Abdullah Ibrahim and the Politics of Jazz in South Africa  
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Jazz has had an especial role in the social and cultural politics of South Africa. This paper will trace its function in the political struggle waged by Black and Colored musicians against the apartheid regime, from the early 1950s until the 1990s, focusing on the work of one artist particularly. While Abdullah Ibrahim is by no means the only South African musician to use jazz for political goals, the development of his career provides an incredible example of the convergence of race, protest, and memory in the performance as well as study of jazz. Ibrahim’s musical career is entrenched in South Africa’s struggle against apartheid, and it is through this lens that I will examine his life and the role of jazz music in general.

As early as the 1940s, jazz had emerged as the favored genre of the elite in South Africa. Professional musicians preferred American ‘international’ performance styles, and only a few African jazz musicians brought anything identifiably South African to their performances of American swing. The negative association between traditional African music and the ‘tribal’ past or rural present was begun by missionaries and had become entrenched in African society, most obviously under the Afrikaner’s government’s policy of “forcing Africans to develop along their own lines”. Like the leaders of the American Harlem Renaissance, the African elite hoped that achievements in the artistic and intellectual fields would help break down the color bar. Indeed the similar experience of Black Americans and Africans, of “two peoples under white domination,” may have increased the appeal of Black American style in amongst South African performers. Because it was more Western but not white, it provided a model for cultural change that was more similar to African heritage and therefore better adapted to the reality of segregation. Indeed, culture and entertainment were “among the principal means by which White liberals co-opted the African middle class, softening the harshness of segregation and convincing them that advancement could come through Westernization”.

The ultimate problem, of course, was apartheid. In the early era of South African apartheid, the Group Areas Act restricted any and all movement. Indians played for the Indian community; Colored bands played jazz for their constituencies,
and white jazz musicians were moving between Durban, Johannesburg, Margate and Cape Town. As Ibrahim described in 1979,

It almost impossible for a black man to earn a living there as a musician. It’s illegal for blacks and whites to play together; you have to have a permit to play for Indian people, for whites – you’re mainly restricted to your own community. Music has always helped to bring people closer together, yet in South Africa in the 1960s things seemed to be going from bad to worse.

Apartheid rendered an “autonomous, self-supporting, culturally relevant Black music world impossible. Under the pass system, Colored musicians were generally classified as vagrants. They could only be semi-professional, as the worked in the day and performed afterhours. Even then, Colored musicians could rarely obtain permits to perform as professional musicians throughout South Africa, and therefore were almost always dependent on White promoters. They were neither permitted to join a White musicians’ union, nor to form their own, giving them no chance to stand against the record industry. And that was no luxury, since “it was not until the end of the 1950s that copyright and royalty arrangements were introduced, which was only to the greater honor and glory of the record companies. In order to earn a living, the black musicians often had to turn to other odd jobs or hire themselves out as studio background musicians”. “The police were something to be reckoned with too, of course,” Ibrahim recounted in 1965, “It’s not unusual to be stopped by the them on the way home after a job, and then have the choice of either disappearing into jail or giving them an impromptu show right there on the road.”

Jazz had begun manifesting itself particularly in the “ethnic and cultural melting pot of Sophiatown, the legendary demolished suburb of Johannesburg. There for the first time in South African history black and white jazz musicians could meet on a regular basis and common platform for jam sessions”, and it was out of this context that Ibrahim’s first successful band, the Jazz Epistles, emerged. Like pianist Chris McGregor and his group, the Epistles insisted on “progressive and experimental jazz as non-racial ‘free spaces’ in the music they made”. Emulating Black American musicians like Thelonius Monk, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, the Epistles drew
mostly in modern jazz and avoided local music in public. “The single they released might as well have been recorded in New York or Detroit,” historian John Mason concludes. “The sound is pure bebop, pure modern jazz.” However, Ibrahim would later deny the influence of American jazz on his own music. “There were many parallel developments,” he argued, and while there was a “hard-core, basic musical literature that is common to both countries,” it was Africa that was the fountainhead. Similarly, he would describe his relationship with Duke Ellington as “not a question of finding anything new, but rather of an analogous expression. It was like a scientist working in Los Angeles, and another working in Tokyo independently, and they came up with the same conclusions.” Much work has been dedicated to tracing the development of South African and American jazz, whether as two separate indigenous art forms or a single transnational one, and this tension is one that I will return to later. As for the Epistles, their reliance and dedication to modern, avant-garde jazz was not received well by the local South African population. Nor was it taken seriously as a protest form, especially because of its lack of commentary or open protest. Regardless, simply the composition of the Epistles (and also McGregor’s sextet, the Blue Notes) was an affront to the apartheid system. So too was their social alienation and musical inaccessibility, which are “political statements in and of themselves.”

