Spinning Around

The South African Music Industry in Transition

Randall Abrahams



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Preface

The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) publishes a number of occasional paper series. These are designed to be quick, convenient vehicles for making timely contributions to debates, disseminating interim research finds or they may be finished, publication-ready works. Authors invite comments and suggestions from readers.

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The Sol Plaatje Lecture Series on Africa provides a platform to explore the rich socio-political and cultural history of our continent.

About the Author

Randall Abrahams was Station Manager of Cape Town's Good Hope FM from 1994 to 1997. In this capacity he was in charge of all programming functions including on-air talent, station production, station sound, managing music programming, promotions and publicity functions and liaison with PR agencies, advertising agencies and record companies. From 1997, Randall has been Station Manager of YFM. Randall held the position of Deputy Chairperson of South Africa's broadcast industry association, the NAB, in 2000 and was elected chairperson of the NAB in 2001. He joined the SABC in July 2002 as General Manager: Public Commercial Broadcasting Services (Radio) and currently manages 5FM, Metro FM, Good Hope FM, Radio Bop and Radio 2000. Comment and suggestions on this paper may be e-mailed to the author c/o lwilson@hsrc.ac.za

Spinning Around

South African Music Industry in Transition

There's an old adage drawn from the arcane field of songwriting, a field that will receive special mention in this paper as it is my greatest love. Tony Joe White, responsible for such memorable tunes as *Polk Salad Annie* and most notably *Rainy Night in Georgia*, recently reiterated the point to young Grammy award winner Shelby Lynne – this adage being the one singular truism when writing lyrics: 'Write about what you know'.

It took me a considerable amount of time to decide where to begin this paper but let me begin with what I know. I know that I spent many a Saturday afternoon at the Landrost Hotel in Lansdowne, which is where I grew up, marvelling at the dexterity of Basil Moses' bass playing. Basil Moses introduced me to the work of the late Scott Lafaro, whose output with Bill Evans is the very essence of post-bop bass playing. I also spent time at other venues in Cape Town following the Schilder brothers around and I spoke with Zayn Adams earlier this year about the chords that Chris Schilder had written for the Pacific Express hit *Give a Little Love*. I would like to remind the reader at the outset then that critical debate should never take away from the infinite power of the music itself; in fact, serious rock music journalism only grew up in the early 1970s and is still a field that many musicians despise.¹

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During my early years in broadcasting at Good Hope FM in the first half of the last decade, I met the famed 'champagne' record producer Patrick van Blerk, who had helped form the pop group Rabbitt and wrote the mammoth hit *Paradise Road* for Joy. Patrick joined Satbel under Robin Taylor in 1973 as inhouse producer. A record called *Good Feeling* by Margaret Singana and the Symbols, produced by Claridge Bayville Matiwane, came to Patrick's attention and he persuaded the Satbel Managing Director, Al Constansa, to agree to a big budget for the production of an album. Even though he felt that the record he had heard was in the wrong key and the original production was not great, Patrick recognised Singana's inherent talent.

Anyone can see an apple when it's dropped in their hands but few can see the apple in the seed. The Beatles were rejected by Decca who believed that guitar bands were on the way out, and legend has it that George Martin at Parlophone signed them more for their sense of humour and love of the Goons than for their musical talent. However, both Patrick and George saw the apple in the seed.

While Patrick and Margaret travelled internationally, visiting London and the south of France, their greatest priority was to break Margaret in South Africa. When he visited the SABC offices in Johannesburg, van Blerk was told to offer the record to Radio Bantu as Singana was a 'black' artist. Invoking the names of Diana Ross, the Supremes and Shirley Bassey as examples of 'black' artists who were successful on SABC radio, he was told that these singers were 'international' and therefore somehow above the restrictions placed on local musicians. At Radio Bantu he was told that the sound of the record he had produced was too international and therefore wouldn't do well on their playlist. As Patrick described it, the record had 'fallen through the cracks'.²

Bob Whitfield, of the independent LM Radio, loved the record giving it considerable airplay which led to a number two showing on the LM Radio charts. Patrick did not stop plugging the record at SABC radio which, at the time, did not believe that playing local 'black' artists on Springbok Radio was appropriate. It was an uphill battle, but as anyone in the record industry will know, it's all in the grooves. A hit record hits the heart and bypasses the head. *Good Feeling* went gold and the Satbel team believed that their artist could make it internationally. In van Blerk's own words:

Let this person, who has a voice comparable to the greatest anywhere in the world, let her make it from within. Don't turn her into a bitter exile like the Masekelas and the Makebas.'3

Singana went on to sell over 100 000 copies of her version of *I Never Loved a Man*. She was signed internationally to the same label as Donna Summer. But hardships followed on the heels of success. Sonja Heroldt pipped her at the Sarie Awards and *Light up the Light* was banned by the SABC because it was seen as having a political message. Here begins my short historical path from the dark apartheid days to the modern era.

In an interview conducted for Muff Anderson's book *Music in the Mix* (1981), van Blerk decried the state of the South African record industry. The vision of the major record companies was parochial to say the least. Their function was to bring international music to South Africa. Little has changed. The success of these companies is based on their ability to market and promote international products developed by their international principals. It would not drive international profitability if South African acts outsold their international counterparts.

Van Blerk 'objected violently to the complete and utter lack of vision on a creative level, on a financial level and on a pride level of making any kind of major record to break overseas' (Anderson, 1981). The independent record companies would have to take responsibility for developing this vision and product. Van Blerk did not believe that record company executives spared a moment's thought about how wonderful it would be for South Africa to have an Abba in the way that

Sweden had or a Bee Gees like Australia. At one stage in the 1970s, Abba was Sweden's biggest commercial export after Volvo and the Bee Gees are possibly the third biggest hit act ever.

Apartheid is gone but this mindset continues and unfortunately it is found even at the level of the record buying public. We have rock and pop acts similar to international acts. They may not be as good or as famous, but they exist and that seems to be sufficient to satisfy the needs of culture and pride. Why we cannot believe that we can do as well as, if not better than, international acts is beyond me.

