

“Struggling to define a nation”: A selective overview of South African jazz recordings 1959-2009

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For Chris Ballantine

Introduction

Lara Allen, writing of the origins of South African *kwela* music of the 1950s, divides the history of the country into three distinct periods. Following “Gramsci’s notions of the relationship between culture and society’s economic base,” she identifies three points of what he refers to as “situational change” (1996, p. 52).

In the South African context, these are the first period of colonialisation (1652), the second of industrialisation (1886), and the last of the installation of *apartheid* and the struggle for independence (1948). These dates coincide with the arrival of the Dutch voyager Jan van Riebeeck at the Cape of Good Hope, the discovery of gold in the north of the country, and the coming to power of the Nationalist government.

As Allen describes it, “Each situation brings with it a primary method of allocating social, economic and political power: colonial categorisation is racial; for industrialists power is allotted according to class, and in the struggle for majority rule the primary aim is the inversion of power in both the above categories of race and class.” Through such Gramscian lenses, categories of race and class seem both static and rigid, with the attendant dangers of

essentialising and totalising a situation that was far more fluid than the grand narrative of apartheid ever admitted. Alternative viewpoints might consider how the migrant labour system and urbanisation contributed to “the fragmented and ambiguous nature of class formation in early twentieth-century South African society,” as Veit Erlmann states in *African Stars*, concluding from this that a concept of class as a homogeneous category is problematic as a tool for understanding South African popular music (1991, p. 179):

In Durban, for instance, black residents may have performed class-based distinctions in their performance activities, but the analysis of recorded material reveals that virtually all sectors of the city's black population drew on the same stock of musical techniques and practices.

Identifying three areas for future research (“the growing class differentiation in South African society, the development of popular music after 1945, and the growth of black resistance to political and cultural domination”), Erlmann (ibid.) concludes by highlighting “the need to situate the development and ideology of modern performance styles within a network of fluctuating group relations.”

It is important to note that Erlmann’s focus is on recordings, which are relatively rare in the context of early South African jazz and popular music. Christopher Ballantine’s pioneering study *Marabi Nights* (1994) provides a fascinating account of the links between early jazz and vaudeville in South Africa, as well as a number of recordings of the time and other archival material (photographs, posters, and so on). The first edition of his study included a cassette tape with rare examples of archival recordings of the 1930s and 1940s.

I want to emphasise the point that while the histories of jazz and popular music are intertwined with the history of twentieth century recording technology, this relationship should not blind us to alternative histories of live performance (ephemeral as these may be). Further, music and resistance coalesced in the form of protest songs galvanising political rallies and accompanying industrial action in the field, beyond the confines of the recording studio¹.

¹ See Gilbert in Olwage 2008.

Above all we need to keep in mind that the record industry is a capitalist enterprise with the stated purpose of selling products, which are to a degree purpose-built to cater for the tastes of an imaginary public. The South African record industry often served the interests of the dominant ideology, especially under grand apartheid where the state's apparatus of control extended to censoring lyrics and album covers that were construed as "undesirable," a label that covered a multitude of sins from pornography to political resistance².

In this address I survey selected recordings drawn from fifty years of South African jazz in relation to socio-political events, discussing the circumstances under which they were produced and their impact and legacy as social texts that served to unite resistance against the *status quo* of the time. The recordings, arranged in a historicist framework for the sake of a coherent chronology, stand as reminders of underlying themes of journeys both physical and aural, exile and homesickness, struggle and overcoming. As such, these artifacts bear witness in sound to networks of relationships between jazz in South Africa and elsewhere in the world and local responses to jazz as practised in the United States and Europe. Through the hardships of exile, South African musicians brought "a whole dialectic of richness" to a wider international audience.

South African jazz conceals an undercurrent of dance and anger, tradition and freedom, a whole dialectic of richness, which doubtless explains the attraction that this antipodean music exerts on the revolutionary Archie Shepp.

Jazz Magazine May 1989, cited in McGregor 1995, p. 216

² For example, the local version of the Jimi Hendrix album *Electric Ladyland* was released with new packaging because the imported version featured bare-breasted women. For an account of album cover iconography under apartheid, see Drewett in Olwage 2008.