Despite this, however, the apartheid state attacked modern jazz and other jazz styles during the repression following the Sharpeville Massacre. The 1960s and 1970s were a difficult period for jazz within South Africa. Resistance against apartheid, led by the African National Congress, had experienced a heavy setback: the ANC was banned, Mandela and other leaders were detained, hundreds of political cadres were forced underground, leading jazz musicians fled into exile and some jazz celebrities, like Kippie Moeketsi, died an early death. Disgusted with South Africa’s doomed jazz scene, Dollar Brand, as Ibrahim was known then, fled to Europe in 1962. With the help of American jazz star Duke Ellington, whom he met first in Zurich, Ibrahim was able to record and perform in Europe as well as the United States, where he met with substantial success. Ellington’s patronage had been instrumental to his first few performances; increasingly, though, his own distinctive style spoke for itself and
found him willing playing partners on the New York free jazz scene including Don Cherry and Ornette Coleman, as well as more mainstream gigs with Elvin Jones and others\(^\text{19}\). There in New York Ibrahim was immersed in new American 'free jazz' and 'bebop' styles of the likes of Coltrane and Monk, but also to the emerging Black Power movement, which Mason describes in detail. Not only was Ibrahim living in New York City, the center of the movement for much of the era, but also many of the American musicians he collaborated closely had ties to Black Power organizations and the Black Arts movement. Naturally, Ibrahim drew analogies between the position of the black minority in the U.S. and the colored minority in South Africa. Immersed in within a foreign culture, Ibrahim was pushed to reexamine his own South African roots.

Although his first return to South Africa came before Black Consciousness ideas had been fully articulated, and much before they had become popularized outside of a small group of activists, “Black”, in the Black Consciousness sense, did not seem have ever held any attraction to him. His newfound nationalism, Mason elaborates, “aligned itself with the colored and African working classes and embraced their cultures... he was slowly moving away from the abstract free jazz of the African-American avant-garde and toward a more musical vocabulary\(^\text{20}\).

For Ibrahim himself, conversion to Islam was the most transformative aspect of his initial return to South Africa in 1968. Perhaps the route to reconnection with African music, Ibrahim would later describe his conversion as the ‘universal truth’:

> Music was part of the reason, because in Islam the music is naturally integrated; you don’t just feel the Koran, you sing it, in remembrance of Allah. I had gone through a bad period, partly in New York. I stopped smoking, I stopped drinking, found an inner peace. There is nothing really I want or need for myself now, because Allah has blessed me. My main concern is for others, for the liberation of my people, the establishment of justice. Music is just a means toward the end\(^\text{21}\).

Ibrahim’s new universalism surfaced not only in the composition of his music, which drew on local African, and particularly Xhosa, styles, but also in the new activism with which he approached his fellow jazz musicians. He implored them to end their imitation of American and Europeans, and instead “explore their own musical roots,
the “sacred” and “beautiful” music that grew in African soil\(^2\). However, in the absence of any direct criticism of apartheid, his “celebration of distinctive colored and African cultures seemed to resonate with the apartheid state’s efforts to reinforce ethnic and racial divisions in order to keep blacks weak and divided\(^3\). The release of *Mannenberg* in 1974, on the album *Mannenberg is Where It’s Happening*, marked the culmination of Ibrahim’s new approach. With great imagination and technical skill, he combined an old jazz *mbaqanga* melody composed by trumpeter Elijah Nkonyane in the late 1950s with *marabi*, Xhosa ragtime, and hymn township rhythms to create *Mannenberg* in 1974, a record which began a new trend with old materials in black South African urban music. *Mannenberg*’s enormous success was due to its combination of “so many forms of South African music into a coherent and consistent whole, with which listeners of all kinds could identify.” Ibrahim had finally made his message to the South African musical world loud and clear: “an authentic syncretism in tune with the cultural reality of black experience is potentially the most creative and marketable direction that contemporary black music can take\(^4\).” And marketable it was, as the LP sold more copies in 1974-1975 than any other that was produced in South Africa\(^5\).

