



Freedom Fire
The Indestructible Beat of Soweto (Vol. 3)

This is the third in a marvelous series of albums detailing the vast output of "mbaqanga" or township jive musicians. *Vol. 1* was an epochal release that, combined with Paul Simon's *Graceland*, focused attention on world class talents like Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

Vol. 2 revolved around slicker, more recent offerings from another set of artists, almost all of whom were intriguing enough to demand they be searched out on their own.

Vol. 3 may lack the sweep of

those earlier releases, but it is no less rewarding. As always, the music is an intoxicating mix of thick, loping basslines, complex arrangements and call-and-response vocals.

Because so many major acts have already been featured, *Freedom Fire* serves as a mini-showcase for Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, who've performed together and separately since the '60s. Mahlathini has a deep, growling voice that earned him the nickname "Lion of Soweto." The Mahotella Queens are a female

vocal group whose tight, swift harmonies contrast wonderfully with his raspy attack.

These artists appear in one combination or another on nine of the 15 tracks. Since so little of their music is available in the United States, this hardly seems enough. Other standout artists include the male vocal group Amaswazi Emvelo and Johnson Mkhali.

The latter appears on "Let's Go Together," an instrumental in the style of accordion jive, a hard-driving music that is especially infectious.

Whatever the song's topic — be it a warning to stay in school, a call to Christianity or a man's comical lament about the travails of marriage — the underlying message is an uplifting one. The relentlessly rhythmic music underpinning them wouldn't have it any other way.

Anyone who enjoyed *Graceland* — or Peter Gabriel's *Security* or Talking Heads' *Speaking In Tongues*, for that matter — would do well to seek this series out.

BY MICHAEL GILTZ