

EDMUND “NTEMI” PILISO JAZZING THROUGH DEFEAT AND TRIUMPH: AN INTERVIEW

by

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Abstract: Associated with the local swing style usually described as African jazz, Edmund “Ntemi” Piliso was one of the most highly regarded, frequently recorded, extensively consulted and best known South African musicians of the twentieth century. Renowned for his deep knowledge of the urban black South African popular music of his time, as well as for his reflexively intelligent insights into its relationship with mainstream international jazz, he is perhaps more appropriately thought of as an “organic intellectual” of his time, place, and musical culture. The article introduces Piliso and then presents a wide-ranging interview dealing with his life and work. Piliso recounts this history, offering numerous insights into many of the key social, political, and musical developments of his time.

Keywords: *marabi*, African jazz, US jazz, Harlem Swingsters, Alexandra All Stars Band, apartheid, politics, *mbaqanga*, bebop, African Jazz Pioneers.

Introduction

Race-based capitalism was already firmly in place in South Africa when the National Party assumed power in 1948. What the new government did was to perfect the system: it devised measures to make more efficient the exploitation of, in particular, the huge sector of the working class racially defined as “African”. So the state became increasingly totalitarian, a process in which it steadily assumed the form that achieved global notoriety as apartheid. Among the many features essential to its tightening grip was a draconian approach to ideas: what people thought came under ever-expanding surveillance and control, including ideas about how power and authority might be resisted, pushed back, or even ultimately overthrown.

The state became increasingly ruthless, not only in the way it crushed dissent and banned oppositional political practice, but also in its commitment to the repression of resistant forms of expressive culture, including music. Yet the apartheid state’s victory was never final, or complete. Although the popular struggle against the state was severely hobbled, it survived in myriad ways, especially in places and spaces that lay outside easy reach of oppressive power. Even though nobody knew when, or how, it might happen, few doubted that a virile, popular oppositional culture would eventually reappear. And when it did, music found itself in the front line, playing a role as one of its most striking manifestations.

With music, as indeed with the other arts, this re-emergence occurred as part of the reawakening, on a momentous scale, of black working-class and community politics.

One early example was a historic, sold-out concert in 1983, a few months after the launch of the United Democratic Front (UDF).¹ The concert marked the launch of a big band of older black jazz musicians, many of them living legends, and many of whom had not played publicly for around twenty years. They called their band the African Jazz Pioneers. Like the rebirth of the mass-resistance movement, this was a ritual of regeneration, a release of energies and processes stifled for two decades, and the beginning of the endgame in the struggle to overthrow the apartheid regime. Among the many ironies of this violently contested period is that the musician who headed this iconic band was one of the era’s gentlest, kindest, and most self-effacing cultural figures. His name was Edmund “Ntemi” Piliso (1925–2000).

It is as the leader of the African Jazz Pioneers, a band that went on to tour widely, record extensively, and become internationally famous, that Ntemi Piliso is now best known and remembered. What is not widely known is that this was his “second” career. Ntemi had effectively been retired for several years when changing political and social circumstances unexpectedly called him out of retirement, thus launching a second career that flourished until his death. His “first” career, largely forgotten nowadays, had established him in the field of African jazz as one of South Africa’s most important bandleaders and composers. In his role as the leader of, in particular, the celebrated Alexandra All Stars Band, he had become a widely and greatly loved figure in the local

jazz community, and had left behind a rich legacy of recordings.

This “first” career commenced in the early 1940s and lasted more than three decades, much of it coinciding with the darkest years of the apartheid era. If those two careers are important facts about him, so is this: because he was born in 1925 in Alexandra Township, a large, freehold, black residential location north of Johannesburg, his earliest years coincided with the era of *marabi* music and the country’s first, and most nascent, jazz bands.

Extraordinarily, therefore, Ntemi belonged to three utterly different eras. The roots of his musical life can be traced back to the foundational period of what was to become South Africa’s vibrant jazz culture; his musical career



Edmund “Ntemi” Piliso. Photo by Author.

¹ Founded in 1983, the UDF was a non-racial coalition of many hundreds of anti-apartheid civil-society organizations across South Africa. It played a major role in the struggle to end apartheid.

flourished and came to an end during the apartheid era; and finally he came out of retirement to play a signal *marabi* role for a multi-class movement, the UDF, that helped end apartheid and inaugurate democracy.

It quickly became clear when I began my research into the musical and political history of South African jazz, that Ntemi Piliso would potentially be an important informant. I first set eyes on him in 1983, at that inaugural concert of the African Jazz Pioneers, around the time that my work on *marabi* and African jazz commenced. I soon made contact with him. He became one of my more frequent interviewees, especially between January 1984 and July 1986.

