)* "I'm lion, I'm king."

I'm the one who's directing my journey. I'm not the hunter in this story; I'm the lion. I shouldn't be scared of the hunter. This is my kingdom. This is my journey.

And sort of, yeah, just guiding the listener through a shared, sort of, human experience of struggling through something that you want to achieve. And we are talking about that together.

You know, I struggle through this part of my story. A lot of people won't tell you the tears they've gone through with their story, but I'm still here. I want to be the author of this story. And so we are going through that story together, listener and, you know, writer.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*( "Man, applause I'm feelin' it / But of course, what is the cost, I'm healing now / I'm dealing with my heroes always shitting on my flaws / When I was younger you was on my walls / Now it's "Replace this" / There will never be another me, n\*\*\*\* / So I figure I could carve my own path / Soaring, I'm am exhibit on my name / I'm Sammy, I'm Tembo, I'm Eve, I'm Sampa, I'm great" )*

And then came the chorus. It just felt like you finally reached that realization that you can do it. All these obstacles are happening, but - let me be great.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*( "Ahhh, yeah / Let me, let me / Ahhh, yeah / Let me, let me" )*

That's my sister, and my cousin.

Mag44: There's an organ in there.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*organ\**

It's percussive. And an organ is unlikely to be used as a percussive instrument. But it gives the whole beat movement.

Sampa: In the second verse, I was speaking to up-and-coming artists.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Vocals: "And you can never fail / Where even when you fall, you prevail / And you can never lessen with a lesson")*

We do actually get into the (laughs) bitterness of being a young artist who, you know, is inspired by all these idols, but is disappointed, also, with the lack of guidance.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*("And Simon said, "Stay in your lane" / If I stayed out and played with them little rhyme books / Singing Tupac hooks / Still ignoring the fact that a queen named Lauryn / Said that you can conquer any hill / That's how I feel, that's how I feel")*

The reason I named myself Sampa the Great was because of the self-doubt. But, if I was gonna take on being an artist, I'd want to be the greatest version of myself. So that's where the Great came from.

And calling the song "Let Me Be Great" is sort of like a play at words. Like, let me actually step into my own greatness, and create my own path.

*("Let Me Be Great" by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*("Remember when there's doubt, fear / You would have your voice in the song in your ear / You can time travel, any month, any year / You're the greatest, yeah I told you cause its what you need to hear / Yeah I'm gonna be, great")*

Sampa: We would laugh in the studio, we would be having, like, a heck of a time.

And I listened to the songs and I'm like, these sound really good to me. But do they sound good 'cause I'm having so much fun?

S + M: *(chuckle)*

Sampa: Are these actually, like –

S + M: – good songs?

Sampa: We've been just laughing throughout.

Mag44: Yeah.

Sampa: So the beginning of “Let Me Be Great” was done by Sam Nyambe.

Mag44: Sam, the keyboard player.

Sampa: The keyboard player, and one of the main collaborators of the album, who is just known to joke...

Mag44: ...Like he's getting paid for it.

Sampa: Like he's getting paid for it! And so, I walk into the studio, they play the track.

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(\*intro vocals\*)*

And I think, wow, the beginning of this track just sounds so spiritual, sounds, you know, what language is this? This almost sounds South African. What's the beginning of this track?

And then Sam laughs for a good, like, five minutes. And he's like, okay, you have to actually play this backwards. And I'm like, what? Play the intro backwards. And I'm like, okay.

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Reversed vocals: “You ain't got nothing on a n\*\*\*\*”)*

S + M: *(chuckle)*

Sampa: Oh, no. So, I'm here thinking, I thought this intro was so moving, like the perfect intro into this song about uplifting. And here Sam goes, just saying, Hey, you ain't got nothing on a n\*\*\*\*. And sadly enough, I already got used to it, so I said, let's, let's hope nobody rewinds this intro.

When we were in the studio, we were trying to think, okay, how do we end this song? Because “Let Me Be Great” is so grand and so cinematic, it felt like we needed a summary.



So it started with the: [vocalizes] “Mmm, ahh, yeah yeah.”

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*( “Mmm, ahh, yeah yeah / Mmm, ahh, yeah yeah” )*

But we didn't know how to circle that back to the song. And, I think Sam was just like, why don't we say the chorus again, but we can't say it the same way we're saying it, because it's very repetitive. Like, how do we switch up the melody?

He is like, okay, say it twice! “Let me, let me be great.” And we're like, ah, that's dope! Do that again!

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Vocals: “Mmm, ahh, yeah yeah / Mmm, ahh, yeah yeah / Let me, let me be great / Let me, let me be great” )*

You know, for a minute there, it was just me. No mentors, no family member who understood the musical journey, or the music industry. So it's, there's sort of a young disappointment.

Which is funny enough, because the person who ended up featuring on this song is now my mentor.

Angélique: Hey, my name is Angélique Kidjo. I'm a singer-songwriter from Benin, West Africa.

The first time I heard Sampa the Great was her NPR Tiny Desk. I mean, the artistry around it -

Sampa: The theme was “An At-Home Performance.” And, you know, we thought, what better way to do an at-home performance than showing that we are at home, wearing our traditional fabric, and really like, putting our country on the map. And everyone was like yeah, let's do it.

