

Gwigwi Mrwebi, Ghetto Musicians and the Jazz Imperative: the Social and Musical Dynamics of South African Jazz in 1960s London

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Abstract:

African jazz, also known as mbaqanga and less frequently as Majuba jazz, occupies an important but ambivalent position in the story of South African music. Musicians, aficionados and scholars alike commonly perceive the style as a culmination of black South African jazz musicians' reckoning with African American jazz in the 1940s. Moreover, jazz musicians' assertion of a specifically black South African musical position was accompanied by an increasingly assertive political position in black South Africa's public sphere at the time. Mbaqanga, in other words, did ideological work, because it articulated resistance against prevailing conditions under white rule. By the 1950s, however, mbaqanga was also expressive of a popular culture that positioned black South Africans in an urban milieu embracive of that era's ambiguities regarding changed racial, gender and sexual mores, and as importantly, changed consumer mores. African jazz became a participant object in this change. Its dual significance led to an analytical tension that music scholars could only resolve 'elsewhere'. This (working draft) chapter explores how the challenge posed by mbaqanga could only be met by musical, geographical and musicological displacement. It does this by focussing, firstly, on the career of one musician, Gwigwi Mrwebi, in South Africa and in London. It then outlines the complex world of London's jazz scenes in the 1960s and their reception of mbaqanga. Finally, it considers how what I have termed 'the jazz imperative' – a constellation of musical desires, ethical postures and individual (musical) belonging orientated towards African America – affected the careers of both Mrwebi and mbaqanga in London. Such an investigation not only illuminates the life of a relatively neglected musician, it also interrupts those histories that attribute South African jazz's importance in the formation of British jazz to avant-garde expression.

Introduction: Gwigwi Mrwebi and the making and unmaking of African jazz

Es'kia Mphahlele's second autobiography, *Afrika My Music*,¹ is perhaps as close an historian of South African jazz need get to Gwigwi Mrwebi's epitaph. Mphahlele's literary output, described by David Attwell as 'the most sustained record in South African literature of the encounter between a South African writer and the cultures of the wider diaspora',² is instructive because it reveals not only his focus on literature, but also his investment in other arts. Music is one of these arts. It is a cultural practice whose career in apartheid South Africa Mphahlele undoubtedly misread; he was, moreover, 'happy that [he] turned out to be wrong'.³ Despite the conceptual challenge it posed, music in Mphahlele's self-writing in some ways attenuated the tyranny of time and the tyranny of place occasioned by his exile. In *Afrika My Music*, for example, when he lists the deaths ('Casualties') of friends in exile and relates these to his imagined interlocutors ('The Living Dead'), some of his fondest memories are reserved for his comrades from the 1950s ('the Drum majors'), including its musicians: like Todd Matshikiza, the creator of 'Mathikese' and the composer of Alan Paton's *Mkhumbane* and more famously *King Kong: an African jazz opera*,

Like Gwigwi Mrwebi. Township jazz, sax. Drum circulation boss. Lies somewhere in the United States ... So far away, Gwigs – so damn far away.⁴

Mphahlele's 'memoir' captures this musician's life and death with grim economy. Its biographical neatness in fact tells more about the alto saxophonist than is usual. To obtain more information might mean walking the streets of downtown Johannesburg to Pim Street in Newtown, which has been renamed Gwigwi Mrwebi Street. Newtown's street names confirm that Mrwebi was indeed part of that mythologised milieu of 1950s South Africa and its jazz

¹ Es'kia Mphahlele, *Afrika My Music: an autobiography, 1957-1983* (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 2001 [1984]).

² David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: studies in black South African literary history* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), p. 111-2.

³ Mphahlele, *Afrika My Music*, p. 158. Emphasis in original.