The situation is similar to that in the 1960s when the Jamaican music 'ska' became a force to be reckoned with. Until that time, Jamaican music was perceived as being just for Jamaicans. Producers such as Lee 'Skratch' Perry in his work with Bob Marley on the original *Catch a Fire* album, created a sound so dynamic and internationally viable that Chris Blackwell, boss of Island Records, saw the worldwide potential and added musical touches that made crossover possible.

Solid reliance on international involvement and simply copying ideas from abroad will not make for a breakthrough beyond our shores. Top songwriters who are set to live lives of luxury from just a single track on a Madonna or Whitney Houston album, would be unlikely to supply their best material to a relatively unknown South African singer.

The Beatles created the phenomenon of bands who wrote all their own songs and co-produced their own work simply because they knew that songwriting teams such as Mort Shuman and Doc Pomus or Leiber and Stoller would much rather supply hit acts like Ben E King or The Drifters than some unknown band from Liverpool.

While South African acts may well need the sheen supplied by international record producers, no-one is interested simply in another Whitney Houston or Mariah Carey. The recent rise of more adult pop music is a reaction to the years of boy-band phenomena such as Westlife and Backstreet Boys. At this stage no-one is looking for the next Britney Spears. Even her sound has changed in order to chase the demographic that has grown up with her.

South African pop music needs a sound that is comfortable enough for foreign ears yet African enough to pronounce itself as different.

The independents will always lead the way as they did with Elvis, the Beatles, Puff Daddy or Margaret Singana. Because they are not ready to collapse under the weight of colossal overheads, they are willing to create new sounds and take chances thought impossible by their lumbering counterparts. But how do we spread this vision and also reveal the many difficulties associated with the popular music industry? My only thought is that we need a mechanism to create 'students' of popular music.

I would like to recount two rather different stories, one drawn from the distant past and another from November 2002. Both involve South Africans blessed with 'golden ears'.

In the early 1940's, Solomon Linda's Original Evening Birds recorded *Mbube* which went on to become *Wimoweh* when it was arranged by American Pete Seeger for The Weavers. In that form it topped the American chart at the time. The term *mbube* also refers to vocal music, a style developed locally in the 1940's, a sound that grew from the a cappella American vocal groups. *Mbube* is believed to have meant 'bombing' deriving from the war years, but another assertion is that this musical halo is linked directly to Solomon Linda's tune. The song has been recorded internationally over the past five decades and very recently efforts were made to restore huge sums of money in royalties to Solomon Linda's surviving kin. Linda had very little knowledge of copyright and is believed to have signed away the rights to the tune.

Coming to the present day and to a man who grew up in the Johannesburg suburb of Siddenham. Originally a member of Calder's Collection, Clive Calder formed the independent record company Clive Calder Productions (or CCP), with Ralph Simon in 1973. Calder was responsible locally for the success of Little Ronnie Joyce and Richard John Smith amongst others but of greater significance is his relationship with producer Robert John 'Mutt' Lange.

Lange is now married to American country music sensation Shania Twain. He initially worked as an independent producer for, amongst others, David Gresham's Nitty Gritty Records. According to Gresham, Lange would take home all the latest hit records and listen to them throughout the night, returning them the following day. When Gresham asked him what he was doing, he said that he was trying to understand the 'geography' of hit songs. His research paid dividends when his first production for Gresham's company in early 1972 (Sunday Monday Tuesday for the artist Jessica Jones) sold in excess of 75 000 copies.

Lange moved to the UK in the mid-1970s where he signed a production and publishing deal with Calder. By 1978, he had worked with The Boomtown Rats and Graham Parker and was a significant name in production circles. During the early 1980s he produced several massive albums for AC/DC, crafted the sound of British rock act Def Leppard (whose album *Pyromania* was the second biggest selling album of 1984 in the US behind Michael Jackson's *Thriller*). Towards the beginning of the next decade, Lange co-wrote and produced *Everything I Do (I Do It for You)* for Bryan Adams, a song that spent 13 weeks at the top of the British charts in 1991.

After seeing the then dowdy Shania Twain on television, he contacted her, met her face to face in 1993 and with her, began to produce a country-pop sound and image that set the US alight in the last decade of the 20th century. He has also recently produced hits for Irish pop-rock outfit The Corrs and his understanding of a song's 'geography' is still evident in their latest hits.

Lange is, of course, a multi-millionaire. Extremely reclusive, he eschews industry awards ceremonies and never accompanies

his superstar wife on tour. Clearly his first-love is music and nothing, not even fame, can draw him away from that love. But let's not lose sight of Clive Calder.

In the international arena, Calder created Jive Records and Zomba Publishing. Through his business relationship with Lange, he was able to generate large sums of money through publishing that helped finance his record company. During the mid-1990s, Jive was the biggest R&B label in America having huge success with R. Kelly and Aaliyah. Towards the end of the decade, Calder began to focus on the American pop market and delivered further success with acts such as Britney Spears, The Backstreet Boys and most recently 'N Sync. Through his astute understanding of publishing and marketing, he controls much of his artists' material and owns portions of the rights to their songs. He also brought the *Now That's What I Call Music* compilations to the top of the US chart. But all this success cannot compare to the deal Calder pulled off at the end of 2002.

Jive was, until the end of 2002, the single biggest independent record label in the world and Zomba Publishing the biggest independent music publisher. Less than four years ago, Calder sold 25 per cent of each company to BMG and EMI respectively. At the same time, he developed a deal that would see him either buy back this 25 per cent holding or force these majors to buy the remaining 75 per cent of his business, based on his own calculations. The deal, finally approved by courts in the United States, has seen BMG become the parent of Jive, having paid Calder three and a half billion dollars for the privilege. It is a deal that has BMG reeling, knowing that they have overpaid. Rumours are rife that rather than see Calder disappear into the sunset with his king's ransom, BMG may wish to control and protect their massive acquisition by making him their Chief Executive Officer.

So where does the relationship between Solomon Linda and Clive Calder lie? The former died a pauper, his greatest musical work, and one of our country's richest treasures, not even providing an income for his family until very recently. The latter is a modern-day music business icon, whose name is mentioned with deep reverence from New York to Sidney, London to Johannesburg.

