Get Up, Stand Up
The Role of Music as a Driver For Political Change in Apartheid South Africa

Taylor R. Genovese

Please cite as:

Genovese, Taylor R. 2013. Get Up, Stand Up: The Role of Music as a Driver For Political Change in Apartheid South Africa. Unpublished MS, School of Anthropology, The University of Arizona.

INTRODUCTION

“Any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be prohibited; when modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them.” -

Plato, *The Republic*

Music has always played a critical role within social change and the struggle for supremacy in power relations, but one case study that has continued to be referenced is South Africa during apartheid. The history of South Africa under apartheid is marked by one of the most vicious acts of racial segregation and denial of human rights in modern history. In fact, the word *apartheid* literally means “separateness” in Afrikaans and there was no veiled attempt to hide what the white communities of South Africa wished to perpetrate on the black Africans.

During apartheid rule, many types of resistance movements began to spring up ranging from organizations of non-violent protest to the armed and powerful African National Congress (ANC). No matter the ways in which South Africans went about protesting the white oppression, music played a major role in uniting and fueling the struggle.

This paper will explore the correlation between music and political change with a focus on South Africa. It will examine the resistance against apartheid through the lens of musical contributions without falling victim to oversimplifying the situation by describing it as a music revolution. By examining music as a form of uniting a people in opposition against, and the eventual dismantling of, the apartheid regime, one can begin to understand the power music can hold within a political context.

CENTURIES OF WHITE RULE: A PRECURSOR TO APARTHEID

The implementation of music in South Africa focusing on resisting apartheid stems from centuries of oppressive rule prior to the apartheid regime and laws. Segregation among racial

lines dates back to the first invasions of European settlers to the African continent. In 1652, a Dutch company began to use the Cape of Good Hope as a base for their fleet of trading ships traveling between Europe and Asia. The establishment of this base ignited a series of frontier wars that drove the Khoi from their lands. The Khoi, primarily living a pastoralist way of life, had their lands converted to European commercial farms and were enslaved as laborers.¹

When the British arrived 150 years later, the Dutch were forced to move inland from the coast and in turn, forced more South Africans from their land. Racial classifications began to be implemented throughout the 300 year rule of the British and the Dutch. Monikers like “white”, “black”, “colored” and “indian” were used to group the increased intermingling of the Europeans and the African populations. When diamonds were discovered in 1867 and gold in 1886 within South Africa, division between the white and black South Africans exponentially increased in both the economic and political realms.²

Starting in 1892, a string of rapid laws were adopted in order to restrict and disenfranchise black Africans. The Franchise and Ballot Act of 1892 placed limits on financial means the extent to which black South Africans could get education. In 1905, the General Pass Regulations Bill denied the vote to all blacks and limited them to specific geographical locations and began the notorious Pass System.³ In 1910, the Union of South Africa was created in order to give whites complete political control over South Africa and making it illegal for blacks to sit in parliament which was followed by the Native Land Act three years later which restricted blacks from purchasing any land outside of “reserves.”⁴

Laws like the above continued throughout the early 20th century until white control over the central legislative, judicial and administrative bodies was absolute. These early policies institutionalized the idea of racial segregation and laid the complete framework for the

¹ Thompson, L. M. (1990). *A history of South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

² *ibid.*

³ Allen, John (2005). *Apartheid South Africa: An Insider's Overview of the Origin and Effects of Separate Development*. iUniverse. p. xi.

⁴ Leach, Graham (1986). *South Africa: No Easy Path to Peace*. Routledge. p. 68.

impending apartheid. Any efforts for black South Africans to organize a resistance were immediately met with state-sanctioned violence that increased in intensity over time.

After three hundred years of white rule in South Africa, the division between blacks and whites “were divided on nearly every conceivable level.”⁵ Practically every aspect of daily life between a black South African and a white were insurmountably different. The white minority had complete access to the means of production and ability to reap the wealth from the country. This created instability and dissidence between the racial groups. In order to combat this, the white leaders decided to “further entrench the existing divisions under an ironclad system of racial separation that would be known as apartheid.”⁶

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF APARTHEID

The General Election in 1948 solidified the already long history of racial discrimination in South Africa. The Afrikaner Nationalist Party (NP), made up of white South Africans, was voted into power and their platform of apartheid began to be implemented. The phrase “vote into power” is a bit of a misnomer, however, since only whites were allowed to vote.