Our interviews took place at various localities in Johannesburg, including his modest home in Alexandra: the small house in which he was born, where he lived virtually his entire life, where he was to die, and where I felt humbled by the grace with which he welcomed me and the hospitality he and his wife extended to me. A quietly-spoken, reflective, deeply intelligent man of great warmth and unstinting generosity, Ntemi was always willing to see me, and he gave lavishly of his time. As an example of this generosity, I think of something that occurred a few weeks after one of our (typically) long interviews. Awaiting early transcription, the cassette tapes from the interview had been left on my office desk rather than locked away. And there they remained, until the morning when I discovered that they were missing. In shock and distress, I publicized this fact across the campus and offered a substantial reward for their return. When it became clear that I would not see the tapes again, I phoned Ntemi. In a state of great embarrassment, I explained what had happened, and asked if he could find the time, the energy, and the patience to repeat that particular interview. With the kindness and warmth that I came to know as characteristic of him, he agreed, and our next meeting was devoted to covering the same ground for a second time.

My interviews with Ntemi took place across a period of about thirty months. Once transcribed, these interviews amounted collectively to a document of about the length of a modern novel. What I present here is merely a small selection: a distillation, edited from the complete transcription, to offer glimpses of some of the terrain we covered. The redacted interview makes no claim to cover all important aspects of Ntemi's life and career. Though certain sections of what I present might not be new to readers who are familiar with the work now available on South African jazz, even for them the bulk of what emerges in this redacted interview is likely to be new. And where it is not new, I think there is nevertheless real value in "hearing" Ntemi recount these musical, social, and personal histories in his own way. I have made it a principle to retain, as far as possible, Ntemi's own words, bearing in mind, of course, that the interests of clarity have necessitated compromise, sometimes as a consequence of such an extensive redaction.²

² Given the sheer length of the interview material, the redacting process has been unusually complex. I am grateful to Dr David Basckin for his invaluable editorial assistance in the early stages of this work.

The Interview

CB: Ntemi, you're one of South Africa's most widely known and revered jazz musicians. When, and how, did your involvement with music begin? And how did it evolve?

EP: My musical experience kicked off in Standard 2 [Grade 4 in the current system]. Because of our singing ability, me and a friend of mine got promoted to the senior choir, singing with the Standard 6 [Grade 8] children. Quite an achievement! We easily understood tonic solfa, so the teacher reckoned we had real potential. Yes, we were excelling. In the meantime, I was in the church choir, as a tenor. Around this time, there used to be a group of chaps who wore Scottish dress and patrolled the streets of Alexandra playing penny whistles. We called them The Scottish. Say about six or eight penny whistles blowing at the same time, in harmony, with someone playing the drums. I got inspired by that. So I got a penny whistle too, say around 1939, and tried to play the thing like those other chaps.³ This came quite easily to me, so I kept on with the penny whistle.

I studied at high school for two years. My mother wasn't able to let me continue with school because it was difficult for her. She had quite a big family. So I had to leave school, and go and work. But I completed my Junior Certificate [Grade 10] mainly by correspondence. About this time, I met a chap who had a whole set of assorted instruments and wanted to form a band. He called it The Casablanca Band.⁴ I was interested in taking up the trombone, because I was inspired by a certain movie featuring Glenn Miller, called *Orchestra Wives* [1942]. What actually inspired me was the demonstration by the trombones, so I thought, "That's wonderful. I think I'd like to do the same thing!" Unfortunately, I couldn't get the trombone. Ah, so this chap had a clarinet for me. I said, "Well, as long as it's an instrument, because I want to play an instrument!" I took up the clarinet and started from scratch. I was really keen.

We had a tutor, a teacher from the Roman Catholic school. He used to teach the children the trumpet, and he came and taught us staff notation and the rudiments of music. He let me play the alto sax because it was more powerful. I was quite pleased with it. I carried on with the teacher, but most of the chaps were not very clear on the reading stuff. They just wanted to blow, that's all. But I was keen on reading, and playing

³ This seems a reference to the "Scottish" band he joined at the time. Known as the Alexandra Highlanders, it included not only the young Ntemi, but also other future stars, notably Aaron "Jake" Lerole (the legendary kwela and jazz musician, nicknamed "Big Voice Jack") and Willard Cele. "Scottish" or "MacGregor" penny-whistle bands were not uncommon among black youths at the time, taking their inspiration from the experience of seeing both Scottish military and fife-and-drum bands. See Coplan (2007: 80, 190).

⁴ The Casablanca Band is now almost totally forgotten. The only other person who ever even mentioned the band to me was (the now late) "Jake" Lerole, who told me (1986) that the band was based in Alexandra Township, flourished in the 1940s and '50s, and was "owned" by a man who called himself "Casablanca". Lerole also described it as "the biggest" and "one of the best" bands of its day.

written stuff. So I studied a lot on my own. So much so, that I ended up teaching the very chaps I had started with.

At the time, even before I could read well, I used to listen to records by people like Johnny Hodges and then try and emulate them. I knew some others who did this, too, and in this way we picked up an American influence. We used to buy these records so that we could keep on repeating them. That's how we used to make up our repertoire. Then, at a later stage, there were people who were reading all the time and could just play from orchestrations, exactly as written.