That is not to say that the production of *Mannenberg* was any easier than Ibrahim’s previous recordings. In fact, Ibrahim was facing greater pressure from the regime because of his activism, and his declared support for the ANC. Soon after its release in 1976, Ibrahim was exiled. But, because of the very nature of jazz is less susceptible to media industry control – since instrumental music is not censored and most jazz players remain out of the studios or record with independent producers like Rashid Vally, therefore avoiding the censorship and interference of the regime\(^6\) – and the active popularization of the song as a freedom song by Ibrahim’s colleagues Basil Coetzee and Robert Jansen, *Mannenberg* rose to fame as South Africa’s ‘unofficial national anthem’. Many artists had no choice but to bow to the censorship of the state and the Broadcasting Committee, or resorted to self-censorship. By 1980 however, a campaign of resistance to every aspect of apartheid was being wage through South Africa, and as part of this ‘totally strategy’, culture moved to center stage, nationally and internationally\(^7\). As the ANC’s armed struggle against the
regime intensified, most South Africans were concerned with surviving the present rather than defining it, and were not ‘looking back’ with hindsight – yet Ibrahim’s *Mannenberg* was an affective mode of expression, whose power depended on shared associations among listeners from very different South African backgrounds. Conversely, the song acquired its political resonance because of the efforts of Coetzee and Jansen, who played it at innumerable rallies and concerts, “linking it directly to the anti-apartheid politics of the United Democratic Front and other politically progressive organizations.” Indeed, for musicians, the 1980s was a period of characterized not by any single stylistic development but by an intense focus on communications – how best to reflect the songs of strike and struggle.

Thus the marvel of *Mannenberg* lies in its compositional usefulness as a mobilizing tool against the apartheid regime and as a ‘popular metaphor for all the townships where trouble brewed’. While Ibrahim continued to produce after 1974, *Mannenberg* was never one of his most popular songs outside of South Africa. In the U.S., it was initially released under a different title, “Cape Town Fringe”, and was generally ignored. The work that won him acclaim in the U.S. and Europe was music that was in a more avant-garde mode.

The popularity of *Mannenberg* in South Africa and Ibrahim’s subsequent rise to international fame sealed his position as a musical icon. But after the cancellation of his citizenship and his exile in New York in the beginning of the 1980s, the lines between his musical fame and political activism blurred (which no doubt, bolstered the popularity of the song further). With his wife, Sathima Benjamin, acting as his manager, Ibrahim insisted on playing South African jazz in New York – ‘the reason I’ve survived,” Ibrahim said, “was because I have always taken charge of my own affairs.” By his insistence on a South African idiom he disseminated and created an appetite for South African music,” which resulted in several musical combos like *Kalahari Liberation Opera* and *Cape Town Traveller* touring across Europe.

The experience of political exile was crucial to Ibrahim’s new emphasis on South African music. Indeed, it was mostly those who left the country, including Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Chris McGregor and countless others, who began to carve out an original niche for themselves (Müller Comp 59). Changes in his
personal life were reflected in musical style. After 1976, in a conscious attempt to reconnect with "home", Ibrahim's music made more overt use of marabi, swing, dance music, carnival, blues, hymns, gospel and spiritual than it had done in the 1960s. His musical influences now spanned from traditional South African work songs to Arab melodies; his new approach was to absorb everything, stating "Indian ragas or Stockhausen; for us its music, it doesn't matter where it comes from." Unlike the dichotomous approach to Mannenberg, his unwavering universalism finally acknowledged the "painstakingly real historical processes by which the oppressed have grappled with, transformed and appropriated elements of colonial culture." Ibrahim too is a product of these processes, and a testament to the reality that most cultural production in South Africa – even when part of a professed politics – cannot simply be packaged into 'democratic and non-democratic containers' or convenient and neat analytical bundles.

