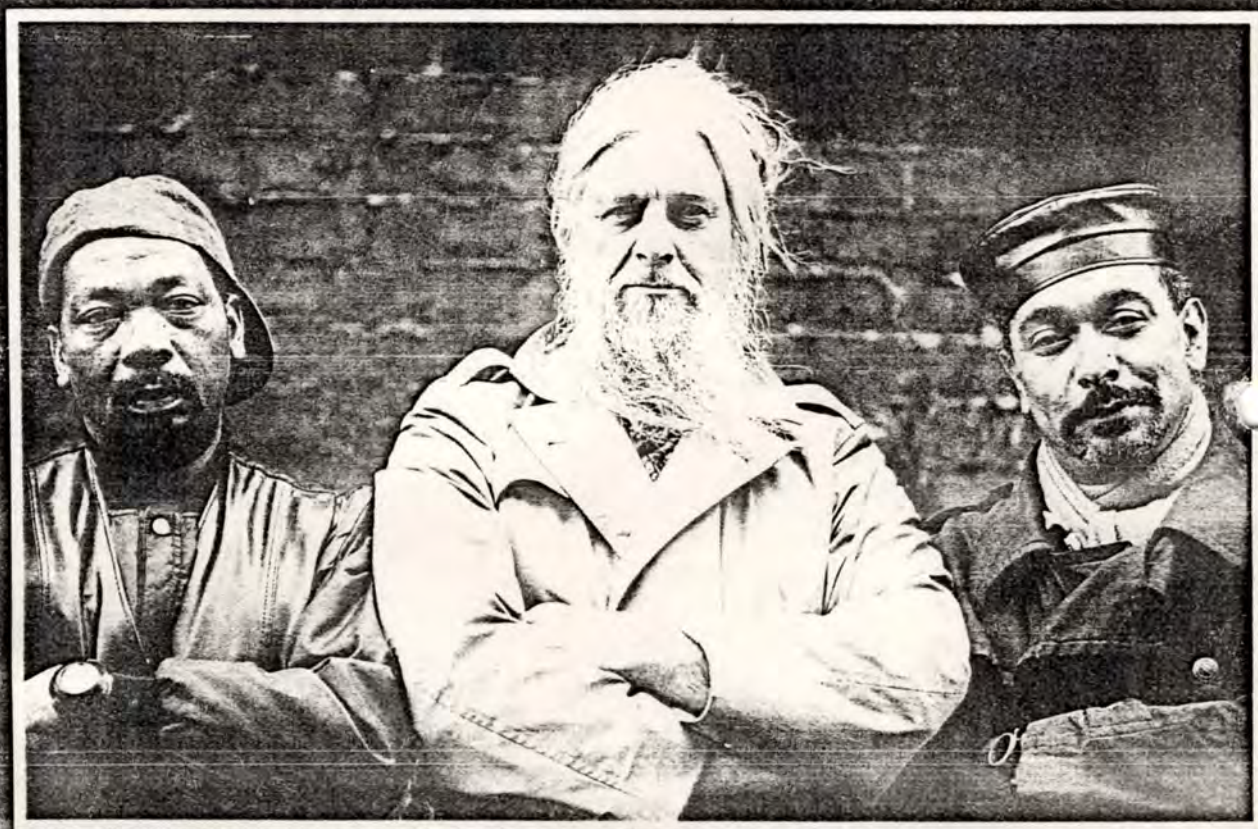


# INDESTRUCTIBLE



## BEATS

RESISTANCE MUSIC & CULTURE

HAS BEEN CRUCIAL IN KEEPING ALIVE

THE SPIRIT OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN

PEOPLE AND HAS BROUGHT NEW

AUDIENCES TO UNDERSTAND THE

REALITY OF APARTHEID.





singing the wrong song in South Africa can cost you your liberty or your life. Consider the case of 17 year old Mngcini Mginywa, gunned down at a Grahamstown funeral for 'singing in his language' according to the riot police who shot him. Or the case of two reggae artists gaoled in 1983 for performing 'Free Mandela' on stage.

Apartheid's attempts to close minds and truth has consistently brought it into contact with musicians, poets, playwrights, photographers and painters. Their works and performances censored and banned, they themselves have been harassed, imprisoned, and sent into exile. Those who have stayed have often been exiles in their own land, denied access to the media or the chance to make a living from their art.