Immediately after the NP was voted into power under the leadership of Daniel Francois Malan, apartheid laws began to be passed. Several of the principal laws passed included the Population Registration Act of 1950, which officially sanctioned racial classification and required all persons over the age of 18 to carry with them an identification card specifying their racial categorization. If one's race was unclear, official state boards were established to classify citizens. This was difficult for mixed families, even if they were not white, because members of the same family could be classified as different races.⁷ The Group Areas Act of 1950 required

⁵ Clark, Nancy L.; Worger, William H. (2007). *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Harlow. p. 31.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Goldin, Ian (1987). *Making Race: The Politics and Economics of Coloured Identity in South Africa*. Longman. p. xxvi.

that residential areas be zoned in accordance to race. This was later justification for the forced removal of people who occupied the wrong racial zone.⁸

Many other laws were passed on racial lines but as this paper is to focus on music and resistance, it will not go into depth on the legal aspects. It will also refrain from entering the debate on why apartheid was able to be implemented, especially in a time when the spread of humans rights issues were on the rise across the world. Instead, it shall examine how music had the ability to unify and solidify a resistance movement for disenfranchised black South Africans.

THE RISE OF SUBVERSIVE MUSIC

Even though music in South Africa could hold political meaning, it was not always so explicit. When one thinks of a political protest song, one usually thinks of a song that is rich in subversion from its lyrics to the musical style. However, sometimes a song could be rebellious through its use and function.⁹ For example, sometimes a song's meaning on the surface is coded and recontextualized into a coded message. "To illustrate, one press report claimed that Mafuya's recording '*Udumo Lwamaphoyisa*' (A Strong Police Force) was sung by 'look-out boys' to warn shebeen queens and illicit drinkers of police presence and the possibility of a liquor raid."¹⁰ Therefore, the use of music in a context of dissent was already present in South Africa.

One of the first protest songs to emerge in the new apartheid-run South Africa was by a composer name Vuyisile Mini. His song, titled "Ndodemnyama we Verwoerd" ("Watch Out, Verwoerd") became very popular in South Africa. It was a song in condemnation of Hendrik Verwoerd, the prime minister of South Africa from 1958 until his assassination in 1966 and he

⁸ Besteman, Catherine Lowe (2008). Transforming Cape Town. University of California Press. p. 6.

⁹ Schumann, Anne (2008). The Beat that Beat Apartheid: The Role of Music in the Resistance against Apartheid in South Africa. *Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien*. Number 14. p. 24.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

was sometimes referred to as the “Architect of Apartheid” because of his role in implementing so many apartheid based laws while he was the Minister of Native Affairs.¹¹

Mini was known as “the organizer of the unorganized” and was one of the first inducted into the ANC’s military branch in 1961. After his arrest in 1963 for “political crimes”, including sabotage and involvement with the death of a police informer, Mini refused to give up evidence against his accomplices and was sentenced to death. According to a fellow prisoner, Mini sang “Ndodemnyama we Verwoerd” on his way to the gallows. The prisoner’s recollection of this moment is worth quoting because of the poignance and haunting beauty of one of South Africa’s first musician revolutionaries.¹²

And then, unexpectedly, the voice of Vuyisile Mini came roaring down the hushed passages. Evidently standing on a stool, with his face reaching up to a barred vent in his cell, his unmistakable bass voice was enunciating his final message...to the world he was leaving. In a voice charged with emotion but stubbornly defiant he spoke of the struggle waged by the African National Congress and of his absolute conviction of the victory to come...Soon after, I heard the door of their cell being opened. Murmuring voices reached by straining ears, and then the three martyrs [Mini and his accomplices] broke into a final poignant melody which seemed to fill the whole prison with sound and then gradually faded away into the distant depths of the condemned section.¹³

The song was sung for years following Mini’s execution and is still sung by contemporary artists such as Afrika Bambaataa.

THE ANC ORGANIZES

The ANC had become the formally recognized opposition to the apartheid after its creation in 1912 when several hundred educated South African elite established the congress to protest racial discrimination. Music was instrumental from the founding as the song “Nkosi Sikelel’

¹¹ Clark, Nancy L.; Worger, William H. (2007). *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Harlow.

¹² Reddy, E.S. (1974). *Vuyisile Mini: Worker, Poet and Martyr for Freedom*. Notes and Documents. No. 31.

