

The Culture Of Apartheid Through Music



Above shows Miriam Makeba. Makeba was a famous female jazz singer throughout apartheid, shown here on the cover of one of the most progressive magazines in Africa, A Magazine of Africa For Africa, showing just how important Makeba was to be included on their cover and how important jazz music was to the African culture at the time

Jazz and the artists involved in the booming trend needed a platform for their talents and their message, this was found in Drum magazine. Drum magazine started off with a paternalistic, tribal representation of African people under the editorship of Bob Crisp who was a South African cricket player and played a key part in starting Drum magazine. Once Crisp was replaced, Drum changed its message and focused on vibrant black townships. In the 1950s, Drum magazine moved to Sophiatown, a place which was seen as the most lively and sophisticated of South African townships, a place of huge cultural development. Black Jazz also became hugely prominent alongside the opening of the jazz opera King Kong. There was also a move towards an adoption of shebeens which were illegal bars, places where music could be played, bands could perform, and ideas could be shared. There was also the adoption of American gangs and frequent Americanisms within everyday life, such as cars and outfits. It was seen as a time of optimism and hope and Drum was used to portray the Black African culture growing at the time, jazz playing a huge part in this culture.

The text underneath is a section of lyrics. These lyrics are from an anti-apartheid song written by Peter Gabriel, about the death of a black South African anti-apartheid activist called Steve Biko, in police custody. The song includes Steve Biko's Xhosa language and is inspired by African musical styles. The song discusses a movement like a flame, when it catches, it can only grow and can't be suffocated.

You can blow out a candle
But you can't blow out a fire
Once the flames begin to catch
The wind will blow it higher

Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
Oh Biko, Biko, because Biko
Yihla moja, yihla moja. (Come spirit)
The man is dead
The man is dead

Jazz was a form of expression; it was a platform for political resistance and statements of freedom. Jazz was seen as a black identity, linked to freedom, breaking free from the chains set by the government, the chains of fixed roles and identities. It was also very difficult for artists to record and sell jazz under Apartheid due to restriction placed on Black artists. Under apartheid, jazz grew and grew amongst Black South Africans, slogans such as "The struggle for jazz, jazz for the struggle" became extremely popular. Many songs were used as unofficial anthems most famously 'Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrica' meaning 'Lord Bless Africa'. This song composed in 1897 by Enoch Sontonga, a Xhosa clergyman, was adopted as a liberation song and was even adopted as the South African anthem after the end of apartheid showing how important the song was. Jazz became such an important aspect to the movement, that even listening to jazz in South Africa was seen as an action against the state, however, to the Black South Africans who just enjoyed the musicality of jazz, it was also just used as a release. It was used to express a cultural identity not just an anti-apartheid identity, it was listened to at the end of a hard day's work, and it was used to provide a sense of community.

The image to the right shows Sophiatown, a place of huge cultural development. The man in the image is Gray Mbau, a 27-year-old social worker with his son Jethron outside of their cottage in Sophiatown. As can be seen in the image, music was hugely related to the cultural developments within Sophiatown and played a huge part in allowing black Africans to express themselves and their feelings



Western music was accessible to people living in South Africa in record stores, it was also possible to get music from sailors who visited the continent at ports such as the one in Cape Town. There are also clear western influences within much of the jazz music produced under apartheid, however it is still easy to see the music was rooted in South African traditions. This is even true for 'Biko', the song written by Peter Gabriel which an excerpt of can be found on this board. There are clear South African influences seen within his recording of this song, not to mention the use of traditional Xhosa language, the single version released of the song also ends with a recording of 'Nkosi Sikelel iAfrica' linking back to the importance of music as an overarching link for many factors during this period. Biko was credited with creating a political awakening of the brutalities of apartheid internationally. Music was able to bridge the gap that allowed people outside of the Apartheid regime to fight it, not just that but it was also many peoples first interaction with the brutalities of apartheid. Paul Simon is another western musician to play music in response to the apartheid regime. He performed the unofficial anthem of the liberation movement, 'Nkosi Sikelel iAfrica', alongside very prominent figures in the South African jazz scene such as Miriam Makeba, seen on the cover of Drum magazine on this board, and famous South African jazz trumpeter Hugh Masekela. This unofficial liberation anthem played a hugely symbolic part in the liberation. It was impossible for them to ban the song being used in songs by internationally known artists, or even sung by the Black men and women being forced to live under their regime. Music was the binding factor and the foundation of a culture that was not allowed to die, not even if the regime stopped the production of music, or tore down cultural hubs seen during the destruction of Sophiatown, the town the Man and child pictured on the board lived in. Music would still bridge gaps domestically and internationally, culture was the only weapon that the regime struggled to remove, it was like a fire that would burn and burn, as stated in 'Biko', and this culture was fuelled by the ability to spread messages through jazz and music in general.

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