# "DRUMBEATS, PENNYWHISTLES AND ALL THAT JAZZ": the relationship between urban South African musical styles and musical meaning.[1]

*by*

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In 1963 an African correspondent wrote the following in one of Johannesburg's leading newspapers:

... Whenever I play a pennywhistle record I can almost smell the hot sweat, the stench of stale liquor in the townships and locations. I can almost see the open gutters, the gangsters, the hungry, the train queues, and feel the suffering and the bottled-up emotions of the African.... it captures the Zest of African life.[2]

In the forties, a pennywhistle was considered to be a child's toy: what small boys played because they could not afford 'real' instruments. What the quote I have just given illustrates particularly well is that from the sixties onwards, the pennywhistle and *kwela* music, the style which evolved around this instrument, had come to symbolise a whole era of South Africa's history. I would like to explain this extraordinary metamorphosis of meaning through an exploration of *kwela's* socio-political context and its effect on the style's development.

As my theoretical springboard, I have taken Gramsci's notions of the relationship between culture and society's economic base. I explore this relationship using Chantal Mouffe's 'articulation theory' as modified for the study of popular music by Richard Middleton. I have further adapted Middleton's model, moulding it to the specific needs of the southern African situation.

The first step in the application of this theory is to identify what Gramsci calls points of "situational change". These are periods during which the modes of production, and the fundamental structures of political power in a society, are contested. "Conjunctures" are those periods of relative stability between situational crises.[3] In recent times, most of Africa has experienced three periods of radical

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[1] This article is based on a paper presented at the 1993 Symposium on Ethnomusicology, Univ. of Natal, Durban.

[2] *The Star*, 11 July 1963. "Goodbye, Penny-Whistle" by an African correspondent.

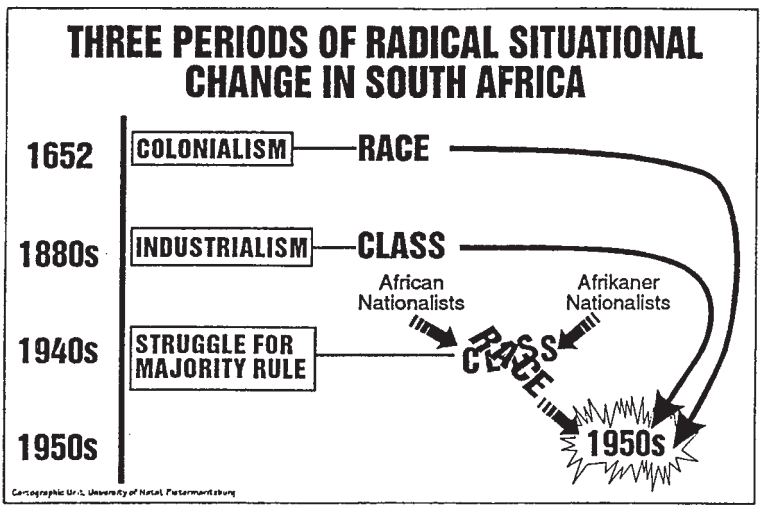
[3] Richard Middleton, "Popular music, class conflict and the music-historic field", *Popular music perspectives 2: Papers from the Second International Conference on Popular Music Studies*, Reggio Emillia, 19-24 Sept 1983 (Wheaton & Co Ltd, Exeter, 1985) pp 33-34.

situational change, namely: colonisation, industrialisation and the struggle for independence from white rule. Frequently, these periods coincide or overlap, leaving much shorter conjunctures (or periods of relative situational stability) than is the case in Middleton's model for western Europe.

In South Africa, the process of colonisation started in 1652 and continued as the country's dominant political and economic force until the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand in 1886. This event catalysed the region's second period of deep situational crisis, industrialisation. During the forties, the African National Congress transformed itself from an elite to a mass-based organisation and embarked upon the struggle for majority rule.

Each situation brings with it a primary method of allocating social, economic and political power: colonial categorisation is racial; for industrialists power is allotted according to class; and in the struggle for majority rule the primary aim is the inversion of power in both the above categories of race and class.