I've played with quite a few different bands. In the Casablanca Band, I played alto. Mostly we used to play for people who do this jiving business, the jitterbugs, and so forth. We never used to play in a concert setting. And we played anything that we could just lay our hands on, like something by Duke Ellington or Johnny Hodges. The audience used to like that, even if we play it by ear, and don't play it exactly because we're doing our own arrangements. They used to like the fact we were playing Johnny Hodges, and so on. That used to take them! They hear it on record and they think we are great because we can reproduce that thing!

CB: Why do you think they liked that kind of music?

EP: It's because they used to buy records and listen to overseas musicians, and, maybe with jazz it's mostly because it was played by the black Americans. They got that inspiration from those black musicians. I think that's one of the reasons. Because they would say, "Hey, this guy is playing like Johnny Hodges, and the other one is playing like Ben Webster!"; and so forth. They used to have their favourites. Like today, we like John Contrane and Sonny Rollins, and so forth.

Then I decided to go elsewhere to more experienced musicians, to learn more. To be able to read, to play from orchestrations, to expand. So I went to the Bantu Men's Social Centre,⁵ where there was a group of musicians: the *Zonk!* Band, 12 musicians at most, from the original *Zonk!* variety show in the army, led by Ike Brooks. I joined somewhere in 1948 or '49, I think. There I met musicians like the late Skip Phahlane. And Sam Maile, the pianist: that's one good musician who used to write and orchestrate music as well. He's the chap who improved my reading. He was leading the band at that time.⁶

The *Zonk!* Band mostly played orchestrations from America, by Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Glenn Miller, and so forth. They didn't play any African jazz except, I think, for some tunes by Sam Maile, and also something like "Tamatiesous," which had a bit of Cape-Coloured traditional. But mostly the *Zonk!* Band played orchestrations,

⁵ A famous and fashionable venue for social and educational activities, in Eloff Street, in Johannesburg's city centre.

⁶ Formed during World War 2 as a variety entertainment company drawn from the South African Native Military Corps, *Zonk!* had its roots in the seminal, hugely important jazz-and-vaudeville tradition. This became institutionalised as "Concert and Dance"—which had flourished in the preceding years among black city audiences. See Ballantine (2012: 16–53). Under the leadership of army lieutenant Ike Brooks, its white director, *Zonk!* struck out on its own after the war and enjoyed enormous success among both black and white audiences.

and we played them exactly as they were written. We had orchestrations all the time: I think Ike Brooks used to order them, and his variety show kept them. At that time, it was quite easy to order orchestrations, for five shillings an orchestration, from Francis, Day & Hunter in England. And we used to play them exactly as they were written. We never used to rearrange them. Each orchestration we would play exactly as it is!

Then I went to the Harlem Swingsters. I must have joined them somewhere in the 1950s, probably the early '50s; I'm not quite clear. Now that was about the best and most favourite band in the country at the time, except for the Jazz Maniacs. The Merry Blackbirds were not such favourites.⁷ How can I put it? The Merry Blackbirds were a polished band, but they had their own type of audience, the ballroom dancers mostly. We used to play, you know, the "rocky" stuff, for the thug element. Let me put it frankly: they were sort of rough characters, in comparison to people who would go to a ballroom session. Our audience was more rank and file. You would find all sorts of characters with us, among the people who used to like swing jazz. The ballroom dancers wouldn't come to our show because, more than anything else, they want to know ballroom. You see, our audiences were like what I read about the United States for instance, when there were these gambling joints. They used to have Louis Armstrong playing in front, while it's a gambling joint at the back, and the next thing some free-for-all happens and everybody is fighting everybody else. It's those people who used to attend our shows and used to follow us. Maybe we go to Benoni to play, and then these chaps from Sophiatown and Alexandra would also go to Benoni. And kick up a hell of a row there, and fight the local chaps there, and then those chaps retaliate, and then it's just a mess. That's what used to predominate with us. But not with the Merry Blackbirds: their audiences were different. These people who attend the Harlem Swingsters shows wouldn't go to a show where the Merry Blackbirds are playing, because they know they would get the type of music that they don't really appreciate. With us, it was American swing music that the audiences were dancing to.

They wouldn't even have us play foxtrot songs or quicksteps. We must play the "rock tempo," you know: a medium tempo. "Oh, Lady Be Good!" [Gershwin], for instance: it's a quickstep, so they never used to like it. But still we played it, for variety's sake, because among those who used to attend were those who did like ballroom. We had to cater for all sorts. Whereas the Merry Blackbirds didn't really cater for all sorts, they had their type of people, their followers. We catered for everybody, even the ballroom dancers if they wanted to come to our shows. And if they did, we would give them something to make them happy. We also played our kind of jazz: African jazz.

Most of the time, the people who used to go to ballroom dances would dress up for the occasion, in formal dress. But our events were not formal. People would come as they are: just casual, most of the time. Even ourselves. We used to have our uniform, but most of the time we'd never dress up. We were casual, so that when we mix up with the crowd during intervals and after the show, we must be just like them.

⁷ For more on the Harlem Swingsters, the Jazz Maniacs, and the Merry Blackbirds, see Ballantine (2012).

CB: Would you say that the Harlem Swingsters were as popular as the Jazz Maniacs?