The relationship I believe is at a number of levels. Firstly and most obviously, both of them are South African. Secondly and for very different reasons, their legacies have never been revealed to the broader South African public. In Linda's case, the issue of the rights to his song and the royalties generated formed the basis for an article by Rian Malan (2000) in *Rolling Stone* magazine, which renewed interest in both his musical works and the question of copyright. In Calder's case, while magazines such as *Billboard* continually cover his business dealings, little is known about the man due to his own hermitic tendencies.

The need to develop a legacy for South African music is critical. Linda's story is crucial for young musicians about to sign their first deal because little has changed in terms of an understanding of legal issues amongst those who are not steeped in the pitfalls of the business. And while Calder is a figure of primary significance for industry executives around the world, how can he ever be a role model if only a chosen few in this country even know that he exists? And Linda and Calder are not the only 'unknown' South Africans in the international record industry.

Phil Ramone who has produced for Billy Joel and Barbara Streisand, and worked on Frank Sinatra's final album, was born in Cape Town. The legendary Eddie Kramer responsible for the studio experimentalism and genius of Jimi Hendrix's albums *Are You Experienced?*, *Axis: Bold as Love* and *Electric Ladyland* was also raised in Cape Town. Ricky Fataar, the drummer with the Flames, is now doing both session work and touring with Bonnie Riatt. Most recently, the British group Sugarbabes scored a number one hit with *Freak Like Me* described as a 'mash' by the international music press as it features the lyrics to *Freak Like Me* 'mashed' (that is, sung

directly over) the tune of a hit from the 80s by Tubeway Army. This innovative track was produced by another South African, Craig Dodds.

The final parallel between Solomon Linda and Clive Calder is the significance of copyright. Linda remained poor because, through no fault of his own, he lacked an understanding of mechanical rights. Calder on the other hand, built a massive empire through his ownership of portions of 'Mutt' Lange's publishing, his control over his artists' publishing and even the purchase of the rights to market British-made compilation albums in the United States.

The need to educate musicians about the value of intellectual property and publishing is paramount if we are to see South African artists prosper financially. Publishing is the very essence of the record business. While artists have to tour and promote their music endlessly, owners of copyright can retire after just a few hits, mechanical royalties being generated through both record sales and airplay.

With companies such as EMI faltering on international stock markets, the majors may not wish to invest in new artists but will lay out large advances for good songs. Calder is reported to have paid an advance and bought Swedish writer and producer, Max Martin, a Mercedes SLK for the song *One More Time* in order to launch Britney Spears' career. And an artist and repertoire manager at RCA in the States was willing to sign a blank cheque to grab *Genie in a Bottle* for Christina Aguilera. If our most vital treasures are those pieces of music like *Mbube* or *Manenberg* or *Pata Pata* shouldn't we make sure that the current generation of writers benefit?

Does a truly South African music style exist?

It would take much research to deliver a conclusive answer to this question. I will draw a comparison, which I believe will provide an insight into how we understand music and just how eclectic and generic it truly is.

Randall Abrahams

In the early 1950s, an artist by the name of Little Junior Parker recorded a slow blues shuffle called Mystery Train on the small independent Sun Records label in Memphis, Tennessee under the guidance of producer Sam Phillips. The origins of the lyrical ideas for the song however, date back to the 1930s and a group known as the Carter Family – the first family of country music. One must be clear that the backgrounds of a white family group of Irish descent in the 1930s and a black blues artist in the 1950s were quite different, yet the message of an object, a train in this case, being responsible for the disappearance of a loved one, is the common thread. No explanation as to the break-up of a relationship is provided. It is easier to blame the train for hijacking the loved one, because it is simply too painful to contemplate the truth.

Country music and blues music in the deeply racially divided America of the 1950s, was in fact not that different. Both were musics of the working class developed in rural settings, both became electrified once the population became urbanised and both had heroes throughout these changes - the Carter Family for country music and Robert Johnson for the blues. After urbanisation Hank Williams became the voice of country music and Muddy Waters staked their claim on the blues. Then in 1955, came the voice that fused these seemingly disparate forms of American popular music, fusing country and blues styles effortlessly and adding a further dimension: the arrogance and Dionysian beauty of youth. Elvis Presley recorded Mystery Train, and rather than wallowing in the sadness of having lost a lover, rejoiced in the power of his youth and sexuality by concentrating on the final lyric, stating boldly that 'she' would never leave him again. That is the legacy of popular song in America, thrust from different backgrounds and at different times in the history of the country, into the pathway of the masses over the radio, and moulded into new and exciting forms.

The legacy of that song is no different from Abdullah Ibrahim's *Manenberg*. *Manenberg* contains elements of Marabi, *kwela* and American swing in the shuffle of Monty Weber's drums, hymn melodies in Abdullah's block chords and phrases, Cape folk music and the sound of the fish-horn in the duelling saxophones of Basil Coetzee and Robbie Jansen. The call and response of the saxophones are also an important part of American blues and gospel singing.

The modal improvisation of Coetzee and Jansen is another important post-bop innovation first heard on the Miles Davis album *Kind of Blue* to great effect on both *So What* and *Flamenco Sketches*. But for me the most South African thing about the whole experience is the short, terse phrase: *Julle kan maar New York toe gaan maar ons bly hier in die Manenberg*. (You can go to New York but we will stay here in Manenberg) Just as *Mystery Train* spoke to its various American audiences, from rural whites to urban blacks to young white and black teenagers, *Manenberg* spoke to the broad South African audience in 1974 with its fusion of diverse styles.

When it was performed at the Luxurama Theatre in Wynberg at the height of the school boycotts during the 1980s, it spoke to the experience of living in an area created by the apartheid regime but refusing to allow any form of oppression to break the collective spirit and will of the people. In today's context, it can inform the sound of young record producers experimenting with the beats of *kwaito* but wishing to use South African melodies as the basis for their experimentation.