⁴ Ibid. p. 124.

subcultures. The general reader or jazz aficionado might encounter traces of Gwigwi Mrwebi in Hugh Masekela's autobiography.⁵ They would learn from the trumpeter that whenever he and his friends visited Sophiatown from Alexandra in the old days, 'Gwigwi would bombard [them] with recordings by Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond, Shorty Rogers, Bob Cooper, Bud Shank' and similar icons of West Coast jazz.⁶ For the jazz journalist and researcher Gwen Ansell, Mrwebi appears only incidentally, in the course of a longer interview with the trombonist Jonas Gwangwa. Ansell records Gwangwa's recollection of his first trip on an aeroplane headed for London with the *King Kong* Company in 1960, when his terror was eased by the same Gwigwi Mrwebi, who had managed to sneak 'a bottle' onto the dry plane.⁷

My encounter with Gwigwi Mrwebi, which has led to this (working draft) chapter, was no less accidental. It occurred whilst I was reading for the story of *King Kong: an African Jazz Opera*, where I revisited its South African run in 1959 and examined more specifically its London run at Princes Theatre in 1961. Because the broader ambit of my (doctoral) research is the social and musical dynamics of South African jazz in London, 1960s-1970s, Mrwebi's career as a King Konger, in South Africa and in London, is especially important. Extant scholarship on *King Kong* and on jazz's history immediately prior to it presents Mrwebi as a founding member of the Union of Southern African Artists (Union Artists). As I have written in detail in Chapter Two of the dissertation, the Union was founded in 1953 as an interracial effort to protect the rights of musicians to royalties and other forms of remuneration.⁸ Union Artists' interracial makeup lasted only up to its formalization in 1960 as a Section 21 not-for-profit company, when one of its clauses,

⁵ Hugh Masekela and D. Michael Cheers, *Still Grazing: the musical journey of Hugh Masekela* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004).

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 80.

⁷ Gwen Ansell, *Soweto Blues: jazz, popular music and politics in South Africa* (New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 222 and 47.

⁸ Muff Andersson, *Music in the Mix: the story of South African popular music* (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1981), p. 29; David B. Coplan, *In Township Tonight!: South Africa's black city music and theatre*. 2nd Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 213-4 and p. 266.

demanded by the Registrar of Companies, was that no ‘non-white’ should be a member of its Directorate.⁹ Despite these restrictions, Union Artists facilitated the legalisation of the *King Kong* cast’s departure for London from late-1960.

As we shall see, however, Mrwebi’s participation in *King Kong* was a (relatively profitable) sideshow when compared to his daily employment and professional session work as a musician and a bandleader. By *King Kong*’s time (c. 1958-9), he was already acknowledged as a crucial protagonist in South African jazz’s creation myth. Christopher Ballantine has dated mbaqanga’s creation to the mid-1940s, when jazz musicians for the first time experimentally combined ‘the cyclical harmonic structure of *marabi*’ with the rhythmic patterns of isiZulu *indlamu* dance, with neo-traditional melodic contours and ‘forms and instrumentation adapted from American swing’.¹⁰ Todd Matshikiza’s recollection of the birth of mbaqanga – from his vantage point of 1957 as a music critic for *Drum* – foregrounds the importance of one jazz band called the Harlem Swingsters, to which he and Mrwebi belonged, in the making of African jazz. Thinking back to the 1940s (with its worlds of possibilities), Matshikiza recounts how while on tour in Potchefstroom,

African Jazz was reborn. The original product – Marabi – had died when American swing took over. Gray [Mbau], Taai [Shomang], Gwigwi [Mrwebi], and I recaptured the wonderful mood over an elevating early breakfast of corn bread and black tea in the open air after a heavy drinking bout the previous evening. Gray put the corn bread aside and started blowing something on the five tone scale. We dropped our corn bread and got stuck into Gray’s mood. And that is how some of the greatest and unsurpassed African Jazz classics were born. ‘E-Qonce’, ‘E-Mtata’, ‘Majuba’, ‘Fish and Chips’ were born out of that combination of the Harlem Swingsters whose passing remains today’s greatest regret.