1. 1959 and all that: The Jazz Epistles *Jazz epistle verse 1*



Figure 1: The Jazz Epistles *Jazz epistle verse 1* (1959)

When Julian Beinhart writes (as cited in McGregor 1995, p. 23): “One day when someone sits down to write the history of jazz in South Africa, he might find that South Africa’s 1917 was 1959. For it was then that six talented men became the Jazz Epistles, the first group in the country with real aims and a unity of outlook,” scholars of jazz history will understand his reference to 1917 as not only the year the United States entered the Great War, but also when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band (ODJB) went into the studio to record the first so-called jazz recording.

With a full complement of animal noises and other humorous instrumental effects, *Livery Stable Blues* for all its historical interest is closer to vaudeville than jazz, and its formal arrangement communicates little of the rich tradition of affect that American blues draws from. Under the leadership of Dominic James “Nick” LaRocca, the ODJB was comprised of

white musicians, fairly ironic given that King Oliver passed up the opportunity to earn the distinction of producing the first jazz recording³.

1959, a pivotal year in American jazz⁴ saw the formation of the Jazz Epistles⁵, which ensemble Beinhart characterises as “the first group with real aims and a unity of outlook.” Let us examine this value-judgement with care, for it seems on the face of it almost as controversial as that which surrounds the ODJB recording with which Beinhart is consciously comparing. Separated not only by a time interval of more than forty years but also by geographical and cultural distance in their origination on different continents (South Africa and the United States), there is certainly little of a common musical basis on which to compare these different recordings.

Returning to Beinhart, since there is clear evidence of earlier recordings of South African jazz from the 1930s, one is hard pressed to understand what he means by “real aims,” unless he is taken as hailing the original music as a form of high art akin to bebop’s status in African-American music. Struan Douglas sets the scene as follows:

At the same time, the Jo'berg scene was being set alight by Kippie Moeketsi, who modelled himself on the erratic, hip and stylish Charlie Parker, innovating and improvising on the saxophone with similar brilliance. He joined young trumpeter Hugh Masekela, trombonist Jonas Gwangwa and arrangement genius Abdullah Ibrahim to form The Jazz Epistles....

³ “However unfair and indicative of the racism of the era, the record *Livery Stable Blues*, coupled with *Dixie Jass Band One Step* became the first Jazz record ever released on February 26, 1917 for the Victor Talking Machine Company. It was wildly successful. Its release signaled the beginning of the Jazz age and helped define the wild, exuberant (sic) era we call the ‘Roaring Twenties.’ “

⁴ See Brubeck 2003.

⁵ “The Jazz Epistles consisted of Dollar Brand (later known as Abdullah Ibrahim) on piano, Kippie Moeketsi on alto saxophone, Jonas Gwangwa on trombone, Hugh Masekela on trumpet, Johnny Gertze on bass, and Early Mabuza or Makaya Ntshoko on drums.” Tony McGregor, “Jazz Epistles Verse One - a Classic South African Jazz Album featuring Dollar Brand” (<http://tonymac04.hubpages.com/hub/Jazz-Epistles-Verse-One---a-Classic-South-African-Jazz-Album>), accessed 20 October 2011.

The Jazz Epistles were the first black South African group to record an album but broke up only six months after forming. Other than Abdullah, the band joined the all African opera, *King Kong*⁶.

Tony McGregor describes the Epistles' style as "harder-edged, more bop-oriented than the more usual swing-oriented groups that were popular at the time." This points to an early example of a syncretic fusion of African musical sensibilities and American bebop, borne out by Douglas's claim that Kippie Moeketsi took as his role model Charlie Parker, the alto saxophonist who for many critics is the quintessential representative of this style. Perhaps most significantly, bebop represents a particular response by African-American musicians to their exclusion from the mainstream of 1940s American music. These musicians wished to be taken seriously as creative artists, suggesting that bebop was informed by a new political as well as musical self-consciousness.

The Jazz Epistles took the brave step of recording only original music, which raises some vexing questions about originality and the influence of American jazz. Chris Ballantine explores these complex issues in a number of articles (1991, 1996, 1999, 2000) as well as in *Marabi Nights*. As Ballantine argues, there was a certain amount of ambivalence with respect to US influence, with some people adopting the mannerisms of American gangsters with enthusiasm and others decrying the negative effect of a slavish adherence to foreign influence in no uncertain terms. At any rate, as John Edwin Mason (2007, p.28) describes it, "hipster" jazz and its integrated fan base of musicians and public alike represented a major threat to the regime. Supported by the legislation of petty apartheid, especially the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act (No 49 of 1953), the authorities reacted quickly to prevent such cross-cultural interaction:

Despite its small audience, modern jazz perplexed the apartheid state, which attacked it (and less obscure jazz styles) relentlessly during the repression that followed the Sharpsville (sic) massacre of March 1960. The police progressively shut down racially integrated nightclubs and enforced statutes which prohibited both black musicians from playing before white audiences and musicians of different races from performing together.