¹³ *ibid.*

iAfrika” (“Lord Bless Africa”) was sung at the opening and closing the congressional meetings. The song, originally written by Enoch Sontonga, a teacher at a Methodist mission, became a liberation anthem as well as the anthem for the ANC.¹⁴

By the dawn of apartheid, the changes in African attitudes to politics reflected the ANC’s new radical approach. Under the leadership of Alfred Xuma, the ANC began to adopt a non-cooperation stance with the government. Xuma thought that change could never happen through “polite requests” and with the help of ANC members like Nelson Mandela, established the ANC Youth League in 1944. The aim of the ANC Youth League was to “[invigorate] the national organization and [develop] forceful popular protest against government segregation and discrimination.”¹⁵

The government met Xuma’s demands and actions with stubborn silence until their actions against Sophiatown. Sophiatown was a very musically active town near Johannesburg and was the heart of jazz and *marabi* at the time. Unfortunately, it was also seen as a problem by the government due to it being a racially mixed area. The government ordered the people of Sophiatown to relocate to Meadowlands in Soweto. “Since these policies particularly affected the musical scene, many songs protested this practice, such as the Sun Valley Sisters’ ‘Bye Bye Sophiatown,’ Miriam Makeba’s ‘Sophiatown is Gone’ and Strike Valakazi’s ‘Meadowlands’.”¹⁶

The government, taking the literal translation of Meadowlands “We’re moving night and day to go to Meadowlands. We love Meadowlands”¹⁷, thought that the people of Sophiatown were in support of the relocation. The true ironic nature of the song become an anthem of the protest against the Sophiatown removals and further lyrics express the real devastation that was caused during the forced removal: “We will move all night and day / To go stay in Meadowlands /

¹⁴ Clark, Nancy L.; Worger, William H. (2007). *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Harlow. p. 38.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Schumann, Anne (2008). The Beat that Beat Apartheid: The Role of Music in the Resistance against Apartheid in South Africa. *Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien*. Number 14. p. 24.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

You'll hear the white people saying / Let's go to Meadowlands.”¹⁸ After Sophiatown was destroyed, it was rebuilt as a white-only suburb called *Triomf* (triumph in Afrikaans).

The song “Meadowlands” did something more important than become a protest song for the South African people, it also raised international awareness. Recordings from Nancy Jacobs and Sisters, as well as Miriam Makeba (who also wrote the song “Sophiatown is Gone”) became popular around the world, giving the international community a glimpse into the atrocities that were being committed within South Africa.

THE OUTBREAK OF VIOLENCE

At the dawn of the 1960s, the resistance groups began to undergo changes in their policies regarding violence. The catalyst of this transition from non-violent protest to armed struggle was the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. On March 21st, 1960 a crowd of unarmed protestors met to rally against the Pass Laws and were fired upon by the South African government killing 69 and wounding many more.¹⁹ This action “represents the beginning of the era of repression which stunted all political development among black South Africans in the 60s.”²⁰

The government then declared a state of emergency and outlawed both the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), forcing them underground. The ANC then established the *Umkhonto we Swize*, meaning Spear of the Nation and was also referred to as the MK, and was the military wing of the ANC. The MK began to carry out guerrilla attacks on infrastructure and police stations but made it a priority to avoid taking any lives.

Nelson Mandela, the co-founder of the MK, said that “we felt that without violence there would be no way open to the African people to succeed in their struggle against the principle of

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Schumann, Anne (2008). The Beat that Beat Apartheid: The Role of Music in the Resistance against Apartheid in South Africa. *Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien*. Number 14. p. 25.

²⁰ Jeffrey, Ian (1985). The Sharpetown Swingsters: Their Will to Survive. University of Witwatersrand. p. 3.

white supremacy. All lawful modes of expressing opposition to this principle had been closed by legislation and were placed in a position in which we had either to accept a permanent state of inferiority, or to defy the Government”²¹

During this transition, the music of the time also took on a more militant outlook in both style and lyrics. One of the songs, popular at MK training camps outside of South Africa, was called “Sobashiy’abazali” (“We Will Leave Our Parents”) and it evokes a sense of sadness leaving home as well as having the tenacity to be a freedom fighter: “We will leave our parents at home / We go in and out of foreign countries / To place our fathers and mothers don’t know / Following freedom we say goodbye, goodbye, goodbye home / We are going into foreign countries / To places our fathers and mothers don’t know / Following freedom.”²² The music to this song is more upbeat and energetic than previous protest songs and the rhythm is more militaristic; one could imagine a group of soldiers marching.