Even the laws governing self-expression in South Africa extend from prohibiting foreign imports to home-produced books, records and films. The country's rigid censorship of newspapers and a monopoly of television.

But the apartheid screw has been tightened further curtailments on creative expression. Yet despite all the crackdowns, the country still bursts with poets. Black South African musicians are honoured the world around. 'Kosi Sikelel' Africa', the song composed by Sontonga in 1897, and the country's national anthem, continues to be sung: 'Less Africa, May her horn be raised'.

Struggle and resistance have always gone hand in hand in South Africa. As far back as 1913 black workers, drafted in from the Transvaal to work the coal, diamond and gold mines. The growth of heavy industry and big cities gave black culture an urban quality that is unique elsewhere in Africa. Escape from drudgery and mind in shantytown 'shebeens', where a vibrant, marvellous, was born of the clash of traditional and African forms.

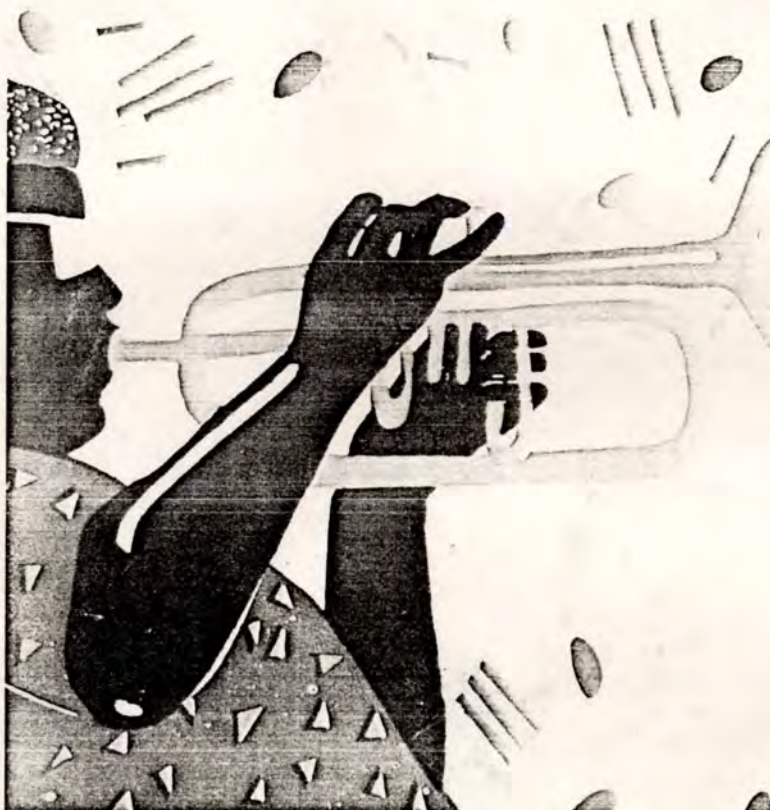
South Africa took a gap on South Africa early on and never let go. Musicians like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were popular models for African musicians, while homegrown stars like Dolly Rathbone became enormously popular in the '40s and '50s.

At Johannesburg, the legendary suburb of Johannesburg, which was flattened by government bulldozers in the late '50s, was the epicentre of popular culture rich in musicians, writers, and sporting heroes.

Black musicians like Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa and Dollar Brand (now Abdullah Ibrahim) led big bands which helped break the monopoly of white concert promotion. Esburg's Dorkay House was the home for music and theatre, including the first inter-racially successful non-racial production King Kong (1958). The horrors of the Sharpeville massacre and the increased clampdown of the 1960s, many artists went into exile - Masekela and Ibrahim among them.

Dissent was never confined to black writers and artists; every Afrikaner writer of note has disowned the regime, and many, like Breyten Breytenbach, have left. English-language writers like Nadine Gordimer and Alan Paton, who stayed, gave voice to the liberal conscience, often under house arrest. They, at least, were able to publish and be read around the world. Black writers like Alex la Guma and Lewis Nkosi, mostly remained unpublished and unheard in their own country.