Concurrent with the mass mobilisation of black South Africans was the rise to power of Afrikaner Nationalism, and the subsequent enforcement of apartheid. In




1948 the government started setting the clock back to colonial rule and white (specifically Afrikaner) supremacy. Apartheid policies intensified issues of race to the extent that they became more important than those of class. Thus, by the fifties, three crises of social change were being simultaneously negotiated.

People living through periods of fundamental social change generally suffer deep crises of identity. Their search for a way of making sense of their existence manifests in cultural forms such as musical style. I would like to make a diachronic cut in the mid-fifties to discuss *kwela*, the style most popular at that conjuncture, and to

investigate how this music embodied meaning for various interest groups.

The theory of articulation proposes that whilst economic factors such as classposition do not directly control cultural elements, the two are always linked, articulated, together. The meaning of a musical style for a particular group results from the articulation of musical elements with the class position of that group.

Two qualifications of the theoretical model are necessary in order to deal with the complexities of the South African situation. Firstly, under colonial rule the fundamental articulation concerns race rather than class. However, the essence of the method is not altered since colonial social organisation is simply class created on the basis of colour. Secondly, the fundamental articulation is different for each situation, and the three crises occur simultaneously in the period under discussion. Therefore, when researching the meaning of a musical style for a particular interest group, it is vitally important to ascertain which situational crisis is of primary importance to that group.

My investigation into the meaning of *kwela* is based on the following questions: What did *kwela* mean for those who played it? What did *kwela* mean for its audience? How was it possible for one musical style to simultaneously embody different meanings for diverse interest groups? And finally, what did *kwela* come to mean in retrospect?

The financial rewards of *kwela* were extremely important for musicians. Most pennywhistlers came from impoverished backgrounds, and the money they earned fundamentally altered the quality of their, and their family's lives. Money was earned both by busking, and from flat fees paid per number by recording companies.

For its creators, *kwela* was also an expression of personal and collective identity. Prior to Spokes Mashiyane's recording success, pennywhistling generally fell into John Storm Roberts' category of 'personal music, in which one or maybe two people play largely for their own self-expression and amusement'.[4] Occasionally musicians attempted an expose of their social circumstances: typically this took the form of short cameos in spoken introductions, or in titles reflecting aspects of township life.

Although for musicians *kwela* was primarily a response to economic conditions, for its audience the style played a more esoteric role; it provided a sense of identity.[5]

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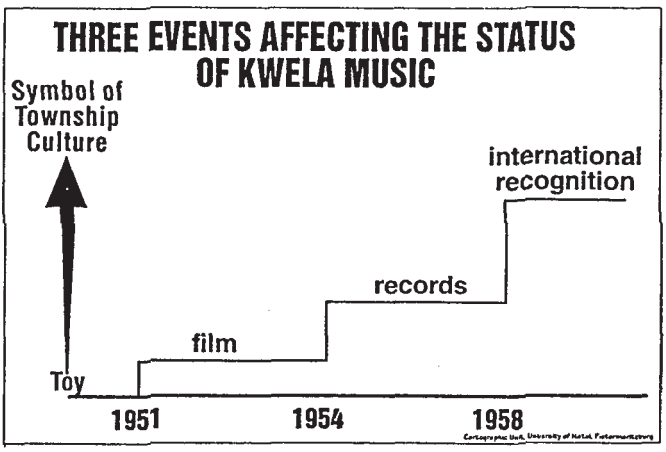
[4] John Storm Roberts, *Black music of two worlds*, Praeger, New York, 1972, p.241.

[5] It is frequently bemoaned that researchers claim a strong relationship between music and identity but fail to explain exactly how a certain style expresses the identity aspired to, or espoused by, a particular interest group. See Charles Hamm, review of *In township tonight!: South Africa's black city music and theatre*, by David Coplan, in *Popular Music* 6/3, 1987, p.354; and Louise Meintjies, review of *African stars: studies in black South African performance* by Veit Erlmann, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991, p.379.

In its heyday, *kwela* music boasted a large and heterogeneous following: different, occasionally opposing, interest groups were able to articulate *kwela* with their outlook on life and find meaning. To factors made this possible: firstly, the status of *kwela* changed three times during its reign, each shift securing recognition from a new interest group; and secondly, the syncretic nature of the style's internal musical structure allows interest groups to select certain musical elements which, for them, have particular meaning.