Another phenomenon that arose during this time of armed resistance to apartheid was a war dance called toyi-toyi. A group of demonstrators would begin a chant, “the leader would cry out ‘Amandla!’ [meaning ‘power’] and the crowd would respond with ‘Awethu’, which means, ‘to us’. This would complete the cry: ‘Power to the people!’”²³ A former riot police commander candidly commented on the fear and power the toyi-toyi instilled in the apartheid ranks: “Most of the riot police who had to contain those marches were shit-scared of the chanting blacks confronting them. Here was an unarmed mob instilling fear just by their toyi-toyi!”²⁴

²¹ Clark, Nancy L.; Worger, William H. (2007). *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Harlow. p. 150.

²² Olwage, Grant (2008). *Composing Apartheid: Music For and Against Apartheid*. Witwatersrand University Press. p. 169.

²³ Nevitt, Lisa (2010). What’s The Deal with the Toyi-Toyi. *Cape Town Magazine*. November 2010. http://www.capetownmagazine.com/whats-the-deal-with/Whats-the-Deal-With-Toyitoyi/125_22_17384

²⁴ *ibid.*

BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON: EXILED MUSICIANS SPREAD THE MESSAGE ABROAD

Although apartheid was able to inspire many musicians at home to write about their struggles and unite many South Africans, it also drove many musicians away from South Africa. Although many of the musicians were pushed out of the country, it did not stop them from writing and performing protest songs against apartheid. The South African government made it illegal to broadcast any musicians who went into exile or who sang about opposition to apartheid. The government also destroyed archives of black South African music.²⁵

Olwage also points out that “many black artists who remained in South Africa throughout the struggle...resent the spotlight given to exiles who were away during the height of the struggle...’Leaving,’ as singer Dorothy Rathebe pronounced, ‘us ‘inziles’ to keep the home fires burning.’”²⁶

Although focusing solely on exiled musicians as the foundation of the anti-apartheid musical movement fails to tell a comprehensive story, it still holds merit turning the lens upon exiled musicians who found commercial success outside of South Africa. Artists like Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, and Abdullah Ibrahim were able to spread their anti-apartheid message to an international audience that “inziled” musicians were unable to reach due to the South African government’s strict censorship.

These “luminary names”²⁷ of the exiled musicians are often hailed as the key revolutionaries in the struggle against apartheid. However, that is an unfair statement, as the influence of musicians and activists within South Africa were equally vital to the struggle for equality. Although exiled and “inziled” musicians played very different roles in the eventual overthrow of the apartheid regime, both were equal and necessary within the struggle.

²⁵ Olwage, Grant (2008). *Composing Apartheid: Music For and Against Apartheid*. Witwatersrand University Press. p. 263.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

CONCLUSION

When writing a paper about the effect of music on a political struggle, one always ends research with more questions that one began with. Does music really resonate in practical political terms? Is the music generated with the goal of a political change or for other reasons? If the apartheid supporters created music and songs, would they be labeled freedom songs? But more importantly, can music ever truly be separated from its political context?

Nothing in music is intrinsically revolutionary or political in nature and at the same time, music should not be divorced from the power it has over social and political contexts. By doing that, you're taking out the "meaningful in its abstract and metaphysical potential [and making it] irrelevant in what it has to say to the here and now of daily life."²⁸ In the case of South Africa, music helped shape the community and inversely, the communities shaped the music that was produced. As this paper has illustrated, music can serve as both a canvas and a criticism of culture. It has the ability to initiate, unite and influence change.

South Africa's struggle to free itself from the tyranny and racism of apartheid is in the music. The music responded when the government began to pass unjust laws. Music was central to the South African struggle in both its ability to rally a response from the people of South Africa as well as raising awareness in the international community.

Music is all about meaning and purpose. When human beings are able to connect to a song in some way, there is a flood of positive emotion. One can get goosebumps and feel connected to others even if they are alone. When that power is harnessed for political change, as it did in South Africa, it can change the entire context of how to look at a revolutionary situation.

²⁸ Fischlin, Daniel (2003). *Rebel Musics: Human Rights, Resistant Sounds and The Politics of Music Making*. Black Rose Books. p. 11.