Apartheid's clampdown on culture was worthy of the thought police in George Orwell's



1984. His Animal Farm remained banned, along with such classics of subversion as Black Beauty. All manner of material, theatre and literature, was and remains banned.

Theatre has managed to get away with more pungent comment than other media in plays like Sizwe Bansi Is Dead (1972), Woza Albert! and Bopha, all of which have toured the world along with musicals like Sarafina.

There were calls for a cultural boycott as early as 1954 from Trevor Huddleston, the popular English priest whose parish included Sophiatown. Within a few years, Equity, the British actors' union, and the Musicians' Union, responded.

In 1965, sixty five US artists, including names like Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier and Nina Simone, joined together to 'Say No To Apartheid'. In 1969 the United Nations gave the cultural boycott its endorsement. This, together with the Gleneagles Agreement of 1977, which banned sporting links, has helped turn the South African government into a pariah regime.

One effect of the boycott was to clear the ground at home for the emergence of an alternative culture, grounded in the experience of the

OPPOSITE PAGE: ERNEST MOTHLE,  
CHRIS MACGREGOR & BRIAN ABRAHAMS IN EXILE  
PHOTO: IDAF

BELOW: TOWNSHIP POSTER  
PHOTO: IDAF

THE DOORS OF  
CULTURE  
SHALL BE  
OPENED

black majority.

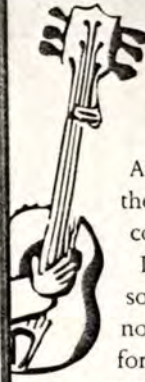
After the seismic shift of the 1976 Soweto uprising, this oppositional culture bloomed and flourished, in spite of government attempts to extinguish it.

Poems of defiance and hope were published on underground presses. Dramatic murals kept testimony of police cruelty. Artists' and writers' federations were established. A massive literacy campaign was launched, operating through the thousands of township organisations known as 'civics' which help constitute the United Democratic Front.

The South African government has always tried to bypass the boycott, offering fat contracts to performers and 'rebel' sports stars and supplying a few token mixed audiences to ease consciences.

The construction of Sun City, a vast playboy paradise set within the borders of Bophuthatswana, was another attempt to lure international talent - without the embarrassment of a South African passport stamp - until the UN Register of artists who have performed in apartheid South Africa, instituted in 1983, gave the boycott-busters nowhere to run - a point emphasised by





Artists United Against Apartheid's 'Sun City' record that year.

Around this time, interest in South African music began to grow, buoyed by the fresh sounds emerging throughout the continent and the boom in 'world' music.

In 1987 the cultural boycott was amended so that it would isolate the oppressor, and not silence the oppressed, clearing the way for a new international audience for the country's alternative culture.

The same year in Amsterdam, a conference entitled 'Culture In Another South Africa' (CASA), brought together a wide range of the country's artistic talent – both exiles and non-exiles. It was a showcase of resistance culture and an outline of future strategy. In the words of poet Mongane Wally Serote: "We are here to help South Africa towards sanity rather than just talk about her madness."

Despite the segregation enforced since the '50s, music and theatre have been instrumental in breaking down the barriers erected by apartheid.

Pop, rock, soul and reggae from the world beyond South Africa's borders have found eager ears on both sides of the racial divide; while collaborations between black and white musicians, and the mixed audiences that gather to hear them, have persistently defied government notions of 'separate development.'

The Blue Notes, a mixed jazz group formed in the early '60s, was one example the government tried to discourage. Then, on a trip to a Dutch jazz festival in 1964, the band decided to defect en masse.

Exiled in London, the group's talented line-up became a central part of the British jazz scene, mutating first into the Brotherhood of Breath, lead by arranger and pianist Chris McGregor. Many of the constituent musicians, including saxophonist Dudu Pukwana and drummer Louis Moholo, went on to lead their own outfits. They remain active players in the UK, and were subsequently joined by exiles like Julian Bahula and Brian Abrahams, leader of District Six, named after the Cape Town community wiped out by the Group Areas Act.

Jazz remains a central part of the South African music scene, and was just one of the ingredients that went into the creation of mbaqanga in the '60s. Mbaqanga was the music of the migrant workers in the townships and miners' hostels; music for city people with country roots. Its potent rhythmic mix borrowed from R&B and Zulu dance; its vocals included the growling call and response of Mahlathini and the precise harmonies of the Mahotella Queens, along with The Soul Brothers, two of mbaqanga's biggest stars.