EP: Yes, the same, just parallel. We used to have the battle of the bands. Say, the Harlem Swingsters and the Jazz Maniacs, or the Merry Blackbirds. It used to be a big occasion, to see who is who, and all that jazz. Sometimes, if somebody just wants to make a big thing, he just says “battle of the bands,” and hires both of us. We play the first half, the other band plays the second half. Or they start and we finish off. But if you are not competent enough, you can’t take the second half because it will be an anti-climax. With us, even if we played the second half, it was not an anti-climax, it was just alright.

I stayed with the Harlem Swingsters for maybe two years. There were 14 of us in the band: we used five reeds (one of which was a baritone sax), three trumpets, two trombones, and a four-piece rhythm section (piano, guitar, bass, drums). The leader at the time was Taai Shumang.

Then in 1953 I formed the Alexander All Stars Band. We were a septet: three saxophones, one trumpet, piano, bass, and drums. On alto sax we had David Mope, whom we called “Boy Mosaka,” and David Sello. I was on tenor sax. My kid brother Shadrack, now dead, played trumpet. We used to call him “Shadow”. Fortescue Mazibuko, nicknamed “Forty,” was on bass, “Boyttjie” Mokone played drums, and Aaron Lebona the piano. Aaron used to play good *marabi*! I knew him from school. I think I was in Standard 6 when he arrived. And at school there was also a group of three brothers, tap dancers and singers, who called themselves Joe’s Broadway Syncopators. Now I noticed that Aaron played well; he was quite flexible on piano. So I got interested in him. I was not yet a saxophonist (I was still at school) but at a later stage when I formed the Alexandra All Stars, I asked Aaron to join us. We produced quite good sounds, I think! He was a good pianist really, by the standards of this *mbaqanga* thing. It was not called *mbaqanga* then, it was just plain African jazz.⁸ This *mbaqanga* word came at a later stage, when somebody decided to call it *mbaqanga*.

We played imported arrangements. Although the Alexandra All Stars Band was a much smaller group, we wanted it to sound big. So the arrangements were, you know, compact, tight. All the parts had to be well arranged to suit our number. Some of these arrangements were for small orchestras. But when we got big orchestrations I used to try and rearrange them to suit a small band. I was not too well versed, but I did my best to reduce the bigger orchestrations and sort of bring the sound together. I’d also try and get special, smaller arrangements, mostly by the popular guys like Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington, and Count Basie. Usually I imported these from England.

CB: As a bandleader, you also headed and recorded with a group called the Sofasonke Swingsters. How did that come into being?

EP: It was another name for the Alexandra All Stars Band. At one stage in the late ‘50s, we felt that the band’s name was going down a bit, and Rupert Bopape⁹ felt that

⁸ Occasionally it was also referred to as *majuba*.

⁹ Bopape was a legendary record producer, but one with a reputation for being an intellectual-property thief. Many songwriters accuse him of copyrighting their compositions under his own

maybe, for commercial reasons, it would pick up with a new name. So we thought, let's call it the Sofasonke Swingsters. Sofasonke was the name of the party started by James Mpanza, the prominent leader who encouraged people to build the first shacks in protest against the lack of housing. So people decided to build shacks and stay in the shacks. This happened in Number 2 Square, in Alexandra, and people also went from Alexandra to Moroka Township in Soweto and did the same there. I think I must have chosen that name for the band because I felt this guy Mpanza was something special, something different from other people. He just did something that nobody thought of.

CB: Can we backtrack a bit? You've referred to African jazz, which of course grew out of *marabi*. You were born at the time when *marabi* was at its peak, especially in the poorer urban ghettos. But many people considered *marabi* a scourge, and kept their children away from it. What do you remember of *marabi*, and what sort of relationship did you have with it?¹⁰

EP: Well, this *marabi* music originated, as far as I know, from Prospect Township. There was a famous guy there called Ntebejana; he used to play the organ. He is a legend. People used to worship him. When you play like Ntebejana, you know you are made! I heard Ntebejana myself. I used to get there, but my parents were strict, you know. Even my mother, who lived quite a long time after my father died. I was not free to go to these places. But I used to sneak out.

The organ was the most popular instrument for *marabi*. Basically, a one-man band, with a maracas sound coming from someone shaking a tin filled with stones. The music, the whole thing, is basically a three-chord sequence. Something like the tonic major, then subdominant, then dominant seventh, and then back. Just like that, but with different melodies.

Here and there the bands used to play some *marabi* music, but rearranged. What had been played on the organ, people started rearranging for saxophones and trumpets, and adding counterparts for the brass. I think African jazz started properly with big bands: a full band playing African music. Just playing harmony based on triads, because with our music we don't use four-part harmony. You know? We use three parts. We use three, even with the dominant seventh itself, but then cut out something else. Like, instead of C, E, G, B flat, you'll say E, G, B flat. Most of the time we worked it out that way. We use a major dominant seventh a lot, but instead of G, B, D, F (in C major), we

name and regularly naming himself as the composer on the record label. At the time Ntemi is referring to, Bopape was with EMI.

