

# Space, place, sound and sociability: Situating South African jazz appreciation societies

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## ABSTRACT

Among the contrasting post-colonial music scenes to have emerged in South Africa during the transition from apartheid, voluntary associations of jazz lovers – known as *stokvels*, clubs or appreciation societies – remain a relatively under-documented aspect of township musical life. Yet on any given weekend, in a variety of locales ranging from working-class private homes to local taverns to larger community halls, groups of formally constituted jazz *aficionados* criss-cross urban and rural spaces to attend listening sessions, where globally circulating jazz recordings, and sometimes the performances of live musicians, are reinscribed with a range of local meanings through various performative practices. In this paper, which draws on my doctoral ethnographic research, I examine the particular ways in which jazz is “situated” in this milieu as sounds with their origins in places like New York, Chicago, Copenhagen or Tokyo are integrated within South African soundscapes. More broadly, this project considers the ways in which listening, no less than musical performance itself, is socially enacted, culturally and historically contingent, and implicated in the transformations occasioned by modernisation, musical commodification and transnational circulation.

KEYWORDS: jazz; listening; South Africa; localisation of global music commodities.

## INTRODUCTION

On any given weekend around the beginning of South Africa's second decade of avowedly non-racial democracy (that is, 2005, when most of this field work was conducted), but to this day, alongside the listings of jazz gigs in nightclubs and concert venues in the major city centres, or festivals in parks or at resorts or convention centres, newspapers with a predominantly black readership would be peppered with announcements of another kind of musical gathering that continues to occupy a rather different place within the topography of jazz on the broader South African cultural landscape. Typically located in the segregated townships created for black residents under apartheid-era "Group Areas" legislation, far away from the official city centres, in private homes, taverns, community halls and other public spaces, they seldom, if ever, feature in discussions or representations of jazz within South African public culture, let alone general histories and profiles of jazz. Nonetheless, at the micro-level of musical reception and on the margins of the formal jazz industry, extensive networks of everyday aficionados have organized themselves into voluntary associations or jazz appreciation societies that, despite their often modest settings and resources, constitute a decidedly sociable and vibrant dimension of vernacular culture within South African musical life. Placing the music within these spaces offers useful perspectives on what, and especially how, jazz means in South Africa, and on how it is reimagined and resituated in inventive and sometimes surprising ways. Moreover, this perspective also renders visible the reconfiguration, within a neoliberal macroeconomic dispensation, of the post-apartheid South African public sphere. This paper foregrounds the situating, emplacing and reframing practices of participants in this scene as they reinscribe globally circulating jazz recordings, and sometimes the performances of live musicians, with a range of local meanings through various collective practices. These practices are individually realised but socially shared and enacted, becoming constitutive of, even as they reflect, distinctive modes of sociability.

## RESOCIALISING JAZZ

Whether it entails dozens of friends and musical associates cramming into a four-roomed township home, or whether participants give themselves more room to move under the florescent lights of a boomy municipal hall, in the contexts with which I am concerned here, jazz provides a pretext and catalyst for heightened sociability. Music and dance play a key role in attaining this heightening, but much of the significance of these events lies in the sociomusical institution within which the music is deployed. Jazz sessions are officially hosted by either an individual or a society (or "club"), embedding the practice of collective listening in a vernacular social institution that makes sessions a realisation of various bonds, roles, obligations and opportunities accruing both to the host and the "supporters" in attendance, which reverberate with social and historical significance.

The jazz appreciation society is a socio-musical institution of considerable standing in many black working and middle class communities in South Africa, and has

apparently been so for several generations. These societies or clubs are typically organized as *stokvels* (pronounced “stock-fell”), communal savings schemes which sometimes double as burial societies. Members of jazz *stokvels* convene listening sessions where DJs play their jazz CD collections and occasionally host live musicians. For the participants, who can devote several nights out of each month or even each week to attending sessions, in which they invest a sizable, predetermined portion of their monthly income, jazz serves as a significant marker of identity and as a nexus of social relations. With whom one listens to jazz goes beyond informal leisure camaraderie and signals symbolic, social, and – to a degree – financial capital. Moreover, given the culture of mutually supporting one another’s sessions, jazz appreciation societies constitute a network of reception communities, varying in scale from a handful to hundreds of listeners, and spanning neighbourhoods, towns, and even large regions of the country.

Traceable, in their present form, back to the 1930s at least, and ultimately as far back as the rotating “stock fairs” organised by British settlers in the Eastern Cape in the early decades of the nineteenth century, *stokvels* emerged historically at one of the first contact points between indigenous African societies and the colonial economy. They have long been recognised as a collective response on the part of the masses of urban labour migrants to the rigours of life under racial capitalism, and *stokvels* remain a notable feature of vernacular culture in South Africa. In his classic study of black South African popular culture, David Coplan (2007, p. 123) offers a succinct explanation of how *stokvels* function:

*Stokvels* were and are credit rings in which each member contributes a set amount each week in anticipation of receiving the combined contributions of all the other members at regular intervals. Commonly, each member in her turn uses the lump sum she receives to finance a *stokvel* party, at which other members and guests pay admission and buy food and liquor and even musical entertainment. Profits go to the hostess of the week. (emphasis mine)

Offering a collective means of survival in the cash economy and held by many practitioners to embody traditional African values of communalism and cooperation, *stokvels* embody modes of sociability that bridge urban and rural, modern and traditional social roles and norms, and they lend themselves, over and above their economic rationale, to the enactment of social and cultural values, among which music features prominently (Porteous and Hazelhurst 2004; Lukhele 1990). What is striking, viewing *stokvel* culture in general, is that whereas music of various kinds can and has historically been enlisted to facilitate social interaction among members, the jazz *stokvel* has, nominally at least, acquired a specifically musical focus and rationale. Pamphlets, banners and verbal claims to the effect of “bringing jazz to the people”, advancing “the love of jazz” etc., are a common feature of the milieu I am describing, and reflects the specific socio-political valences of jazz across the twentieth century, as a music associated with some interracial collaboration and black cosmopolitanism and cultural assertion (Ansell 2004).