No music is entirely devoid of external influences. Either through an analysis of lyrics, or through instrumentation, or through style of playing, it can be traced far beyond a simple origin. Yet with enough elements of music such as *marabi* or *kwela*, or the beat of *kwaito*, it is immediately recognisable as South African. The timbre of a South African black female voice will be quite different from that of a black American singer unless the artist is simply mimicking the American accent and delivery. And that I believe is all it takes to have a

'South African sound': a clear acknowledgement of 'South Africanness' either in lyrics, or melodic influence or rhythm.

The rhythm track and melody on British producer Malcolm McClaren's *Buffalo Girls*, a hit from the 1980s, is borrowed from Mahlatini & the Mohetella Queens. For our artists, while competing in the international arena means adaptation, it doesn't mean losing everything inherently South African. America has an American sound, Britain a British sound. They are not going to listen to something they already possess.

As an example of local and external influences, the popular music that grew up around the Western world after the Second World War, including small group jazz and bebop, electric blues, American rock 'n roll and the beat groups of the 'British Invasion', was a sound influenced by the modernising industrial city.

Electric blues for example, grew from the seeds of the Delta Blues on the plantations with artists such as Robert Johnson, Charlie Patton and Leadbelly creating unique stylings that formed the building blocks of the music. But the inner cities demanded a new, louder and bolder form of expression. The voices of the electric blues such as Muddy Waters and BB King, created an explosive and dynamic new form of the blues, driven by the electric guitar and their own voices. In the case of Muddy Waters recording at the studios of Leonard Chess in Chicago, the 'sound of the city' was a powerful influence both on the lyrical and musical context of his work. It is also instructive that Waters had come from the plantations where he learnt to play the guitar to the city, and switched to electric guitar as his primary instrument, updating his sound in the process.

In South Africa, a similar transition took place as large portions of the disenfranchised population moved closer to Johannesburg when the government in power sought to create pools of cheap labour for the industries of the mining city. Four and a half miles west of the city centre lay over 200 acres of land known as Sophiatown, part of the Western Areas and

soon to become the largest residential area for blacks in the country. The area's population grew exponentially over the space of a decade, with inhabitants more willing to reside there as Sophiatown offered a degree of ownership not found in the municipal locations or the workers' hostels.

Due to its proximity to the industrial heartland of the country and the greater degree of ownership and freedom allowed, Sophiatown came to be the leading 'cultural' driver for black South Africans. In fashion and music it set new trends to be embraced throughout the country. Just as Memphis in the United States was the home of the electric delta blues, a city awash with myriad musical influences from around its shores, so Sophiatown too developed a synthesis of musical and cultural influences both local and international. It is not difficult to understand why inhabitants drew parallels and began calling the area 'Little Harlem.' Jazz music by American artists such as Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Cab Calloway and their appearance in motion pictures, influenced the styles of music and fashion and even communication throughout Sophiatown and then in major urban centres throughout the country.

Sophiatown was a burgeoning cauldron of both local and international influences. Shebeen society, like Harlem's café society, mutated from the small backyard drinking spot to the modern nightclub where the wealthy elite began to spend their evenings. Night spots such as The Back of the Moon and The House on Telegraph Hill became the meeting place for individuals who had found success in various fields, a place to be seen and where one had the opportunity of hearing the latest international music trends. The influence of American jazz is prominent in the local groups born during this era. Vocalists such as Dolly Rathebe and Dorothy Masuku and groups such as the Jazz Maniacs and the Pitch Black Follies were all influenced by the musical stylings of jazz from across the Atlantic. American fashion sense and slang also found a home in the South Africa of the Sophiatown age. The

similarities between the experiences of black people in the United States and South Africa are notable.

Both groups were part of a rapid urbanisation of unskilled labour necessary for the development of industry. Both lived under oppressive conditions, and although black Americans were in the minority while their South African counterparts were in the majority, South Africans came to identify with the sound created by the Americans – firstly, just as audiences throughout the world had, and then on a deeper level as they explored common socio-economic realities.

It is often argued that music in a particular domain should develop along its 'own lines' but once the spread of jazz music through records and movies hit shores throughout the world, the impact of its sound was impossible to resist. The songwriting tradition at the time (with writers as brilliant as Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Duke Ellington and Rodgers and Hart and the big band arrangers and singers such as Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday) influenced not only South African music but music throughout the world.

In South Africa, audiences were often interested in hearing exact replications of American arrangements and many local players created their charts by ear. The necessity for improvisation was minimal. Many jazz lovers were unable to afford imported records and sanctions prevented them from being able to see the original groups live. As a result, they expected note-for-note re-creations by South African performers. This musical tradition can be likened to the modern day example of cover bands that aim at sounding exactly like their international influences. But audience needs and desires grow and once a larger portion of listeners could afford the real thing, they began to expect new and different sounds from local artists. As importantly, audiences come to expect a sound that they can call their own with melodic, rhythmic and lyrical cornerstones that they immediately recognise. While South African performers were avid students of American jazz, their audiences still maintained a strong rural and even tribal musical heritage and sought to hear music they could call their own.

The distillation of the local and international sounds came to marry the rhythms of American jazz with the distinctive melodies of *marabi* music. This synthesis, developed in the 1940s, became known as *tsaba-tsaba* and not only was it a music for listening but it was designed for the dance floor.

Tsaba-tsaba was also more than a simple synthesis of American and South African styles. It was also influenced by the focho style of Sotho migrants and included musical influences from various South African styles. Melodically and lyrically too, musicians such as Ace Buya and his Modernaires recognised the need to do more than simply translate American melodies but to create their own tunes that reflected the experiences of their audience. Vocal group harmony also influenced the sound of the new music. Due to the enormous lack of income and resources and the influence of mission congregational and choir singing, vocal choir music was still the most practiced musical form in South Africa. Just as gospel music in the United States influenced secular music in both performance style and musical form, (for example Sam Cooke's performance and the melody of Ray Charles' What'd I Say) so too did harmony singing influence the development of tsaba-tsaba with Ace Buya, Victor Ndlazilwana arranging traditional worksongs in the style of close-harmony jazz.