¹⁰ A dynamic, pan-ethnic music of the urban slums (especially those in Johannesburg), *marabi* took root around the time of the First World War; by the early 1930s its heyday had come to an end. Based on a cyclical four-chord harmonic pattern, *marabi* was mainly a keyboard music in which a variety of melodies could appear; some would be sung. Typically, it was played at weekend-long slumyard parties, where illegally-produced liquor was sold. *Marabi* thus helped sustain an informal ghetto economy, at the same time that it became an important seed-bed for the South African jazz tradition that would flourish in the decades ahead (Ballantine 2012).

would say B, D, F. It sounds more African! It's the blues. It's our African blues. You feel it's African. It's not "white" music.

I think that's how this African jazz first came about. We called it *mbaqanga*. So when the bands took over, you could feel that it's African jazz because it's got some of the *marabi* in it, even where the chord progressions differed. I think the dominating factor is the monotony! When you play a thing, you must repeat it, and repeat it so much that it gets into you. As the piece goes on, there may be solos that "variate" [offer variations], but the chord sequences don't change. There's no intersection [bridge section] where you change the progression. We call it an intersection, and yet it's just a variation with the same chord progression. Just eight bars, straight, and then you variate. And then we build up the climax. And then when people dance, they dance themselves into a frenzy.

For instance, there's one time my band was playing, and this *tsotsi*¹¹ comes up to the stage. He says, "Please man, play 'eMlangeni,'" a piece of mine; the title is a slang word for jail. I tell the guys, "Okay, let's play 'eMlangeni'" (hums). Then this *tsotsi* starts thinking back to jail, and he cries. It gives him some sort of nostalgia. Another time, during a different number, a *tsotsi* comes on stage. He's got a tomahawk. He starts hitting the wall in the rhythm of this number. Just crazy. He just couldn't help it. The *marabi* song has gone deep into him, so much that it makes him violent. That's the effect of *marabi*: it puts people in a frenzy. A guy could even kill somebody when the *marabi* thing is in him. You see? It used to happen in the halls. When we play something with a real *marabi* flavour in it, you could find that some people start fighting each other. They become violent.

Nowadays, if you play recordings of an old *marabi* band to an older generation who used to follow music, say recordings by a band like the Jazz Maniacs, it's very nostalgic. It makes you think of Doornfontein, you visualise the slums there, where this music was created: in slum conditions, in ghettos. Because *marabi* is a music of the slum. You sleep there, you sleep next to the organ, and the *skokiaan*¹² is there always, and you get inebriated all of the time. You are almost insane, I think. And then you create this music.

Still, *marabi*-based music can also have very different outcomes. I'm thinking of the famous number, "Tamatiesous"¹³ a craze started by the New Symphonics from Bloemfontein. It was based on the Cape Coloured *tiekie-draai*¹⁴ but we gave it a swing beat. It was the time of the jitterbug. And to the best of my knowledge, it was the first local tune played in a swing style.

We were playing somewhere in Diagonal Street [in the Johannesburg city centre]. Some of the gangsters used to come and spend the night there because they had no place to go. Next thing, a drunk might pick a fight and there'd be a free-for-all. But not when we played "Tamatiesous!" The thing got into them so much that they were emotionally

¹¹ Especially in the 1940s and '50s, young, black, urban criminals or gangsters were colloquially referred to as *tsotsis*.

¹² *Skokiaan* was one of "those dangerous home brews that reformers like Dr [A.B.] Xuma [president of the African National Congress from 1940 to 1949] would warn against..." (Hannerz 1994: 186).

¹³ Afrikaans for tomato sauce.

¹⁴ *Tiekie-draai* was both a Coloured-Afrikaans and white-Afrikaans dance music.

absorbed, they were taken away, dancing so much to this "Tamatiesous" that there was actually no fight. It was just that dance, you know? You could feel that these people were in a different world altogether. I think *marabi's* basic monotony got deep into them, so they were just living in another world. About 45 minutes, just the same sequence, but with different variations, and improvised solos, or maybe one instrument with a rhythm section, or the tenor section would stand up and take a solo with brass accompaniment. And then we come back to the tune for about 16 bars. So "Tamatiesous" used to make them sober, you know, sort of cool. We are playing and they go dancing. They form a line right around. And then they find nobody is fighting, they are just sort of inebriated by this sound. You find them breathing, you know, to the rhythm.

So when that "Tamatiesous" came, it changed everything. The people who used to attend these shows, these *tsotsis*, demanded "Tamatiesous". You can't finish! You can play Glenn Miller's "A String of Pearls", and what not, but you must play "Tamatiesous" before you close up. That must be your last number, otherwise they'll even stop you from stopping the music. You must just continue until you play "Tamatiesous"!

All the shows were dominated by thugs, you know, gangsters. They used to come to the shows and control the whole thing, tell us what to do. We had to capitalize on the popularity of "Tamatiesous". We had to take advantage of the fact that, well, if they want that number, then what's wrong with composing in the same line? In other words, what's wrong with composing more local tunes based on the swing style?