Broader macrosocial trends in post-apartheid South Africa impinge upon, as they variably reveal themselves within, this jazz milieu. Members span a relatively wide class spectrum within township settings, and represent a variety of South African ethnic backgrounds and linguistic groups. I have not come across participants from other African countries, despite the popularity of pan-African and pan-diasporic jazz in many places. Having lost, during the decades of forced removals, their historical association with *marabi* parties, female-oriented social organisation as well as the secular *stokvel* parades accompanied by brass bands documented in the first half of the twentieth century (Coplan 2007, p. 125), the jazz appreciation societies in which I conducted my research have tended to be male-dominated, while women do participate at several levels on a relatively equal footing, within a broadly patriarchal milieu. *Stokvel* participation tends to be marked generationally, with jazz being described as an adult preoccupation, or “music for the mature”, setting jazz *stokvels* off from youth culture (though given that the notion of “youth” generally extends into one’s mid-thirties in many South African contexts, this boundary tends to be blurred). And so a distinctive, vernacular jazz public is constituted in this scene based on the principle of free association, but bound by both formal and informal ties that transgress apartheid-era ethnic separatism and reveal a degree of cross-class solidarity, while more equivocally fostering gender equality and in principle being amenable to interracial participation, though in practice this seldom occurs.

### CURATING JAZZ

A second set of practices by which jazz is resituated in the milieu I am sketching concerns the ways in which music recordings are collected, selected, sequentially arranged, personalised and publicly “played” in distinctly curatorial ways. Here DJs or “operators” function as musical specialists capable not only of acquiring a jazz collection but also of performatively demonstrating their knowledge of jazz in interactive *stokvel* settings. The music played at jazz appreciation sessions is decidedly cosmopolitan in scope and open to relatively wide variation between clubs and regional networks. By way of example, in the period on which I report here, the taste of clubs around Soweto, Alexandra, the East Rand and adjacent areas reflected a strong affinity for blues-influenced, swing-based instrumental repertoires from the hard bop era, with some pre-WWII material thrown in for good measure. By contrast, the taste of the clubs around Tshwane, extending into North-West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces, was oriented towards progressive improvised repertoires coming out of Chicago, New York and Europe since the 1960s, and Mamelodi DJs and supporters continue to pride themselves on their avant-garde proclivities. Moreover, various protocols govern the public airing of jazz recordings in sessions, guiding what is played and how it is played, and when. Claims to active musicianship in this role are sometimes explicit, for example, in references among DJs to how well they have “played” on any given day, and hinge on their being musically responsive to, while actively shaping, the mood of a listening session. This rests

both upon prior knowledge of the jazz repertoire, oriented towards predominant tastes within a particular community of reception, and on in-the-moment, quasi-improvisational responses on the part of the DJ to the ebb and flow of the emotional energy of the event. Refracting transatlantic notions of jazz music through more local understandings, aesthetics, and genre distinctions, DJs perform acts expressive of individual connoisseurship that are nonetheless grounded in shared cultural affirmation, in the process blurring the conventional boundaries between art and life, creativity and consumption.

### DANCING JAZZ

Finally, and perhaps most unexpectedly to readers familiar with the adage that jazz ceased to serve as a vehicle for vernacular dance with the end of the Swing Era, the music played at *stokvel* sessions provides a vehicle for a distinctive style of solo improvised dance. Whether presented in intimate domestic settings or other more public spaces, jazz appreciation sessions typically eschew jazz-oriented connoisseur talk and rather centre around a central open space in which participants, when moved to do so, by turns step forward and (by my interpretation) take spontaneous, autochoreographed “solos” that can be read as a kinetic figuration of listening to jazz. With an emphasis on “footwork” and asymmetrical, often abstract body alignments, periodic imitations of the playing of musical instruments or gestures derived from the domain of sport, which often alternate with stylised sartorial display, dancers articulate their own distinctive and personalised contrapuntal rhythms in relation to the music being played. This offers one of the profoundest ways in which jazz recordings are resituated within modern African musical aesthetics, in the process invoking deep indigenous roots. Listening to jazz at *stokvel* sessions thus foregrounds those dimensions of African cultural modernities that are metadiscursive and embodied; enacted rather than spoken.

### CONCLUSION

I have here been able only to sketch a field of practice that is layered and textured in ways that call for close ethnographic inquiry. Taken together, the resituating practices that I have reviewed here reveal that jazz – itself a multi-sited set of musical practices if ever there was one – can acquire profound localised significance, and that listening to jazz, no less than performance of the music, is socially enacted, culturally and historically contingent, and implicated in the transformations occasioned by modernisation, musical commodification, transnational circulation, and a range of adaptive processes in various national and local contexts. The practices which I have discussed, taken together, could be read as a contrapuntal, self-consciously “African” cultural line to the cosmopolitanism inherent in commercially circulating jazz culture and recordings, weaving between, through and against dominant cosmopolitanisms and sounding distinctive modes of sociability laden with local significance.

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