Indeed, Ibrahim's musical voice had become integral for both his memory of home and his ongoing political struggle against the regime. By deploying the musical sounds of South Africa abroad, Ibrahim was able to “transmit remnants of distant place, experiences, and sounds to far-flung people.” While his body remained “dismembered and suffering,” his voice retained its presence and “capacity to bear witness to cruel treatment and bodily disintegration.” Ibrahim's performances, then, became a source of continuous protest against the apartheid regime. Jazz, in particular, allowed him to 'express himself freely', partly because of the genre's emphasis on improvisation. Musical patterns like call and response seem to allow performers to transcend structural limitations otherwise imposed in other genres. Looking beyond the nation to find models of identity and forms of belonging in racial terms, many South Africans turn to jazz as a musical discourse that was above such divisions. Within jazz, the musical markers of ethnicity are usually treated as essentials: they are part of jazz's development but are not themselves subject to development. Ibrahim, arguing that "jazz more than any other musical art form allows us to portray our experiences freely," described the beauty of jazz improvisation:
Every individual can paint his own musical picture, using whatever colors he prefers, and it becomes even more beautiful when we do it together in a group, and contrary to what we might expect the overall picture produced by the group is not chaotic or disorderly but harmonious and exciting because, firstly, while we are creating individually, we are listening to each other, complementing, extending an idea, inspiring each other. Oh, there are infinite possibilities.

As such, jazz figured a crucial component of the cultural memory of South Africans. With the removal and censorship of African history during apartheid, “an acute dislocation of place and identity resulted in the need for imagined past embedded not in national or regional history but in personal memory”. The music of Abdullah Ibrahim was not only integral to the future-oriented discourse that gained momentum in all forms of cultural representation within South Africa in the late 1980s, but also to driving the transfer of cultural memory to other South Africans in exile and more importantly, to the international community as a whole. His music, part of a cultural memory and a cultural form, that as “a repository of meanings that comprises the subjective knowledge of a people, its immanent thoughts, structures, and its practices,” was transferred to American and European audiences and musicians and therein became “culturally objective in practice and perception”.

Ibrahim returned to Cape Town shortly after Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in February 1990. Splitting his time between his house there and his home in Manhattan, Ibrahim now ties his music to healing and spirituality. In 1999, he founded the M7 Academy in Cape Town, aimed at fostering the well-being of young musicians by combining music, martial arts, therapy, to achieve “holistic lifestyle… that would combat the taboos that apartheid society compounded”. His music, and jazz music in general, continues to play a crucial role in the reconstruction and reconciliation of South African society and culture after apartheid.
Notes


2 Coplan, pg. 121.


4 Coplan, pg. 133.

5 Coplan, pg. 134.

6 Muller, “Musical Echoes,” pg. 67.


8 Coplan, p. 192.


11 Campschreuer and Divendal, p. 251.


14 Interview with Ibrahim, Feather, p. 151.


17 Mason, “Mannenberg,” pg. 32.

18 Campschreuer and Divendal, p. 253.


21 Interview with Ibrahim, Feather, p. 153.

22 Mason, “Mannenberg” 35.
23Ibid

24Coplan, p.193.

25Campshreuer and Divendal, p.259.

26Coplan, p. 129.

27Ansell, p. 181.


29Mason, p. 37.

30Ansell, p. 183.

31Mason, p. 38.


33Ibid

34Lucia, p. 137.

35Jaggi, "Abdullah Ibrahim."


37Ibid, p. 299.


41Interview with Ibrahim, Feather, p. 162.

42Lucia, p. 140.


44Jaggi, "Abdullah Ibrahim."
Bibliography