CB: In referring to African jazz, you've sometimes called it by its other name: *mbaqanga*. What are your thoughts about how this term came to be used to label a certain kind of music?

EP: Say people want to organise a meal consisting of that porridge, *pap* and *braaiing* meat.¹⁵ Then we say, "Alright, here's the meat; *manje* [now] where's the *mbaqanga*?", meaning the porridge, a staple food. We can't afford a more sophisticated meal, so *mbaqanga* is a short cut to fill up your stomach. So *mbaqanga*, the music, is on that line. I think people used to classify things in this manner, believing that if you can't read music and play orchestrations, if you're playing just by ear and don't have the basic rudiments of music, then you are playing *mbaqanga*.

CB: I've been searching for old recordings of the bands you led or played in, and have unearthed quite a few. You made a number of recordings of *mbaqanga*!

EP: Yes we did, more than the Harlem Swingsters, because as the Alexandra All Stars we were doing mostly African jazz. The people used to go for it: it was very, very popular in the recording industry. Well, unfortunately, with all that popularity we didn't gain anything, because we didn't know about royalties. And so the companies took advantage of our ignorance. It's unfortunate. Had we been careful, had we known, we would have heaped a lot up, because we were so popular. In fact, at some places, like

¹⁵ *Pap*, a maize porridge, is a staple food in the diet of many South Africans. *Braai* (noun or verb) means barbecue. Both words are Afrikaans.

at Randfontein,¹⁶ the Alexandra All Stars was the only band that could play without causing any riots. I mean, the audience even used to thrash the other band musicians when they didn't like their type of playing, and so on. But with our African jazz sound, they used to like us more than any other band. We would play mostly African Jazz, more than the American stuff, and we were very, very, very popular with them. We had the same type of audience that used to go to the Harlem Swingsters.

Though just seven musicians, we were so popular! Even in Rhodesia [now Zimbabwe] they wanted us. People used to go to Rhodesia, and come back and say, "Hey, you guys must go to that place, they want you! They want Ntemi's Alexandra All Stars Band!" And at home, our popularity spread across the whole country. We became almost as big as the Jazz Maniacs and the Harlem Swingsters. For example, in December 1955 we went on a tour of the Cape, including Cape Town. And even though we were competing with big bands, especially in Port Elizabeth, East London and Cape Town, the seven of us would blow the roof off! Those big bands, like Eric Nomvete's band¹⁷ in East London, they were very popular, playing orchestrated music, swing. The audiences there had heard one or two African jazz things, but they didn't care much for them until we came along and they heard our African jazz!

CB: Those were the band's good times. But because of apartheid, and despite the huge popularity of your band, the group began to run into challenges of increasing size and frequency, just as other bands did. Could you talk about a little about that, and about how the Alexandra All Stars were affected?

EP: Well, from the early 1960s, we were separated because of the Group Areas Act.¹⁸ Some of the band had to go to Meadowlands, Diepkloof, and so forth. We couldn't meet. They couldn't come to Alexandra to rehearse, I couldn't go to Meadowlands, or Diepkloof, or anything. The Group Areas Act: that's what separated us, actually. But before then, we were alright when we were all in Alexandria.

Then something else cropped up that also ended my band: the one-saxophone thing. One saxophone became the popular thing, with more guitars, and a changed beat. This was the "new *mbaqanga*". Just guitars, and mostly one sax. So we also had to do one-sax stints. Just take the saxophone and go and play with a group of rhythm chaps, and so forth. Everybody was doing that. A change in trend altogether. And this one-sax thing is as different to our Alexandra All Stars type of music, as disco is to swing. It's more commercial and less interesting.

¹⁶ A gold-mining town, about 40 kilometres west of Johannesburg.

¹⁷ This is a reference to the African Quavers Swing Orchestra, a big band led by Eric Nomvete; it later became known as the Havana Swingsters. In a different context, Nomvete also enjoyed success leading a group named the Big Five.

¹⁸ As legislated by the Group Areas Act of 1950, "all remaining racially mixed neighbourhoods were separated through the forced removal of entire black communities, often uprooted from the centres of cities and relocated on the peripheries. The destruction of these vibrant communities was a major factor in bringing the era of the large dance orchestras to an end by the late 1950s" (Ballantine 2012: 9).

CB: How did you feel about this new style of music and its consequences?

EP: Well, we thought let's go along with the times, let's do what the others are doing. Otherwise you are out of business. And then the studios won't record you. Whenever you get there, they tell you, just play something like this. We play and they record. We must follow that.

CB: So they play you an example of what they want, from another record?

EP: Then you follow the style. I think it was wrong, everything was wrong. But they were looking at the commercial part. I really didn't like it. But there was nothing we could do about it. So my last recording with the All Stars was in 1975.

CB: You've been not just a bandleader, but also a composer. Most of your pieces were written for your own band. How did the band learn these pieces?

