

## FACT, IDEOLOGY AND PARADOX: AFRICAN ELEMENTS IN EARLY BLACK SOUTH AFRICAN JAZZ AND VAUDEVILLE

by

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This weekend, in the city where I live, music-loving people will be planning certain activities. Large numbers of them will flock to huge outdoor stadiums, to hear various bands and singers of the moment render the latest *mbaqanga* hits, or maybe to hear how well they can deliver the big American numbers of Lionel Ritchie, Prince, or Whitney Houston. Some of these people will of course choose a local discotheque instead; others will find out where the real jazz is, and make a bee-line for that. And there will be other options, besides. The city I live in is Durban; but these sorts of possibilities are likely also to exist this weekend, or next, in varying degrees of magnitude, in the cities or towns you live in – whether these be Kimberley, Johannesburg, Port Elizabeth, or wherever.

It was not always so. If this were not 1991, but rather a weekend in 1929, or 1938, or 1944, many people – and I mean here mainly African people – would be thinking about what to wear so as to look their best at the event which the posters and newspapers would have announced as: “Concert and Dance”. The performers, the venue, even the price for the Concert and Dance might vary from place to place and time to time; but one thing everybody knew: the Concert, typically a vaudeville entertainment, would begin at 8p.m. and last until twelve. Then, at midnight, the chairs would be cleared, the band would take stage, and the Dance would follow, until four.

There’s much else that could be said; but for our purposes, there are two things to stress. The first is that it was here, in the institution known as “Concert and Dance”, that South African jazz culture was incubated. And the second is that this institution derived its repertoire from two principal sources – the one mainly American, the other mainly local. In a paper at a previous Symposium (the Seventh), I talked about the former – the American source. Today I want to focus on the latter, and look at some of the ways that local music (or certain kinds of it) were incorporated into the Concert and Dance between the 1920s and the early 1940s.

It’s true, of course (as I pointed out at that earlier Symposium) that it was American – and primarily black American – culture, that provided the greatest source for the Concert and Dance repertoire. But with regard to the development of an

authentic South African jazz, what is surely of greater significance is the fact that the vaudeville troupes and the dance bands also made use of styles and elements whose origins lay on their very doorstep. The most obvious of these local styles were various types of indigenous music; and it's noteworthy that these reached the Concert-and-Dance stages of the cities more explicitly in the work of the vaudeville companies than of the bands. But here we come up against our first paradox – and I want to draw your attention to it immediately. The paradox is this: one of the things that these vaudeville troupes (like the bands) aspired to most, was to emulate what they thought were the most sophisticated foreign acts. Now certainly the format of these vaudeville programmes – with their encapsulated scenes, their roots in minstrel shows, their affinity to variety concerts – certainly this format readily lent itself to the incorporation of the most disparate items. But this does not in itself explain why materials of local provenance should have been incorporated – even though this incorporation was usually on a limited scale, and took the form of songs, dances, and (what were called) “scenes from traditional life”.

So why should the need to include such materials have arisen in the first place? On the evidence available, three related reasons seem to suggest themselves. First, indigenous music was seen as a rich and important heritage and therefore one that deserved to be preserved. Certainly this view was widely held – at least among the educated African petty-bourgeoisie. In 1931, for instance, the elite South African Bantu Board of Music announced that one of its constitutional aims was “to undertake research work into Bantu Music, and to collect for preservation, folksongs in their original form”.<sup>1</sup> Strong and exceptionally articulate support also came from Mark Radebe, the well-known university-educated critic, pianist and cultural spokesperson. This “folk music”, he wrote around the same time, “is our most treasured cultural inheritance”. And what made it important, he suggested, was that these songs “are intimately associated with Bantu history and lie very near the heart of the people”. In other words, as he put it, “in this music there is a mass of characteristic material”.<sup>2</sup> Never wanting for influential spokespersons, this viewpoint also enjoyed support from no less a figure than the great Reuben Caluza. When he was placed in charge of music at Adams College in 1936, he is reported to have said that his principal aim in the job would be “the preservation of Bantu traditional music”; and that he hoped “to make a collection of old instruments and to form something like a folk dance society which will use purely African percussion, reed

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<sup>1</sup> *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 17 March, 1931.