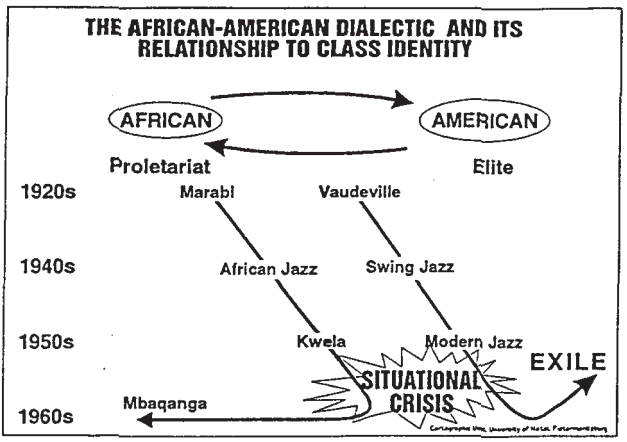

The shifts in the status of pennywhistle music affected the style's meaning for both it creators and patrons. Each advance was catalysed by the association of *kwela* either with international recognition directly, or indirectly through its association with film and records.

The popularity of the pennywhistle amongst black youth was initially catalysed in 1951 by the prominent role of a pennywhistler in South Africa's second all-black film, "The magic garden". Given the prestige amongst township dwellers of Americana culture in general, and film in particular, the pennywhistle's status changed overnight. The instrument became the key to a ghetto gate.

Such aspirations were re-kindled late in 1954 when Mashiyane's recordings became extremely popular, bringing him widespread fame. However, the style's final graduation was the international recognition it received in 1958 when *kwela* became popular in Britain, and visiting American jazz musicians made recordings with local pennywhistlers. An example of a typical *kwela* number is the composition which reached the top of the British hit parade in 1958: "Tom Hark", by Elias and his Zig-Zag Jive Flutes.

The other factor which fosters diverse interpretation of *kwela's* meaning is the

style's syncretic formation. *Kwela* is one style in a long tradition of urban black South African music which stems from *marabi*. *Marabi* was the cultural response of South African blacks to the country's second major situational crisis, industrialisation. The processes of urbanisation and westernisation catalysed an identity crisis for the new black proletariat. Musically, a new identity was negotiated through the syncretic




amalgamation of two stylistic traditions, namely African-American music and music of South Africa's pre-colonial past. The dialectical tension between these two areas of influence is evident throughout the history of *marabi*-derived music. Class awareness is clearly expressed in the patronage of particular styles. The degree of Americanisation of a style is directly proportional to the upwardly aspirant class consciousness of that style's public.

Four of the most important groups to find meaning in *kwela* were: the urban black working class; the educated black elite; African Nationalists; and the white youth. In order to examine how *kwela* sustains meaning for such different interest groups I ask three questions:

i) What are the associations of particular musical elements for each group?

ii) Which of the three situational struggles outlined above is paramount in the consciousness of each group?

iii) What identity is invoked by the cross-connotation of those musical elements with that group's position in society?

For the first three years of the pennywhistle boom, the record-buying public consisted mostly of the urban black working class. Like other styles within the *marabi* tradition, *kwela* was concerned with the negotiation of black urban identity. Musical elements which evoke urban South African associations are: the cyclical harmonic structure, and the melodies which are derived from popular township songs.

American elements, of which the swing rhythm is most important, provide a sense of hip modernity.

Throughout the fifties a vehement debate raged over the relative merits of styles such as African jazz and *kwela*, on the one hand, and modern jazz on the other. The educated black elite (as represented by journalists) did not take pennywhistle music seriously until it obtained overseas recognition in 1958. Although records were favourably reviewed, the tone of reviews tended to be quite condescending: one review stated: "His whistle had a delicate tone but tends to be too repetitive. But if you like this sort of stuff that's the disc for you".[6]

The repetitive nature of *kwela*, so complained of by elite critics, results from the style's cyclical structure. Not surprisingly it is one of the most African aspects of *kwela* and is greatly responsible for the style's popularity amongst the proletariat.