⁶ Struan Douglas, "Bebop and Beyond the Blues - South African Jazz History, Part 2" (<http://www.jazzrendezvous.co.za/special/spe2006062706.php>), accessed 8 February 2012.

I myself remember working with musicians of colour in the 1970s who had to appear under assumed names to perform in venues reserved for whites. However, as Paul Hanmer notes (in Ansell 2004, p. 184), *apartheid* created divisions within the jazz community that went beyond the visibly obvious stereotypes of race and colour: “I am also talking about within the musical brotherhood/sisterhood, there are people [who] have looked at me and said: you are a bit paler than us, you wear glasses and you can read music—it means you can't play...”

These comments highlight the pernicious effects of a system that entrenched division within like-minded communities, and warn us of the danger of assuming that musicians' responses to this state of affairs were necessarily unified in the same way as were political ones. Hanmer's comments point to a conception of community that was less united than one might wish to assume.

2. 1960s: *Yakhal'inkomo* (1968)

Winston “Mankunku” Ngozi's (1943-2009) 1968 recording *Yakhal'inkomo* appeared towards the end of the 1960s, a decade which had seen the self-imposed exile of many of South Africa's top jazz musicians, such as Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes⁷, Abdullah Ibrahim, Hugh Masekela, and many others. As Tony McGregor describes *Yakhal'inkomo*'s impact:

⁷ See Dlamini (2009) and McGregor (1995) for accounts of the history and influence of the various groups led by Chris McGregor.



Figure 2: Mankunku Quartet *Yakhal'inkomo* (1968)

This theme came to be one of the most instantly recognisable in all of South African jazz. Fans at jazz gigs unfailingly greet these bars with shouts and cries of recognition. This composition by the man affectionately, and almost universally, known to jazz fans simply as “Mankunku” was taken into the hearts and consciousness of people from its first release in 1968, to the extent that it sold around 50 000 copies in its first two years.

Accompanied by Lionel Pillay, Agrippa Magwaza, and Early Mabuza, the 25-year old Mankunku forged a musical alliance between the modal jazz of the late 1950s (Miles Davis’ *Kind of Blue*) and John Coltrane’s more harmonically complex harmonic schemas. As Nils Jacobson describes it (2002):

Mankunku occupies the higher realms of sound carved out by Coltrane in his later records, from *Africa Brass* through *A Love Supreme* and beyond. His style relies on deliberate exposition and development of themes, always keeping an eye on structure while stretching it to extremes.

3. 1970s: Mannenberg (Abdullah Ibrahim 1974), Soweto 1976

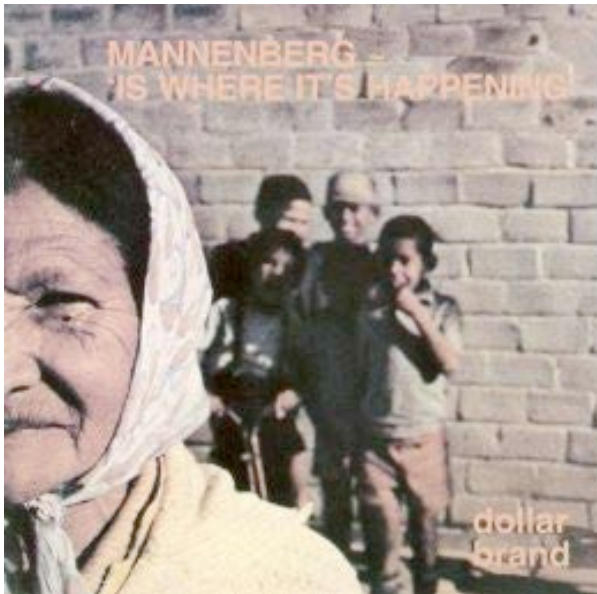


Figure 3: Dollar Brand (aka Abdullah Ibrahim) *Mannenberg...is where it's happening!* (1974)