The lyrical and musical associations of the *tsaba-tsaba* style were with proletarian culture and social standing. Because of the middle-class leanings and the aspirational values associated with jazz, musicians and listeners alike were ambivalent to *tsaba-tsaba*. It may be that the rhythmic sound of the music was too clearly linked to the sound of traditional musical forms and the developing audience longed for a more sophisticated sound. But the synthesis was an almost obvious marriage reflecting as it did the developments of the populations of the inner cities dealing with the rural/urban conundrum. Many onlookers saw the parallels between the American dance styles such as the Big Apple and the Shag and the *tsaba-tsaba*. The value of this new form as a recognisably

South African phenomenon was also not lost on many critics. South Africa would have to develop a style of its own should it wish to compete with the rest of the world. Simply copying jazz would not make any significant impact. A major international hit did finally come when August Musururgwa's *Skokiaan* became an international chart hit in 1947.

The other major musical development and synthesis of styles that took place at the end of the 1940s and early 1950s was the creation of the penny-whistle sound. Inspired by the fife and drum bands of Scottish immigrants, many youngsters learnt to play the penny whistle and organised their marching bands in search of easy money on the streets of Johannesburg. The boys were identified with the worst forms of street culture - the music seen as a thin veil for the excesses of marijuana smoking and petty street crime. But the music continued to develop with the addition of the homemade guitar and the addition of further penny-whistlers creating harmonies and interplay. While these musicians played the penny whistle as the lead instruments in their groups, their main influence was American jazz and its South African offshoots. The swing of the music was clearly influenced by jazz, while the melodies and harmonies had a recognisably local taint. The blending of styles developed into a sound that while not 'purely' indigenous, held more than enough elements to be heard as different from other musical forms. The new term used to describe the music was kwela.

The origin of the term seems to be in the name *khwela-khwela* given to the police vans roaming the townships on the lookout for illicit street-corner behaviour. Elias Lerole and his Zig-Zag Flutes from 1956 caught this moment on the record *Tom Hark*. The record starts with the sounds of a street corner scene with the members of a street gang hiding their dice and pulling out their penny-whistles to shouts of: 'Daar kom die khwela-khwela' ('Here comes the khwela-khwela). Following the success of this record, many whites began using the term kwela generically to depict all forms of local African beat

music. The record's success though is another bittersweet moment in the history of South African music, as it is believed to have netted many hundreds of thousands of Rands for Gallo record company while the principal musician was paid only a session fee.

At one of the many township jazz shows at the Selbourne Hall, young penny whistle genius Lemmy Mabaso made his first appearance. Mabaso was influenced both by American jazz-swing and by local players such as Zakes Nkosi. He went on to steal the show in the musical *King Kong* based on the career of heavyweight boxer Ezekial 'King Kong' Dhlamini. The show featured Nathan Mdledle as King Kong and Miriam Makeba as his romantic interest. *King Kong* was a major success with audiences from across the colour line and one the best examples of musical theatre staged in South Africa. It represented numerous musical and theatrical styles and portrayed the character of Sophiatown.

The other major penny whistle star from the period was Spokes Mashiyane - also reputedly paid between £20 and £30 for records that sold over 50 000 copies. By the 1950s recording labels had pushed for the development of the pennywhistle sound often adding saxophones and rhythm tracks to simple, less complicated arrangements. Spokes Mashiyane also began playing the saxophone and along with other musicians such as Ntemi Piliso crystallised into a newly evolved sound. The ambivalence towards kwela music from jazz aficionados also remained as it had done with tsaba-tsaba. The popularity of kwela was hard to maintain as studios pushed for another evolution of the sound and radio airplay was minimal. The influence of government policies also affected the lives of black performers. Late in the 1940s performers were not allowed to appear professionally without the involvement of a white 'agent' thereby inhibiting development.

The rise of the township gangs or *tsotsis* also had a profound influence on the development of performers. Gangs became followers of specific groups and would target

performers they didn't support. The founder of the Jazz Maniacs, one of the most successful groups since their inception during the 1930s, Zuluboy Cele, was murdered under tragic and mysterious circumstances in 1944. The former pianist turned saxophonist was believed to have been involved with gangsters. He was a key integrator of American jazz-swing and South African *marabi* music. Violence in the dancehalls of the township were responsible for the disintegration of the Jazz Maniacs and one of the country's greatest vocalists Dolly Rathebe quit the business during the 1950s fearing for her own safety.

The developing trend in popular music was the transition from *kwela to mbaqanga*, a form of African jazz inspired by the improvisations of groups such as the Manhattan Brothers and the Jazz Maniacs. One of the most influential soloists was Kippie Moeketsi, alto saxophonist with Mackay Davashe's Shantytown Sextet. Moeketsi sought to emulate the hardliving, heavy-drinking mould of his idol Charlie 'Bird' Parker. He toured with the Manhattan Brothers as part of Davashe's outfit in 1950. Kippie almost made it to London as a member of the cast of *King Kong* but township violence raised its head once again when *tsotsis* hit Kippie on the head with a brick in 1960 landing him in hospital for many weeks. He made the trip to London later that year, noting that he could not believe his journey from the back streets of Johannesburg's townships to the bright lights of the West End.

Moeketsi stayed away from the performing scene between 1964 and 1971, appearing only on recordings with pianist Dollar Brand, whom he had originally met while on tour in Cape Town in 1954, amongst others. One of his albums from the early 1970s *Tshona* showed the influences of *marabi*, jazz-swing and Charlie Parker on his style. The simple figure repeated on the piano lays the basis for extended alto sax solos, both harmonic and modal, by the great 'Morolong' Moeketsi. The honking saxophone reveals his personality throughout the performance, evoking the harsh realities of the

street that Moeketsi had come to know too well. Kippie's influence on jazz music in this country is monumental, with latter-day musicians such as Winston Nkosi clearly influenced by his playing. But Kippie's love of the American jazz scene is also still a part of township culture with young stars favouring dress styles seen in American music videos.

These contradictions, the love affair with American music styles and dress, the acrimonious relationships between artists and record companies and the stranglehold placed on the performing arts by the apartheid regime, has continued to play a role throughout the development of contemporary South African music. Even after the end of the apartheid era, many of these issues continued to plague the development of certain genres and the broader industry. The influence of American music and popular culture on music throughout the world is an issue for debate.