However, as soon as *kwela* obtained the international status desired by the black elite, pennywhistlers and their music received almost excessive positive publicity from the press. This indicated the recognition, by the black elite, that their needs would be more easily fulfilled through the consolidation of identity along lines of race, rather than class.

This brings us to the consideration of the third category of deep situational change in South Africa, the struggle of the black population for political power.

The formation of the ANC Youth League in 1944 marked the political consolidation of New Africanism, a literary and philosophical movement of the late thirties.[7] Exclusion of blacks from positions of privilege and power on grounds of race, weakened class boundaries within black society. The elite formed an alliance with the masses and the two classes mobilised together for common recognition. The concept of 'Africanness' formed the basis of a new ideology which, for the first time, assigned positive value to being African and demanded political and social recognition of that value.

This ideological re-articulation embodied deep implications for the expression of social and political identity through music. In fact, cultural forms, such as the period's music and literature, did not simply reflect this change but were active agents in the dissemination of the new philosophy.

The rise of Afrikaner Nationalism in 1948, and the resulting entrenchment of apartheid, further complicated issues of identity embodied in the African/American

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[6] *Bantu World*, 29 June 1957.

[7] Tim Couzens, *The new African: a study of the life and work of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1985.

dialectic of urban musical styles. Government-prescribed African identity was tribal and rural, therefore the identity solicited by African Nationalists was necessarily non-tribal and urban.

Syncretic musical styles within the *marabi* tradition (such as *kwela*) perfectly embody the ideals of such Africanist identity. The articulation of traditional African with foreign musical elements produces an urban, non-tribal, African identity.

Besides the expression of urban black identity, *kwela* also provided a meaningful soundscape for people who were not black South Africans. The immense popularity of the style with white youth in Britain and South Africa suggests that *kwela* contains musical elements which could be re-articulated to embody meaning for those groups. It is highly unlikely that *kwela's* white fans had any sense of the style's role within the race/class identity debates of black society. The use of *kwela* as dance music suggests the nature of the style's appeal to its white audience. For this group, patronage of *kwela* signified the same rebellion of youth as did its patronage of rock 'n roll. *Kwela* was simply South African rock 'n roll. The two styles have much in common musically, in fact pennywhistlers frequently recorded rock 'n roll type numbers. An example of this is "Phenduka Twist" by Spokes Mashiyane.

However, the most interesting relationship between *kwela* and identity developed in retrospect. As part of the political mobilisation of the eighties, 'the people's roots' once again became primarily important. This search for identity resulted in a deep nostalgia for 'the fifties'. After twenty years of extraordinary repression, this decade was glorified as the last time when hope for new order still existed.

*Kwela* was re-articulated with this romanticised view, and the pennywhistle became, not only "one of the symbols of black South African music",[8] but an emblem for the whole decade and all its idealised possibilities. One township inhabitant reminisced: "Although Shantytown was a ghetto in the true sense of the word, my memories are of drumbeats, pennywhistles and all that jazz".[9]

The internal musical components of *kwela* lend themselves to symbolic association. Township dwellers who were still adapting to urban life could identify with traditional musical elements such as cyclicity, call-and-response, melodic structure, and the pennywhistle tone which contains the 'buzz' required by African timbral sensitivity. The incorporation of black American musical elements, such as the swing rhythm, connoted the chic sophistication desired by many young *kwela* fans. *Kwela's* major tonality and fast swing tempo produces its irrepressibly happy

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[8] Jonas Gwangwa and Fulco van Aurich, "The melody of freedom: a reflection on music", in *Culture in another South Africa*, eds. William Campschreur and Joost Divendal, Zed Books, London, 1989, p.151.

[9] Joyce Dube, "Surviving through the 50s", *Vrye Weekblad*, 28 June - 4 July, 1991.

spirit. These are the musical elements largely responsible for the style's contemporary symbolic associations: *kwela* sings of vibrancy, simplicity and the naive hope which filled those days of peaceful protest.

In its heyday, diverse interest groups were able to identify with *kwela*; in retrospect, the style has come to symbolise a decade. The ability of *kwela* music to embody meaning so powerfully is a result both of its internal musical structure and its high profile at that particular conjuncture in South Africa's history.

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