<sup>2</sup> *Bantu World*, 21 October, 1933; “Bantu National Music”, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 9 July, 1932. (The claim that Mark Radebe was university educated is made by Herbert Dhlomo in *Ilanga lase Natal* on 16 August, 1952. Indeed, Dhlomo says that Radebe was one of Prof. P.R.Kirby's first African students at the University of the Witwatersrand.)

and string instruments”.<sup>3</sup>

The second reason for including aspects of indigenous music in the vaudeville repertoire followed from the first. And it went like this: since this local heritage was so rich in significance, it could, if it was kept alive, lead to exciting creative possibilities in the present. “The African musician and harmonist has his chance therefore”, as the editors of the black newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* wrote in 1933; “the world is waiting”.<sup>4</sup> But it was Mark Radebe who expressed the drift of this argument most profoundly. If “music [is] to be truly national”, he wrote in an article devoted to the topic, then “it must be based on the idiom of the people. Those most valuable achievements in musical history have been essentially national in spirit”. Therefore, if “a distinctive Bantu music” were to emerge, he said, it would have to be based on what he called “the only real Bantu music, namely, its folk music”. And if this occurred, it could be the foundation for what he called “a golden age of national Art”.<sup>5</sup>

The third reason also followed from the first, but pointed in a somewhat different direction. The indigenous heritage needed to be preserved, yes, but not simply because it was rich in significance or because it could nourish and enliven creative enterprise. Rather, the argument now went, it needed to be preserved for the sake of those not yet born who would otherwise know nothing about their roots. Daniel Marivate, singer, composer and teacher, captured the spirit of this view in a letter written in 1935:

We are passing at an age when things purely African are being replaced by things European. We who are between, that is, partly brought up against Native Background and partly peeping into European life and culture have a great responsibility for our race. We may either allow all native life, art, music, language to be crushed and wiped out or preserve all the present ideas, customs, life, music and art for those that will be born at the time when there will be no uncivilised Bantu...I think the black man of the future will want to know what kind of people his ancestors were and what kind of life they were leading and to be able to satisfy himself that he has really got a peep at the life of the old Bantu he must read the ideas that actually came from his Bantu predecessors.<sup>6</sup>

There was undoubtedly also a fourth reason – but it was implicit, and we can only

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<sup>3</sup> *Bantu World*, 21 March, 1936.

<sup>4</sup> *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 11 November, 1933.

<sup>5</sup> “Bantu National Music”, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 9 July, 1932.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to J.D. Rheinallt Jones, 4 November, 1935 (AD843/B47: William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand.)

infer it, sociologically. The Concert-and-Dance institution was largely under the control of upwardly-aspirant, mission-educated blacks who constituted what has been called a “repressed elite”. Nevertheless, the Concert-and-Dance institution catered to blacks of widely differing social, economic and educational backgrounds. A great many of these people would still have retained meaningful links with rural communities – and therefore with varieties of indigenous music. More important, all of these people, irrespective of social background or class, would have found themselves thrown together in urban ghettos. In these ghettos, they would have therefore also found themselves confronting similar problems, and having to deal with the same spectre of racial capitalism. Now out of this common experience of racial and economic oppression, blacks in the towns developed cultural practices which frequently expressed this commonality: they tried to accommodate differences of background and interest, and thus often attempted to transcend some of the incipient contradictions of social class.

So, after all that, what did the vaudeville repertoire sound like? In the time available, I can only give you the merest hint. And let me do that by means of a comparison. When the vaudeville style was wholly imported, even though this or that particular song might have been locally composed – in other words, when indigenous materials were not present – then the American origins were starkly evident. Here’s a typical example from the early 1940s. The language is Xhosa, but the musical style is totally imported.

(Play) Snowy Radebe & Company: “Ebhai” [ILAM Test Record 861 S].

But when African elements were included, one of two things happened. Either the result was genuine indigenous song; or alternatively, the result was a (well-known or newly composed) syncretic song, with strong African features – and here the most popular genre was the *mbholoho*, the wedding song. Here are two typical examples, both of them recorded by a cast of famous vaudeville singers in the early 1940s. First, a “concertised” version of a Zulu wedding song.

(Play) Snowy Radebe & Company: “Maqiqini” [ILAM Test Record 862 S].

And now a “concertised” version of a Tswana wedding song – this time with instrumental accompaniment.

(Play) Snowy Radebe & Company: “Hela” [ILAM Test Record 857 S].

So far I have spoken only, or mainly, about the ‘Concert’ side of the Concert and Dance. What then about the ‘Dance’? In short, the approach of the dance bands was somewhat different from that of the vaudeville troupes. African materials appeared in the repertoire of the vaudeville companies in fairly explicit fashion; the bands, on the other hand, made use of these elements in much more mediated form. What the bands did – side-by-side with their appropriation of dance music from abroad – was