Making music, making money

Major record labels have the power to market and distribute music at a level impossible for an independent. So while independents allow their artists a degree of freedom often missing at the majors, these artists can only achieve large-scale success through a relationship with a multi-national company. While there are artists such as Ani Di Franco who protect their independence tooth and nail, many artists seek popular acclaim and therefore join major record companies. In order to achieve worldwide success, the engines of a major company are necessary for airplay and especially for television rotation on channels such as MTV. South African artists are not unique in facing these difficulties.

It is important to understand especially in the modern era, that popular music, like fashion, motor vehicles and washing-powder, has become a commodity. This particular commodity has mutated over the years and the ingredients necessary for success have changed irreversibly. In the two decades after the

Second World War, with the growth of jazz and the rise of popular singers (such as the bands of Duke Ellington and Count Basie, and singers like Frank Sinatra, Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald in America, and The Jazz Maniacs and vocalists like Dolly Rathebe and Miriam Makeba in South Africa) live performance and big band and ensemble playing and arranging became the essence of success. While the heart of the business will always be a great song, the individual and collective musical abilities of particular artists were paramount. With the arrival of rock and roll in the 1950s, musicianship and live performance were still crucial, but marketing and the artists' ability to identify with a target market became significant. In the 1960s, The Beatles led the charge for artists to write and produce their own work. The level of identification between artist and audience took on a new degree of importance. The Beatles and their music 'spoke' to and for a generation, as did Bob Dylan and The Rolling Stones.

Today, the emphasis and level of importance placed on the visual 'music video' have become paramount. Many artists and record companies would be hard-pressed to choose between rotation on MTV (the music-television channel that first broadcast in the United States in 1980) and playlisting on major commercial radio stations. This has led to a new level of 'commoditisation' for popular music.

The creation of a music video and the 'look' of an artist are all important, as music and fashion have become part of the same package aimed at the consumer. While Alicia Keys is a gifted singer, performer and songwriter, the fact that she is attractive helps the success of her product. It is questionable as to whether a singer with the gift of an Aretha Franklin would today achieve the level of success she did in the late 1960s. How would one 'package' Aretha? So, while many South African artists may find success in this country through release of their CDs and touring, they will have to define a particular image for themselves both musically and visually if they are to find international acclaim.

A number of acts have been hugely popular in South Africa but only with a certain sector of the population. How are they to find acclaim outside of their loyal following should they wish to do so? How are they, or any other act, ever to achieve 'crossover' success if this is their desire?

Steve Kekana found a degree of crossover success in the 1980s and was the featured vocalist on Sipho 'Hotstix' Mabuse's hit Burnout. Steve recorded his first English hit single Raising My Family with production by Malcolm Watson and in an attempt to achieve local and international crossover success. Having won the SABC's 'black Sarie Award' two years running, it was felt that he would be a definite candidate for broader success. By his own admission, he had found it difficult to sing in English rather than in Zulu or Sotho, as he couldn't express the feeling he captured in those languages. He could capture the rhythm of the tunes, but simply translating the words of hit songs into English would not be enough. Kekana was aware that maintaining his Sotho and Zulu speaking audience was important - it was after all the audience that had provided him with his initial success. But his desire, as with many other South African acts, was to make it the mainstream. To achieve this, he would have to record in English, the common currency of international pop. His desire for wider, mass appeal was not only driven by the financial rewards this type of success would bring but also by his wish to develop himself as a musician. While critics may argue that an artist is 'selling out' by attempting to attract portions of another audience's demography, artists often harbour very personal needs for their own development. Many artists argue that they wish to create music on their own terms without the machinations of record companies and the vagaries of a fan base, but there are very few performers who enter the business without the bright hope that they will be financially wealthy and adored by millions the world over.

Kekana went on to great success and achieved some crossover appeal with albums such as *The Bushman*, but his

early sales in the more traditional Sotho and Zulu markets tied him to creating sounds for his following. His lyrical foundations, based around love and the breakdown of family life as a result of the system of migrant labour, were not about to be easily understood by audiences without similar backgrounds. Despite a unique, pleading voice, it was difficult to find songs that were sufficiently universal to garner listenership from white audiences. Once more, a lack of vision and skill around fundamental artist (and repertoire) questions may have resulted in Kekana not receiving a just reward for his level of talent. It was also a time when apartheid and the SABC strangled potential development for many artists. Kekana was seen as a 'local' act to be played on Radio Bantu and not an 'international' act that could be played on Radio 5.

These contradictions and their impact upon the development of the South African music industry cannot be underestimated. Apartheid had created the system of migrant labour, but had also shielded whites from any understanding of the fundamentals of the black socio-cultural experience. Music exists as part of a socio-political and cultural milieu, no matter how tenuous the linkages may seem at any one time. To create music with crossover appeal, it is simply not enough to get a white person to sing 'black' music or vice versa. The ability to sound coherently integrated into the type of music and the experience it relates to are fundamental for the creation of a musical sound.

With the SABC having banned Rabbitt's *Celebrate Freedom*, Stevie Wonder's *MasterBlaster* (it contains a lyric referring to peace having come to Zimbabwe) and even a song as innocuous as Elvis' *In the Ghetto* during the apartheid era, the desire for producers or record companies to create crossover hit records was stinted. Without radio airplay, audiences would not have the chance to listen to artists or genres of music on the airwaves. For an act such as Mahlathini it could be argued that the sound of the music did not fit with popular music played on Radio 5. The same argument did not hold

water for Margaret Singana. Her sound was clearly pop crossover but she was a black female South African and therefore deemed not fit for the white South African public.