For John Edwin Mason (2007), *Mannenberg* represents Ibrahim's achievement of "an authentically South African mode of expression within the jazz tradition, blending South African musical forms—*marabi*, *mbaqanga* and *langarm*—with American jazz." Mason traces the history of the song from its appearance in 1974 and its subsequent adoption by the coloured community in Cape Town to its re-emergence in the 1980s as a struggle anthem, as what he terms South Africa's "unofficial national anthem." The iconic status of the song thus develops first from its commercial success, then through its title (bound by a sense of community and place to the township on the Cape Flats for which it is named), and finally through its rediscovery as an anthem accompanying political action⁸.

In 1976, the schoolchildren of Soweto took to the streets in protest against the imposition of having lessons in Afrikaans. As Alastair Boddy-Evans (2009) describes it:

⁸ Ibrahim's *Mannenberg revisited* is the single track representing South African jazz in the revised Smithsonian Collection of Classis Jazz (2011).

So when the Department of Education issued its decree that Afrikaans was to become a language of instruction at school, it was into an already volatile situation. Students objected to being taught in the language of the oppressor. Many teachers themselves could not speak Afrikaans, but were now required to teach their subjects in it.

Major fault-lines were beginning to appear in the state apparatus although the regime managed to maintain control for nearly another two decades, despite political pressure from inside the country and beyond its borders.



Figure 4: "Probably the most famous photograph of the uprising is the photo by Samuel Nzima of Mbuyisa Makhubu carrying the body of 13-year-old Hector Petersen, who had been shot, with Hector's sister running next to him."

<http://africanhistory.about.com/od/apartheid/a/Soweto-Uprising-Pt2.htm>

4. 1980s: Dark times (the Rainbow), beginnings of jazz education



Figure 5: Mankunku and the author Rainbow restaurant 1985 Vula magazine (not in picture Darius Brubeck, Sandile Shange, and Kevin Gibson)

The Rainbow restaurant in Pinetown⁹ provided (and continues to provide) a social space for musicians of all colours to perform to an integrated audience, technically against the law under petty apartheid with severe legal penalties prohibiting such onstage interactions.

⁹ See Duby 2012, in preparation.

Jazz education took root in this decade thanks to the efforts of Darius Brubeck, Louis Drummond van Rensburg, Mike Campbell, and others. The first postgraduate degree in Jazz Studies was awarded in 1987. Not unexpectedly perhaps, in their infancy the curricula for these programmes drew from existing American models.

Politically these were dark times as the repressive state apparatus began to buckle under severe political pressure from within and outside its borders (cultural boycott etc.) Waves of reaction and counter-reaction ensued. State control of information was supported by spending on computer resources third only to the US and Britain¹⁰ (see Stanford site).

The education we receive is meant to keep the South African people apart from one another, to breed suspicion, hatred and violence, and to keep us backward. Education is formulated so as to reproduce this society of racism and exploitation.

Congress of South African Students, 1984¹¹

5. 1990s: Democracy

With the release of President Mandela and the installation of the first democratic government in South Africa, the opportunity arose for the country to re-define itself. Through initiatives like the Truth and Reconciliation hearings, many of the painful events of the history of what Ballantine describes as “a system of almost unimaginable brutality” (2000, p. 393) were brought into the light of day. The lifting of the cultural boycott meant the beginnings of an ongoing exchange between local and overseas musicians, and many key figures in South African jazz returned from exile to make their contributions to the creation of a new South Africa.

¹⁰ Chokshi et al (1995): “In 1977, only the U.S. and Britain spent more on computer technology than South Africa as a percentage of gross national product, while in 1980, 75% of the computers in South Africa were purchased from American corporations.”

¹¹ Boddy-Evans, Alastair. "Apartheid Quotes - Bantu Education " 2009. Web. 2/16/2012 <<http://africanhistory.about.com/od/apartheid/qt/ApartheidQts1.htm>>.

This decade saw the founding of the National Youth Jazz Festival held annually in Grahamstown, which provides an opportunity for South African students and professionals to engage in musical and personal dialogue with their overseas counterparts.