We invented ‘Majuba’ jazz and gave jive strong competition. We syncopated and displaced accents and gave endless variety to our ‘native’ rhythms. We were longing for the days of the Marabi piano, vital and live. Blues piano, ragtime piano, jazz band piano, swing and modern piano had taken it away from us. And here we were seedling it again with new blood in its veins ... treated freshly with a dash of lime.¹¹

⁹ SAB/HEN 437/1/12/540. Vol. 2307. Minute, Union Artists: Aansoek Om Registrasie Ingevolge Artikel 21 van die Maatskappywet 1926, Johannesburg, 10 March 1960.

¹⁰ Christopher Ballantine, *Marabi Nights: early South African jazz and vaudeville* (Braamfontein: Ravan Press, 1993), pp. 60-1.

¹¹ *Drum* August 1957. Cited in Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*, pp. 61-2.

Ballantine has interpreted this often cited extract as a musical instantiation of some of the broader social, political and cultural changes that characterised the 1940s. In his view, mbaqanga's 'birth' is comparable to, if not to be simplistically aligned with, the emergent cultural politics of New Africanism whose 1940s nationalist strain was taken up by the ANC Youth League.¹² David Coplan, for his part, explains that after the word mbaqanga¹³ was popularised by the jazz broadcaster, Gideon Nxumalo, to the musicians who gave it ear it increasingly came to mean 'the Africans' own, the homely cultural sustenance of the townships, and the popular working-class source of the musicians' "daily bread"¹⁴. Ansell also observes that the word 'mbaqanga' was used 'interchangeably with other terms for the new African jazz'.¹⁵ To describe this process of collaborative, almost spontaneous, creation of Majuba jazz as 'seedling' is vintage 'Matshikese'. On the one hand, its overt reference to birth, growth and nurturing pre-empts Michael Titlestad's insight that 'in each period in South African history, black South Africans have turned to a style of music appropriate to their needs'.¹⁶ For him, 'commercial swing ... would give way to the edgy heurism of total improvisation in the 1960s and, in turn, to musical expressions of black liberationist politics in the 1970s'.¹⁷ Titlestad's mapping of South African jazz aesthetics constructs an incrementally conscientizing South African populist culture whose dominant impulse is to clear admittedly contingent, but relatively autonomous, spaces. His project, in other words, scrupulously avoids a second, more covert, but equally important meaning contained in Matshikiza's description of African jazz's birth. For, while 'seedling' suggests the positive meanings to which I have referred, the word also connotes vulnerability. From the moment of

¹² Ibid. p. 62.

¹³ Coplan writes that the term was coined by the trumpeter of the Jazz Maniacs, Michael Xaba. *In Township Tonight!* p. 200.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ansell, *Soweto Blues* p. 59.

¹⁶ Michael Titlestad, *Making the Changes: jazz in South African literature and reportage* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004), p. 242.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 242.

its making, ‘Matshikese’ suggests, mbaqanga was aware of the possibilities of co-optation; it was, moreover, aware that this co-optation would be accomplished by South Africa’s culture industry. There is little in mbaqanga’s creation myth to suggest that success in the culture industry was anathema; indeed, Matshikiza’s triumphant aside that Majuba jazz ‘gave jive strong competition’ implies jazz musicians’ determination succeed in exactly this *popular* realm.

A jazz-influenced style did arise that proved successful as a product of mass culture: *msakazo* (broadcast). Ansell, Ballantine and Coplan, the foremost writers of South African jazz history, despite their different political and intellectual stances agree that *msakazo* generally stood against all that mbaqanga symbolised. *Msakazo* has been variously described as ‘a simplified version of the [mbaqanga] style’,¹⁸ a ‘bouncy new popular music, mass-produced by the studios’ that was ‘rigid, anodyne, [and] formula-bound’¹⁹ and that increasingly came to mean, for musicians who still recalled 1940s African jazz/mbaqanga, “‘fast food’”.²⁰ They argue alike that *msakazo* came after African jazz and in fact marked the latter’s unmaking. What complicates these scholars’ pioneering work is mbaqanga’s unstable sonic referent. African jazz would not own the label mbaqanga from the late-1950s; despite this dispossession, however, mbaqanga remained in popular consciousness in what Theodor Adorno would have probably termed its ‘aspect of resistancelessness’.²¹ Indeed, recourse to Adorno’s wide-ranging and for some, maddening, critique is timely because, as Max Paddison has written, it reminds us that the fundamental difference in music is not between ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ music as such. It is rather between music that ‘accepts its character as commodity’ and ‘that *self-reflective* music which critically opposes its fate as commodity,

¹⁸ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* p. 200.