The example of Juluka, a partnership between Johnny Clegg and Sipho Mchunu, is instructive. The group achieved popular appeal in South Africa and widespread appeal in France and throughout Europe. The music featured strains of American folk music with mbaquanga rhythms and the sound of traditional Zulu guitar, with expert production by Hilton Rosenthal. The group was also an explosive live act incorporating many elements of traditional Zulu dance into their show. Initially, Radio Bantu refused to play their records and because they felt Clegg 'an insult to the Zulu and their culture' but over time their music became an accepted staple of radio playlists. Songs such as Asimbonanga with its reference to Nelson Mandela and a list of political heroes never found its way onto the airwaves. Another 'crossover' act, Bright Blue, achieved airplay with their single Weeping, an incisive comment on the lack of freedom under apartheid. It received airplay, one can only imagine that the authorities failed to see the political overtones in both the lyrics and the melody. But in general, there was certainly no thrust to try and get South Africans to understand one another musically or in any other way and therefore any development of new and exciting genres was hamstrung from the outset. South Africa also lost the services of artists of the magnitude of Abdullah Ibrahim, Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Harold Japhta and Chris MacGregor and a host of other important talents.

The rise of *kwaito* music during the last decade of the 20th century was one of the first post-apartheid musical forms. Its roots had been sown with what was known in the market as 'bubblegum pop' including tunes by Chico and Brenda Fassie and the Big Dudes. DJs such as Arthur Mafokate and Oscar 'Warona' Mdlongwa had been playing in clubs and on campuses around the country in the late 1980s and early 1990s, mainly concentrating on North American house music

such as Frankie Knuckles and Steve 'Silk' Hurley along with British acts such as Soul to Soul and Ten City. This was the music of the dance floor, heard on stations such as Radio Metro and its huge following among young black audiences.

Both Mafokate and Mdlongwa had ambitions beyond being dance floor DJs and began to experiment with remixing international hits. Mdlonga did remixes for various record labels, requesting copyright permission and slowing down the tempos to suit his dance floor audience. These included 'underground house' remixes for artists such as Steve Hurley, The Pasedenas and Magnificent Noise. Club DJs measure the pace of a tune by beats per minute (BPM) and Mdlongwa was aware that international tempos of around 130 BPM were too fast for local tastes. By learning the art of remixing, he also learnt the fundamentals of the record business and how he could maintain his independence while striking a distribution deal with major labels. Having enjoyed success with his remixes, he sought to create his own hits kicking off with tracks such as Traffic Cop for his own group Brothers of Peace. He again had great difficulty in getting radio airplay for this new sound. Most stations refused to play the tracks even though he had tested them on the dance floor at clubs and campuses. Mdlongwa had a keen sense of what was happening on the street and the sounds that were hot for the ears of his young audiences.

Traffic Cop also poked fun at the system in an innocuous manner, questioning why black people driving smart cars were always a target for traffic cops. This taunt along with Arthur Mafokate's hit single, Don't call me Kaffir, reflected the 'hipness' and street-wise attitude of the music. While not receiving much airplay and with Mdlongwa selling CDs out of his boot, the albums still shifted in reasonable quantities, testimony to their pull with their audience. While the productions were not of the highest standard, the sound of the music is joyous and reflective of the energy of the street, similar to the penny whistle magic of Shakes Mashiyane. It is

also very similar to American hip-hop music with its focus on the rhythm track and its 'street language' and bird's-eye commentary on street culture. When asked in a discussion with the writer in early 2002 as to whether or not his lyrics were influenced by rap music, Mdlongwa claimed that his love of Bob Marley had led him to make comments in his music that were socially relevant. There is however no denying that hip-hop influenced the *kwaito* scene, both at the level of music and in terms of fashion sense. Hip-hop, just like jazz and rock and roll, are more than musical forms. Hip-hop ventures into the territory of influencing lifestyles. *Kwaito* too has its own language, style of dress and fundamentally a particular attitude towards life itself.

The major 'breakthrough' hit for the new kwaito generation came with the release of Boomshaka's It's About Time. Its insistent beat and catchy phrases married with great onstage performances by the group, set dance floors across the country alight. Mdlongwa along with Don Laka and DJ Christos produced the record but Mdlongwa did not believe that the record would achieve the magnitude of sales success and crossover to a white audience that it did.4 Airplay and distribution were still difficult. His team at Kalawa-Jazzmee Records were initially able to sell 30 000 copies of the Boomshaka album while a distribution deal with Tusk Records saw the album reach the 120 000 mark. It is at this point that labels began to take an interest in the new music. Trompies sold over 100 000 copies of Magasman, TKZee exploded with hits such as Take it Eezy and Phalafala while later Mdu had a massive seller with Hey Kop. Kalawa are proud of their initial distribution deal with Tusk, moving later to EMI and then to Sony. Mdlongwa still remembers selling CDs out of the boot of his car - the initial extent of his marketing drive was to promote Boomshaka and BOP at taxi ranks and at his DJ appearances. Today he is able to control the image of his acts and has created careers for Thebe, amongst others.

Mafokate created 999 Records and had success with acts such as Abashante. The *kwaito* explosion can also be linked to

the changes in the political playing fields. Prior to 1994, Mdlongwa argues that songs such as *Traffic Cop* were hard to get onto playlists. The idea of a rainbow nation and the move towards a more integrated social structure meant that diverse musical strands were more openly embraced. The rise of independent radio stations such as Gauteng's YFM also played a role in this new musical vanguard. The station rotated *kwaito* music during its major hours of rotation (between 6am and 6pm on weekdays) from its inception in 1998.

The first song played on the station was Bongo Maffin's *Makeba*, a reworking of Mama Africa's *Pata Pata*. The station's listening audience grew rapidly and reached over one million listeners after just two years on air. Artists were also friendly with station personalities and sought insights from the DJs.

Mdlongwa and his production partner Bruce Sebitlo have always maintained an interest in reworking classic South African sounds including the aforementioned Makeba and the use of Mahlathini samples on BOP's Meropa. In the interview I conducted in December 2002, Mdlongwa maintained that he wants to allow young listeners the chance to hear great homegrown artists albeit in the context of a 'remix'. While he will not allow his sound to be restricted for purely sociopolitical reasons, he wants his audience to hear more than just international rap or house sounds. He says that there are ways to update old South African sounds, just like American rap music samples James Brown, Marvin Gave and Isaac Haves, so too can his own music and the music of his contemporaries rework South African melodies. A number of critics have argued that sampling is simply 'stealing' musical ideas but it has become an accepted form of music making. All music draws on influences from the past and sampling is simply the use of modern technology to achieve a similar purpose.