EP: Usually I used to write the melody for myself, to help me and the musicians remember the thing. I didn't orchestrate it by hand, I would just work it out by ear. Most of the time I would give “Boy Mosaka” [David Mope] the melody, sing it to him and to the rest, and then sing the harmonies out to the musicians. We'd work on these on our own until we got them right. So I didn't write the harmonies down, but could have done so if it had been really necessary. Whenever anything was to be done, I'd do it, including the whole arrangement, and I'd sort of teach the others how to sing these harmonies and put it all together. Sing everything to them.

CB: Was that also how it went even with your composition “Manyeo”, which the Manhattan Brothers recorded and made famous? I think it's one of your finest creations.

EP: Yes, I composed the whole thing, including the words and all the harmonisations and everything. The whole thing; but for the recording I didn't get a cent. No royalty. And it is a good piece! I'd forgotten all about it until you played the recording for me now. “Manyeo” is like when you are speaking to a particular woman. She promised to marry, but now she is doing things against her promise. That's the gist of the whole thing. Well, I was a young guy, I was disappointed by some woman. She didn't fulfil her promise. So it came from my own experience as a young guy. I started the piece with a vocal group, the Lebona Brothers. Aaron Lebona's brothers used to sing, and Aaron was the pianist. I composed it for them. We were doing concerts at the time. I remember that later the Manhattan Brothers asked me for permission to do it. So I thought, well, you can just as well sing it, because royalties were non-existent at the time.

CB: Many of your other recordings also became extremely well known, like, for instance, “Ntemi Special” and “Sip 'n Fly”.

EP: You know Dollar Brand's “Mannenber”? That *marabi* tune is exactly the consequence of “Ntemi Special”! Can I play something? [Ntemi sits at the piano.] I did “Ntemi Special” some years back, before this “Mannenber”. Now, this is *marabi* [Ntemi plays], ja, Ntebejana! Now here is “Ntemi Special” [plays]. Now “Mannenber” [plays]! You see?

And you mention *Sip 'n Fly*. There's this strong African brew called *barberton*.¹⁹ They used to brew it on a *koppie* [hill]. Then the cops arrive, below. So when they see the cops down there, they think "Maybe I want to buy a scale of *barberton*!" And then the auntie gives them a scale and they just sip it. And then the cops couldn't reach them in time. When the cops come, the cops must climb. They can't get on the mountain with their vehicles or anything. They must walk up, run up, to catch up with these chaps. Look at this place: the cops can't reach them! They couldn't do it! So then it's like, "I sip and fly. I boast with my speed because he can't catch up with me", so I called it "Sip 'n Fly".²⁰

CB: You've lived through a time of important social, political, and musical events in this country. Another of these involved bebop. What was your own connection with bebop?

EP: I first started hearing bebop, and people like Charlie Parker, in the 1950s, maybe 1955. And shortly after that, when this bebop craze came in, there was the Sophiatown Modern Jazz Club.²¹ People came to me and said, "Look man, just listen to this music". Then I listened. They said I must arrange that, so I started writing it down from the record. Just the melody, but then I got the guys together, and we started playing a few of these tunes. Soon we started doing some modern jazz concerts. This new thing, "Jazz at the Odin"—at the Odin Cinema in Sophiatown. Then around the late '50s, people stopped buying the records of Duke Ellington and Count Basie. They just didn't want to know about big bands amongst our people here! They started buying American bebop records. Kippie²² picked up bebop very fast, because he used to listen a lot to these records.

Bebop started an appreciation of artistry. If you're a saxophonist you must be able to improvise; when you play with the rhythm section, you must demonstrate your expertise as a soloist. Yes, *mbaqanga* continued, but the big bands were losing out. When we played *mbaqanga*, even people who liked the style would say, "*Umhlobo ndala!*" [old style], to mean that this was the music of the older generation. So we played bebop, but it was difficult for the people to appreciate, because it's a bit complicated. We were with people like Kippie Moeketsi, Early Mabusa, Sol Klaaste, Jonas Gwangwa, and Hugh Masekela. Hugh was still young but he used to get there. And our shows were multi-racial. The white guys, like Dan Hill and Dave Lee, used to come and mix with us.²³ All nations. And then came the recording of *Jazz Epistle – Verse 1*.²⁴

¹⁹ *Barberton* was, like *skokiaan*, one of "those dangerous home brews" referred to above (see footnote 12).

²⁰ "Sip 'n Fly" can be heard on *Bra Ntami At Teal Records*.

²¹ Established in 1955 and run for the next two years by Cameron "Pinocchio" Mokgaleng, the club held Sunday "jam sessions" at the Odin Cinema in Sophiatown. See Coplan (1998).

²² Jeremiah "Kippie" Morolong Moeketsi (1925–1983), the legendary South African alto saxophonist, often described as "South Africa's Charlie Parker".

²³ Dan Hill was one of South Africa's most highly regarded jazz clarinetists and bandleaders; he established RPM Records and later became musical director at Gallo Africa. Dave Lee was a British jazz pianist and composer who moved to South Africa in 1947, and returned to the UK in 1955 to become pianist and arranger for the Johnny Dankworth Band.

