

## AFRICAN MUSIC FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE RECORD INDUSTRY

(From a Special Correspondent of *The Star*, Johannesburg)

The key fact in the Bantu record industry is that there are no key facts such as enable experts on the European side to prepare something in accordance with proven formulae and predict its success with reasonable accuracy.

Indeed, renowned musicologists after decades of studying Bantu music and customs have been invited to comment on various recordings and the box-office results have conflicted dramatically with their informed opinion.

To set against the wealth of evidence that the Bantu record buyer is simply not interested in conventional Western numbers there were the hit sales of "The Tennessee Waltz".

Naturally, the record makers *promptly* devised a slow waltz with a sad lyric to cash in on this success, and had rewarding sales.

But since then there have been repeated attempts to duplicate this success with records conforming to the pattern it suggested, and they have uniformly failed!

One day two youngsters entered a Johannesburg recording studio and offered a little novelty played on two penny whistles. The studio, always ready to try something new, did reasonably well out of the product.

Shortly afterwards there came a record by a tin whistle virtuoso which took the market by storm and for some two years the instrument was an essential component of any performance that had any commercial prospects at all.

Now the fad has faded. The African version of the Twist is enjoying a comparable vogue.

But the end of its reign may be near and a substantial prize will go to the commercial company which most nearly calculates the next fashion.

For this market exhibits none of the sales resistance which Europeans show — to the extent that every single copy of a popular recording will sell.

And the reverse of the coin is that no amount of promotion will sell even a handful of copies of a record that just does not "take", and it will not shift from a counter in a sale.

Changes over the past dozen years have included a continuing breakdown of tribal barriers which used to confine a record's success.

The Basuto were always disposed to accept a pleasant recording in, say, Zulu: but the Zulu insisted on listening only to his own language with a rigour that is fast disappearing.

Like other Africans, they will hear something they like on a friend's gramophone and buy it for themselves even though the words may be as foreign as a fado hit to a European who knows no Portuguese.

That is the principle influence on sales: the friend's gramophone — although many urban Africans have formed the habit of buying a record every week or every fortnight, influenced by what is being played in the shop.

A really good disc heard through the shop's loudspeaker will attract listeners out of the air and sell half a dozen copies in the time it takes to be played once.

It will probably be a 78 r.p.m. record though the 45 r.p.m. record is making headway. No 33 r.p.m. LP has good prospects.

The great majority of Africans have hand-wound gramophones and it appears that recent substantial sales of transistorized players capable of taking slower discs may have made such inroads into the customer's budget that he cannot yet afford many.

The star system, which radically affects European record sales, turned out to be such a menace in the Bantu record business that it has largely been abandoned.

There have been far too many cases of an underpaid, unaffected talented African being discovered, trained and promoted, only to enter upon ill-advised high-living which destroys both the character and the talent.

There are famous exceptions to this pattern, but on the whole it has proved better for audience, performers and business alike to avoid personal tragedies at the cost of temporary profits.

The actual music still originates largely in the traditional tribal music remembered and modified by the court musicians who inherited the prestigious appointments together with the material.

In this rudimentary form it has virtually no sale at all today, but the artistry of modern performers — of whom about 90 per cent cannot read music — gives it commercial appeal.

The itinerant minstrels, singing legends and current affairs have few representatives in the recording studios although one of the best is a steady hit-parade name whose style is widely copied by strolling entertainers in the age-old venues.

A small, detribalized and almost deracinated number of Africans eschew the conventional Bantu records and buy quantities of the internationally famous American jazz leaders.

In return some genuinely African numbers, notably "Skokiaan", have attained world-wide celebrity across the colour barrier.

But barriers do remain, to the extent that first-rate European musicians have slaved for hours to reproduce on their instruments the characteristic sound of a typical Africa group, and had to admit defeat.

Experienced listeners can still hear a single bar or even a single note and tell unfailingly whether an African or a European played it.

Their verdict is that Bantu music is not becoming more sophisticated in any usual sense of the term, although it is constantly being developed by the commercial experts trying to anticipate market trends.

They are governed largely by experience, trained intuition, and an unsystematic sampling of the market. They get a reaction from the consumers much faster and more conclusively than the Europeans give.

The tale is told of a carefully compiled record featuring undoubtedly popular entertainers, which was backed by all the promotional aids — newspaper advertising, loun-speaker vans, posters — that build a Presley disc.

Of all the records that were eventually sent to the shops with expensive ballyhoo, the only ones which did not come back unsold were the ones that got broken.

Another influence which counts a great deal in the European sector of the business and not at all unless negatively in the Bantu sector is the radio.

Africans have said that although the intention is to broadcast Bantu and non-Bantu music in the respective proportions of about 80 to 20, the very reverse appears to obtain.

They say that the trusty gramophone plays the music they want to hear, and there are upwards of 25 South African organisations catering for them.