6. 2000s: Oulap'salms (Playola 2000 Paul Hanmer) First decade of the twenty-first century

Paul Hanmer: Not only did apartheid succeed in dividing people in terms of socio-economic class and colour...they divided our hearts from our minds, they divided our work from our play, they divided us from our truths. They divided our eyes from what we see before us. So those are the kind of barriers I'm talking about.

(Ansell 2004, p. 184)

Hanmer (b. 1961) goes on to underscore the diversity and level of activity of music-making in the community where he grew up, acknowledging its influence on his own musical identity (ibid.):

Out of my community comes music from the Coon carnivals, from the mosque, from the church, from guys selling snoek [fish] and vegetables. It took me thirty years to want to realise that this is my community and that part of my sound comes from it, too. So that's the kind of isolation I'm talking about.

Hanmer's comments are especially revealing because he was among a group of musicians who chose to stay in South Africa, those for whom exile was not an option. It might be argued that exiles face the worst possible type of separation, being uprooted from home and family and country, culture and customs, but the isolation Hanmer describes here is division and separation at a visceral level, at the level of the embodied individual.

Chats Devroop and Chris Walton (2007) have documented the testimony of some of those who made the choice to stay behind. As Johnny Meko states it (in Devroop and Walton 2007, pp. 18-19 emphasis added): "You would be amazed at the bands in those years. Those bands we played in *kept the hopes and dreams of the masses alive.*" Finally, Darius Brubeck (who with the support of Chris Ballantine instituted one of the first programmes in jazz

education in the 1980s at the then University of Natal) sounds a note of hope about the future of jazz in South Africa, in Schadeberg 2007, p. 80:

These university-trained musicians, like many of their peers throughout the country, mix performance and academic careers and local and international experience. They represent a 'new South Africa' built on the vibrant and tragic past that makes the history of jazz in South Africa such a moving story.

Whether the powers that be can or will heed Chats Devroop's call for a TRC on music (2007) remains moot, but the upsurge of interest in tracing the nuances of our past and painful history is demonstrated by the work of a new generation of scholars who attempt to contribute to a renewed understanding of the role South African jazz played in the country's journey to democracy. It seems beyond doubt that music played a vital role in expressing the political aspirations of many South Africans beyond the immediate circumstances of particular historical moments; one thinks of the part played by specific places such as the Vortex in 1960s Cape Town (Rasmussen 2001) and the Rainbow in 1980s Pinetown (Duby 2012) in articulating some possibilities for a non-racial democratic future.

These were places where the central focus was music, and a side-effect was the bringing into being of temporary communities of interest where musicians and audiences explored various types of fusion, between *maskanda* and *marabi*, Indian classical music and American jazz, *kwela* and European music, through a process Nishlyn Ramanna (2005b) has described as "discourse of place."

7. Conclusion

I believe that music played an important part in the struggle for democracy in South Africa. This alliance between music (specifically South African jazz) and politics may be less obvious in the nearly two decades since the ANC came to power, although high level gestures of recognition salute the part played by prominent musicians, many of whom used their music as a vehicle for overt political statement outside the borders of the country. One thinks most immediately of the honorary doctorates awarded to iconic figures like Dr Miriam Makeba and Dr Abdullah Ibrahim. These musicians and many like them trod the lonely path

of existence in foreign lands. It seems to me that *apartheid* inflicted its own type of exile on those who stayed behind, as Paul Hanmer so vividly describes.

One should also bear in mind that South Africans also expressed their political aspirations through a whole tradition of labour songs, the *Voëlvry* movement which galvanised a more liberal Afrikaner youth in the turbulent 1980s, and by way of alternative record labels such as Shifty Records (run by Lloyd Ross) who drew on punk and other genres to draft an alternative sonic and often satiric vision of local conditions of life (James Phillips, Warric Sony, and the Kalahari Surfers, among others).

These alternative pathways notwithstanding, the enshrinement of jazz in the academy in the mid-1980s has led to the rise of an entire generation of technically well-equipped schooled musicians, the best of whom are capable of holding their own with international names, for example Bokani Dyer with *Soweto Kinch* in *Grahamstown 2011*. Critics of the system of jazz education for its sometimes literal reading of Afro-American creativity are right to point out how its counterparts in western art music have failed to transform, while jazz studies is not only producing professional musicians but also an upsurge of well-trained and productive South African researchers who are investigating through various theoretical lenses what Darius Brubeck has called “the vibrant and tragic past that makes the history of jazz in South Africa such a moving story.”

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