²⁴ The series of concerts known as "Jazz at the Odin" helped give rise to modernist ensembles such

CB: You’ve described the various assaults on jazz: the Group Areas Act, the enforced collapse of the big bands, the rise of the “new mbaqanga” and what you called “the one-saxophone thing,” the commercialism of the record companies, and the ending of your own band and recording career. Apartheid politics starved jazz of oxygen, and yet now, all these years later, you’re leading a new jazz band, the African Jazz Pioneers. How do you explain this? Do you see a connection between the recent revival of jazz and the dramatic strengthening of opposition politics?

EP: Yes I do. The African Jazz Pioneers are playing orchestrations again! We are bringing back that sound. Jazz is coming up again now! The UDF is quite a new organisation. In the absence of the ANC²⁵, it’s coming out strong. Over the past few years disco has been dominating the scene, and it’s still dominating, but now people are getting interested in listening to the music of the swing era. And the *mbaqanga* that we used to play in the late ’40s and early ’50s is catching on. It’s coming back. We see this at FOSATU²⁶ meetings when we play. So these things, the political and musical revivals, are happening simultaneously. I wouldn’t say it’s coincidence, it’s just a necessity. Besides, they never actually died off. There was just a bit of quietness!

CB: Of course, this is not the first time that your music has been involved with politics. The ANC often used to ask the Alexandra All Stars to play at their events. That must have been in the 1950s?

EP: Yes, before and after the Treason Trial.²⁷ On every occasion that they had private parties in their homes and so forth, they used to ask us, mainly as the Alexandra All Stars, to come and play for them. Some of the bands were scared of certain things, victimizations and things, but we couldn’t turn them down. We wanted to do them, we wanted to be associated. I mean, I’m coming out clean about the whole thing now: we wanted that. Whilst they were doing their thing, having meetings, parties, celebrations, and what not, they needed entertainment. We’d accept any engagement that they gave us.

as the Jazz Epistles, and hence their (now legendary) recording, *Jazz Epistle – Verse 1*. Though not a member of the Jazz Epistles, Ntemi clearly felt close to the group and proud of its musical achievements. The band’s members were Kippie Moeketsi (alto saxophone), Hugh Masekela (trumpet), Jonas Gwangwa (trombone), Abdullah Ibrahim (piano), Johnny Gertze (bass), and Makaya Ntshoko (drums).

²⁵ The banning in 1960 of the African National Congress (ANC), the largest anti-apartheid party, forced it underground and into exile. The ban on it and several other organizations was lifted in February 1990, and in 1994 the ANC became the ruling party in the first democratic government.

²⁶ Formed in April 1979 as a progressive, non-racial organization, the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) played an important role in the first half of the anti-apartheid struggle’s final decade, before merging into the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) when that much larger body was established in December 1985.

²⁷ In 1956, a year after a Congress of the People had adopted “The Freedom Charter,” the government arrested 156 Congress leaders and put them on trial for high treason. Charges were later withdrawn against some, but the trial of the others dragged on for five years, until 1961, when they were all acquitted.

CB: Do you think they felt the music was then, and is still today, somehow in tune with their objectives?

EP: Yes, very much so. Especially when the music was “African”. They used to prefer that. Even today many people prefer this type of music. They maintain that our African culture is getting too westernised and we’re forgetting our own culture. So, as the African Jazz Pioneers we must try and cultivate our culture. I remember somebody joking that I was going to lead the first national liberation band!

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²⁸ This and the other two *Bra Ntemi* CDs are excellent compilations of recordings featuring Ntemi Piliso as composer, arranger, soloist, and bandleader. They comprise reissues that were selected and produced from master tapes by Rob Allingham. Dating from the mid-1970s, these recordings mark the end of Ntemi’s “first” career. The information Allingham provides in the accompanying booklets is scholarly, detailed and extensive.

²⁹ Features the Alexandra All Stars Band.

- 1956 “Watch The Birdie” (Gene de Paul); “Blues I Like To Hear” (Buster Smith); “Good Morning Blues” (Count Basie); “Jump Steady” (Jack Chapman). *South African Music Archive Project* (“Chris Ballantine Collection”): <http://samap.ukzn.ac.za>.³⁰
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³⁰ These are examples of Ntemi Piliso and the Alexandra All Stars playing imported swing-jazz numbers. I thank Rob Allingham for the information about the recording dates, which he infers from the serial numbers (personal communication, 19 July 2018).

³¹ These are two examples of Piliso’s accommodation with the “new *mbaqanga*,” in compositions by his brother Shadrack. Though these were marketed as recordings by the Alexandra All Stars, this was a deliberate misnomer. As Rob Allingham points out: “Ntemi is in the sax section and solos on the b side, and his brother Shadrack is in the brass section and took the composer credits, but otherwise the rest of the line-up were all session men (including Jerry Mthetwa on lead guitar and Ben Nkosi on string bass) recently hired by Rupert Bopape for his newly-minted Mavuthela division at Gallo. Bopape, no doubt with the Piliso brothers’ approval, just used the famous name of their old band as a commercial come-on” (personal communication, 21 July 2018).

³² Features the Alexandra All Stars Band. Also available on iTunes, Spotify, and other music-streaming sites.