Angélique: And after I watched that, I'm like, whoa! Her boldness. It's just like, I am a queen. I am a goddess. And I will do whatever I wanna do. It reminded me of myself when I started it, having that confidence, not knowing where I was going, starting my career. But the fear was always a strength for me. Because I'm like, I will stumble, I will fall, but I will always grab myself back up and continue.

And that confidence, I found it in Sampa.

Sampa: I look at my Instagram and I get a DM from Angélique Kidjo. So I'm just like, first, Angélique uses Instagram? Wow.

S + M: *(chuckle)*

Sampa: Then I'm like, a legend is DMing you. She broke open the doors of Afro Pop, Afro Fusion and Afrofuturism. She was one of the first. And allowed young African artists to see our culture and our music as something not to be ashamed of, or demonized.

A lot of the times it was like, okay, you have to talk like this. English speaking music is the best music. And that was just not the case for Angélique. She was gonna sing in her language. She was gonna wear her cultural clothes, like, she was gonna make it cool to be African.

Mag44: Right.

Sampa: And to me as a young girl, seeing that, I was like, oh! So, it gave me permission to do the same. So it's a pretty big deal.

So I'm screaming there, squealing, showing my sister. She's like, open it! I'm like, no, I don't have the strength. I don't, I don't think I can take what's on the other side of this DM. And so I finally sit in the studio, I open the DM and she's like, that NPR Tiny Desk performance was beautiful. I would love to work with you. I'm making an album and I would love you to be on it.

I'm like, without any breath. "Thank you so much. Love you. You're an inspiration to me. I'll get it done today." Like, really just showing my love for her music.

And around that same time we're working on "Let Me Be Great." And so I'm like, hmm. I might as well ask her to be on my album as well.

And she goes,

A +S: "I love the song."

Angélique: Because at this young age, she's already quickly understanding that, in order to make an impact, you have to be deeply knowledgeable about yourself. And also realize, in the world we live in, greatness has no boundaries; has no color; has no gender. When you're an African artist, and you're a woman African artist, people have so ma- you cannot be modern. I went through the same thing when I

did my first album. it was too modern for certain people that want us to be put in a museum.

Modernity is not for African people, because people have been fed so many negative narratives about African artists. “We have to be traditional. We have to do traditional music.” It’s like we have to be put on a shelf from a museum. Modernity is too advanced for us.

And that song was like, no. Let me be great, because I am great.

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Vocals: Ahh, yeah / Let me, let me / Ahh, yeah / Let me, let me / )*

Sampa: She added her chorus to the chorus we had already made. And I remember listening back to it, and we heard her vocals, and we took our vocals out.

S + M: *(chuckle)*

Sampa: We’re like, ok, you don’t need this. You don’t need these.

Mag44: All we need is this.

Sampa: All we need is Angelique.

Mag44: I mean, her voice was so powerful.

Sampa: Her voice – she holds, I think, you know, the ancestral way of singing.

Angélique: I did the main voice and I did the backing, and then I did harmonization that I have to do.

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*(Chorus vocals: Ahh, yeah / Let me, let me / Ahh, yeah / Let me, let me / )*

Sampa: And then she added a beautiful twist to the outro in her language

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*Angélique outro\**

Angélique: I’m singing in the language called Yoruba. Because my mom, and my mother’s mother, they are from Nigeria, the southern part, Yoruba tribe. What I’m saying is,

“Let me be the woman that you look up to. Let me be the, the leader of my own life. Let me be whoever I wanna be.”

The point that I wanted to bring to the table is that we can say, “Let me be great,” in other languages, too.

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

*\*outro\**

Sampa: Angelique to me, today, is my mentor. We do talk a lot. We exchange thoughts and, to be honest, it feels like a great manifestation.

Hrishikesh: Maybe this is already the case, but: Are you ready to be someone else's mentor?

Sampa: Hmm. I think, more so as I grow. I'm getting myself ready to be somebody else's mentor. My hesitation is just making sure I don't pass down any fears or doubts to my mentee.

But when I came home, I was surrounded by Zambians. I was surrounded by Zambian musicians. I didn't have to, you know, go above and beyond to make sure that I was seen. So when we were working on music, I knew that I was working with people who understood the language of this music, cuz they were raised on it as well.

And when I finally convinced myself to write to “Let Me Be Great,” when you showed the beat to me the thousandth time -

Mag44: Yes.

Sampa: Yeah. It became less about defense music, and more about joy music.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's “Let Me Be Great,” by Sampa the Great, featuring Angélique Kidjo, in its entirety.

*(“Let Me Be Great” by SAMPA THE GREAT)*

For more, visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net). You can find links to buy or stream “Let Me Be Great,” plus you can watch the music video, and you can watch Sampa the Great's NPR Tiny Desk Concert.

Before we sign off, I just wanted to mention that this is the last episode of the year. This is the end of the ninth season, and ninth year, of Song Exploder, and I

just wanted to thank you for listening. And I want to thank all the amazing musicians who've shared their stories on the podcast this year.

We're going to take a few weeks off, and then we'll be back in late January.

Song Exploder, and the show's theme music, were created by me. I produced this episode with Craig Eley, with artwork by Carlos Lerma, music clearance by Kathleen Smith, and production assistance from Mary Dolan.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening, and happy new year.