Mdlongwa and Mafokate have grasped another important quality for success in the music industry. Having drawn inspiration from international record labels (such as Babyface and LAReid's LaFace and Sean Combs' Bad Boy Entertainment) they wish to make it clear that they are more than musicians and producers. If they want to maintain financial and artistic independence, building their own business entities will be fundamental. Mdlongwa doesn't want to go on performing and writing forever. He has been involved in the music business at its coalface, from recording music and designing covers to pressing CDs and inlays, even promoting artists at taxi ranks, he is steeped in the business of moving CDs off the shelves. He has negotiated with owners of CD stores and he knows that he must create a company that can do all these things. Having achieved political freedom, the focus of young South Africans on their education and careers is as relevant to the music industry as in any other sphere.

Musically, Mdlongwa now speaks of 'progressive *kwaito*' a music that will further blur the lines between local influences, house and hip-hop music, and more focused on a broader target audience, especially white youngsters. Without the divide and rule strategies of apartheid, it will be interesting to see whether the next generation share musical experiences or continue to be schooled in the musical tastes of the apartheid past.

The success of Mandoza's *Nkalakatha* may point the way to the future. Produced by Gabie Le Roux, the tune contains rap phrases in the style of *kwaito* and the rhythm is decidedly formatted and programmed as a *kwaito* beat. The riff could be drawn from any of a number of pop-rock tracks and this type of strong musical focal point is not dissimilar from the huge hooks and choruses found on any number of Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera songs. The fact that *Nkalakatha* may almost single-mindedly have created as a crossover track is not the main point for discussion. The fact that it has received such a massive level of crossover success is an inspiring factor. In the case of TKZee's *Shibobo*, the song was linked to the soccer World Cup, featured Bafana Bafana's star striker Benni McCarthy and had a strong marketing thrust. *Nkalakatha* originally had no such direct marketing link to sport, but now

can be heard at rugby matches and receives huge cheers and causes wild dancing when played.

This begs the question: when will a South African tune be an international hit?

The attitude of the international music community and the world at large towards South Africa has changed dramatically. In general, there exists a far more positive attitude towards our country. The success of local music in the pop market has seen both producers and record companies place human and financial resources behind genres such as kwaito. The level of accessibility may yet prove problematic, especially as, for global appeal, lyrics still need to be in English, and a need for greater melodic variety rather than the repetitive phrases currently in use, still exists for the product to be internationally marketable on a large scale. It may well be that a South African pop star must possess a specific 'look' and may have to incorporate an updated form of indigenous dance into their repertoire in order to appeal to the international market. These musical and performing attributes may be quite similar to those necessary for international success under apartheid, the key differentiator being that times and attitudes towards South Africa have changed. Having remarked about this change in international perceptions towards South Africa, it doesn't mean that the world will simply welcome anything and everything that is music from this country with open arms.

The major difficulty with exploiting *kwaito* for export may well be an internal one. When the music first burst on the scene in the early 1990s, it had a level of underground excitement. Those 'in the know' would communicate with their close friends about new songs that they had heard at clubs as radio was not playing the genre. Now that the styles of dress, attitude, speech and music are seen in mass media television commercials, and the 'movement' is a mass street culture, the usual trappings of commercialism follow with acts having to repeat earlier successes. This often leads to a lack of originality, meaning that songs for the mass market may lose their

essence. Also, once stars start to receive royalty cheques and large fees for performing, they tend to get lazy when it comes to creating new and exciting sounds. This may well be the greatest challenge for purveyors of the genre. Can they stay on top of their game?

As the history of South African music continues to be written, both in the commercial framework and in everyday life in South Africa, a number of the issues loom large for the future of the industry. Without the shackles of apartheid, they will be easier to grapple with, but without thorough debate, problems that were apparent during the last century will continue to plague the local industry and the shackles of apartheid may well be replaced by the shackles of commercialism.

Randall Abrahams

Notes

- 1 The information in this paper comes largely from recent interviews with Oscar Mdlongwa, Diane Coetzer, Arthur Mafokate, Patrick van Blerk, Mike Fuller, Attie van Wyk and David Gresham.
- 2 Personal communication
- 3 Personal communication
- 4 Personal communication, December 2002

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Sound recordings

Are You Experienced? Jimi Hendrix.

Asimbonanga: Johnny Clegg.

Axis: Bold as Love: Jimi Hendrix.

Burn Out: Sipho Mabuse.

Catch a Fire: Bob Marley, & the Wailers.

Electric Ladyland: Jimi Hendrix.

Everything I Do (I Do It For You): Adams, Lange & Kamen.

Flamenco Sketches: Miles Davis.

Freak Like Me: Hanes, Valentine, Hill, Collins, Clinton &

Numan.

Genie in a Bottle: Kipner, Frank & Sheyne.

I Never Loved a Man: Russel.

In the Ghetto: Mac Davis.

It's About Time: D Laka, Christos & Big O.

Kind of Blue: Miles Davis.

Magasman: Sibika, Sebitlo, Mdlongwa & Mofokeng.

Makeba: Bomb Jeez.

Masterblaster 'Jammin': Stevie Wonder.

Mbube: Solomon Linda.

Mystery Train: Parker & Phillips.

Nkalakatha: Tshabalala & Le Roux.

One More Time: Max Martin.

Paradise Road: van Blerk & Roos.

Polk Salad Annie: Tony Joe White.

Pyromania: Def Leppard.

Rainy Night in Georgia: Tony Joe White.

Raising My Family: Vuma & Watson.

Shibobo: Z Bala, T Shabalala & K Mabalane.

Skokiaan: August Musurugwa.

So What: Miles Davis.

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday: Jones & Morris.

Take it Eezy: Z Bala, T Shabalala & K Mabalane.

The Bushman: Kramer.

Thriller: Michael Jackson.

Tom Hark: Elias Lerole.

Tshona: Pat Matshikiza.

What'd I Say: Ray Charles.

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