to assimilate the musical styles that had been developing in South Africa's slums and ghettos since at least the First World War. Despite certain regional differences, these ghetto styles appear to have fallen generically under one name: *marabi*. Now in recent years, as you will be aware, a considerable amount has been written about *marabi* – some of it not free of sheer conjecture or even mythology. While part of this work has been useful, occasionally even pioneering, our knowledge of *marabi* is still inadequate, both in its details and in its foundations: and for this to be remedied, rigorous and painstaking research will be necessary. For our present purposes, what is essential to our understanding of *marabi* as the prehistory of South African jazz, is the following. To begin with, *marabi* was (to quote jazzman and journalist Todd Matshikiza), “the name given to the ‘hot’, highly rhythmic repetitive single-themed dance tunes” of the period from the teens to the early thirties; and these tunes “were largely the illiterate improvisations of the musicians of the day”.<sup>7</sup> Essentially, *marabi* was the music of a variety of secular social occasions, which usually had in common not only the activity of dancing but also that of consuming alcohol. Perhaps the most famous of its venues were the shebeens (the illegal backroom or backyard liquor dens, where various kinds of homebrew were sold), and the weekend-long slummyard parties. Since it was an original style generated in and by the ghetto, the claim that it was, more than any other style, the music of the ghetto, is probably not unfounded. It was also primarily a keyboard, banjo or guitar style based on a cyclic harmonic pattern, much as the blues was: the basic *marabi* cycle, however, may be said to have stretched over four measures, normally with one measure for each of the following chords: I – IV – I 6/4 – V. The cyclical nature of this style clearly derives of course from African sources: in African musics, repeating ‘harmonic’ patterns (sometimes called ‘root progressions’ or ‘harmonic segments’) are fundamental. Indeed, as Gerhard Kubik has pointed out, cyclicity has also become “an important basis of nearly all neo-traditional music in sub-Saharan Africa”. These cycles Kubik calls “ostinato harmonic patterns”; and he argues that they give rise to “short forms” (as opposed to song forms) – a terminology that is clearly another name for what Matshikiza had earlier described as “repetitive single-themed” tunes.<sup>8</sup> So from a structural and harmonic point of view, the African aspects of *marabi* are perfectly clear.

The melodies superimposed on these endlessly repeating patterns sometimes became legendary: sometimes lyrics were invented as well, and in some instances these contained political commentary or protest. I think it is likely that a significant proportion of these melodies came from much older local African musical traditions.

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<sup>7</sup> Todd Matshikiza, “Twenty years of Jazz”, *Drum*, December, 1951.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Kubik, *The Kachamba Brothers's Band: A study of neo-traditional music in Malawi*, *Zambian Papers* No. 9, University of Zambia, 1974, pp. 23-4.

Certainly one of my most venerable old informants was quite clear on this point. He was Edward Sililo: in the 1920s he played *marabi* piano at Ma Jeremiah's shebeen in the slum area of Doornfontein, in Johannesburg; and I was able to interview him extensively before his death a couple of years ago. Sililo identified this corpus of *marabi* melodies as "a mixture of Sotho music, Xhosa music, Zulu music" – or more specifically, as a mixture of their ceremonial songs. But that was not all: he remembered that frequently the tunes would be drawn from a familiar stock of African Christian hymns. In such a case, as he put it, "we'd just take a separate portion of the [hymn tune] and then jazz it up – dance that music!"<sup>9</sup> And to complicate the picture even further, still another source of melodies for *marabi* usage were the commercial popular tunes of the day. I quote Sililo again:

You see, ahh, for instance they would have songs like, in the early twenties there were songs like "(Oh) Yes, We Have No Bananas". And we'd take a snatch from that and put it in the *marabi*. And I play - any tune I play: now anything I remember I play it same time. As it just crosses my mind I play it, but I keep the same rhythm all the way.<sup>10</sup>

So that, then, was the manner: cyclical repetitions of one melody or melodic fragment, yielding eventually, perhaps, to a similar treatment of another melody or fragment, and perhaps then still others, each melody possibly from a different source. And in this manner (as Sililo put it) "you played with no stop – you could play for an hour-and-a-half without stopping".<sup>11</sup>

Throughout, a rhythmic accompaniment would be provided by a player shaking a tin filled with small stones. One standard pattern, as demonstrated by Sililo, is among the most basic and widespread drum patterns of Nguni music:



But other styles also left their mark on the melodic and rhythmic structures of *marabi*: especially those types of "coloured"-Afrikaans and white-Afrikaans dance music known as *tikkie-draai* and *vastrap*, as well as the *ghommaliédjies* of the Cape Malays. There appear also to have been varieties of *marabi* associated almost exclusively with certain groups of Xhosa- and Zulu-speakers. The Xhosa version –

<sup>9</sup> Author's interview: Edward Sililo, Johannesburg, 1 December, 1986. (Sililo cites the traditional Zulu ceremonial song, "Entabeni siyagibela, entabeni siyehla", and Christian Zulu hymn, "Amagugu", as examples of traditional and Christian tunes that were adopted – and adapted – by *marabi* keyboard players.)