Another strand in the diversity of South African music is kwela, the jaunty penny-whistle music of the township young which emerged between the '40s and '60s, followed by Sax Jive – a later tougher version. Black South Africa also has numerous pop acts like Brenda and the Big Dudes who stick to western funk and dance formulae, and an endless appetite for western stars from UB40 to Tracy Chapman.

Though mostly confining itself to everyday matters, mbaqanga hits sometimes managed to speak indirectly about the struggle. But outspoken lyrics risk banning orders and spell disaster for careers.

As it is, black South African music receives pitiful support and promotion. Royalties are virtually non-existent, so that a major act can still be penniless at the end of a prolific career.

It goes without saying that the media and music industry is geared to apartheid's grand



plan. Government services like Bop TV and such stations as Radio Zulu and Radio Xhosa pump out the correct 'ethnic' culture – hand in hand with government propaganda. The 'white' radio stations do not play 'black' music.

The involvement of the international entertainment industry in South Africa is for the most part a tawdry one.

Most of the multi-national record companies have been keen to exploit the large market for western music, and artists who have tried to prevent the release of their records there have often been ignored or outmanoeuvred.

The film industry has likewise shown few scruples about releasing its movies; in fact South



Africa remains the eleventh biggest customer for Hollywood films. Profit has always come ahead of principle. Mapantsula (1988) – of Soweto Harder They Come about the a petty thief – and is one of the only SA films to deal with township life. The government, desperate for hard currency, merely offers western film-makers maximum cooperation for their productions.

While the sound of the Afrikaner remains sentimental white pop, Jim R. big – local white rock has provided an alternative and has remained tuned to demands beyond the confines of the laager.

Western records that smack of subversive





# the INDESTRUCTIBLE BEAT of SOWETO



routinely banned; Pink Floyd's 'The Wall', and Peter Tosh's 'Equal Rights' in the mid '70s, for example, although the Sutherland Brothers' innocuous 'Something's Burning' became a hit with fresh meaning in the light of the Soweto uprising.

Seventies punk bands, like the Radio Rats, confirmed that laager-land was certainly No Fun, and in the '80s numerous rock bands supported the End Conscription Campaign.

The ECC's 'Forces Favourites' LP was the first anti-apartheid rock compilation in the country, issued by the plucky independent Shifty Records, which also put out records by Lesotho's Sankomoto and the brilliant dub poet Mzwakhe Mbuli – recently released from six months' solitary confinement in police cells.

In the '80s, Johnny Clegg's dynamic mix of rock with mbaqanga has won a vast international audience. A white university student with an intense interest in Zulu culture, he teamed up with migrant worker Sipho Mchunu to form the multi-racial Juluka. Savuka, his new group, has proved even more successful, and continues to feature some impressive idlamu (stamping) dancing.

Western pop ears have also turned to Zulu mbaqanga for inspiration. Ignoring the boycott, Malcolm McLaren plundered its old hits for his 'Duck Rock' LP, and Paul Simon borrowed freely



OPPOSITE PAGE TOP:  
MZWAKHE MBULI, POET  
PHOTO: IDAF

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM:  
PAINTING BY LOUIS MAQUBELA, IDAF

ABOVE:  
MBAQANGA COMPILATION,  
EARTHWORKS INTERNATIONAL (EMW 5502)  
PHOTO: ORDE ELIASON, LINK

LEFT:  
SCENE FROM THE FILM MAPANTZULA,  
ON LIFE IN THE TOWNSHIPS  
(CONTEMPORARY FILMS)

RIGHT:  
DUDU PUCKWAWA  
PHOTO: DAVID REDFERN



for 'Graceland', whose enormous international success also owes a large debt to the Zulu choir Ladysmith Black Mambazo, who sing in the church-influenced mbube accapella style.

These days, you can even hear Ladysmith Black Mambazo on the TV advertisements promoting lemonade – such is the universal appeal of music.

The artistic riches of South Africa are yet to be rewarded commercially. But they have already advanced the day of liberation.

Today, the country's popular culture stands poised to regain its birthright and to burst gloriously into the international arena.