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

reputedly less polished than mainstream *marabi*<sup>12</sup> – was named *tula ndivile*, after the words of a song first made popular by migrant workers in Durban in the late 1920s;<sup>13</sup> the Zulu version – really a kind of “concert and *marabi* dance” developed by Zulu migrant workers in Johannesburg – was termed *ndunduma*, after the Zulu word for the minedumps that seemed to them to symbolize that city.<sup>14</sup>

So far so good: but I need to remind you at this point that many people of the time saw *marabi* culture as infinitely corrupted and corrupting. For them it was immoral, degenerate, and irredeemable. *Marabi* was associated with illegality, police raids, sex, and a desperately impoverished working class – large numbers of whom would at any one time have been unemployed. Predictably, these associations stigmatised it as evil and degrading – at least in the eyes of those blacks whose notions of social advance rested on an espousal of Christian middle-class values.

And it is here that we approach another fascinating paradox: and in some respects at least, it recapitulates the paradox we spoke of in the discussion of vaudeville. Since both the jazz bands themselves and their Concert-and-Dance audiences included members of this aspirant, Christian, middle-class group in significant numbers, one would have thought that in no circumstances would *marabi* or any of its versions have been taken up into the repertoire of the bands. Yet paradoxically it was actually the converse that happened. The heterogeneous nature of black ghetto society meant that there were in fact strong pressures towards the inclusion of *marabi* in the bands’ repertoires. Edward Sililo recalled that in 1929, as a member of the fledgling Jazz Maniacs, the group used to play *marabi* tunes either by ear, or (occasionally) in written-out arrangements. This practice continued long after the band expanded.<sup>15</sup> And even band-members who grew up in homes that deeply disapproved of *marabi*, knew the style and its tunes well. Not even the prestigious and “classy” Merry Blackbirds steered clear of *marabi* (despite what the over-simplifications of some earlier historians had led us to believe).<sup>16</sup> This is an important point, and one that the

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<sup>12</sup> According to Dan Twala: see David Coplan, *The urbanization of African performing arts in South Africa*, Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1980.

<sup>13</sup> See Veit Erlmann, *African stars: studies in Black South African performance*, University of Chicago Press, 1991, p.81. (Ed: reviewed in this issue)

<sup>14</sup> David Coplan, *The urbanization of African performing arts in South Africa*, op. cit., p.233.

<sup>15</sup> Author’s interview: Edward Sililo, Johannesburg, 1 December, 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Coplan, for instance, makes a point about the Merry Blackbirds being an elite jazz band – there is nothing in my findings that substantiates that. They did perhaps have a more elite aspiration, particularly as the decades went on, but in the 1930s they were playing *marabi*.

band's leader, Peter Rezant, made to me quite emphatically in an interview. I quote him:

You couldn't avoid that at that time, you see. Everything had that twist into *marabi*. Because it was the *marabi* era...They were little ditties, you know, coming from the townships – ditties as you hear them. And somebody would be suggesting who'd been toying around with them, and then ultimately we play them as we hear them. One playing the melody and the others would fit in and so forth. Well, the trumpet and the alto were always the lead instruments. Then, if the trumpet plays in front, then the alto should find itself the, ahm, the harmony, to harmonise – and so did the trombone. And the correction would come, to correct our harmonies, from the piano. That's how we began, you know, before the orchestrations came in.<sup>17</sup>

And early phonograph recordings provide reliable confirmation of this point. Let me again – and in conclusion – illustrate this by means of a comparison. When an African component was not present in the work of the bands, they sounded (as the vaudeville groups had done) indistinguishable from their American models:

(Play): Merry Blackbirds: "Heat Wave" [Singer GE 862].

That was one of the most famous of the local bands, the Merry Blackbirds, in the mid-1930s, playing an arrangement of a piece by Irving Berlin. But when an African component did make its way into the music of the dance bands – as it most certainly did, and from the earliest times – then that component was, primarily, *marabi*. Here, then, are the Merry Blackbirds again, recorded around the same period – but now playing *marabi*. I give you two short excerpts – both of them arrangements of old *marabi* tunes, and both of them named after shebeen queens. Here is the first.

(Play): Merry Blackbirds: "Madhlamini" [Singer GE 94],

and now the second,

(Play): Merry Blackbirds: "Umajaji" [ILAM Test Record 931 S].

And finally: also from the mid-1930s, but this time a different band: the Jazz Revellers, playing an arrangement of one of the most famous tunes of the *marabi* era, "Sponono".

(Play): Jazz Revellers Band: "Sponono" [Columbia AE 45].

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<sup>17</sup> Author's interview: Peter Rezant, Johannesburg, 23 June, 1985.