¹⁹ Ballantine, *Marabi Nights* p. 8.

²⁰ Ansell, *Soweto Blues* p. 59.

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Schema of Mass Culture’ in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*. J. M. Bernstein (ed) (London: Routledge Classics, 1991) p. 71.

and thus ends up by alienating itself from present society by becoming unacceptable to it'.²² Following Paddison's reading of Adorno, we might identify *msakazo* as music that accepted its character as commodity and interpret mbaqanga as self-reflective music. This would be too hasty, however, because Adorno's sustained critique also identified a similar contradiction *within* so-called oppositional or self-reflective music. It is not enough, in other words, simply to oppose mbaqanga to *msakazo* and dismiss the latter as its social bad conscience: mbaqanga's internal contradiction, captured by its sideward glance to jive, must be conceived as a whole.

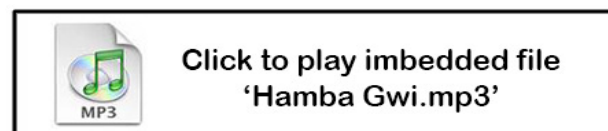
Rather than engage this dualism, jazz scholars have tended firstly to isolate and privilege certain aesthetic conventions and processes as mbaqanga, and read the very *existence* of these same aesthetic markers in *msakazo* as the former's misplacement. Secondly, and in contrast to the charge of unsuitable entrustment, they have interpreted the re-appearance of these aesthetic conventions in the repertoires of those musicians who chose to live abroad as reclamations of mbaqanga – what Coplan has described as 'an authentic syncretism'.²³ This has been the case for those musicians who settled in Britain especially, for reason I elaborate later in the study. Finally, by interpreting the musicians' departure and relocation abroad as exile, scholars have transformed certain musicians' aesthetic choices into metaphorical expressions of political agency. This chapter explores how the conceptual challenge mbaqanga has posed to music scholars could only be met by this musical, geographical and musicological displacement. To explore mbaqanga's misplacement in *msakazo*, I focus on Gwigwi Mrwebi's life in South Africa and later in the study, in London. His career in both spaces will be threaded through the arguments presented in the chapter, of which this presentation is a segment. The importance of geographical displacement is approached by outlining the social dynamics of mbaqanga in London. After the *King Kong*

²² Max Paddison, 'The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music' in *Popular Music* 2, (1982), pp. 201-218

²³ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* p. 232.

production closed at the end of 1961 London, many musicians from its cast chose to remain in the United Kingdom rather than return to post-Sharpeville South Africa. The musicians' unsuccessful jazz careers after *King Kong*, to one strain of British jazz history, reduced mbaqanga to a fleeting visit²⁴ with minimal impact until the definitive arrival of the Blue Notes in 1965.²⁵ For South African historians, mbaqanga's silence in Britain prior to the Blue Notes' arrival prefigures exile.²⁶ I plan to explore South African jazz's reception beyond the staging of *King Kong* in 1961 and the complex reactions to those Africans on stage, by looking specifically at the reception of its album, which a longer and divergent trajectory that has been neglected.²⁷ Indeed, the album's ghostly afterlife partially determined how my final case study, the album *Kwela by Gwigwi Mrwebi's Band* (1967) was disseminated, marketed and received. I use *Kwela by Gwigwi Mrwebi's Band* to explore musicological displacement and to introduce what I have termed 'the jazz imperative', a concept that embodies musical desires, ethical postures and individual (musical) belonging orientated towards African America. While it is related to mbaqanga's social dynamics, the jazz imperative's focus veers towards mbaqanga's internal ideologies as a type of jazz, even as a type of *African jazz*, which stand in critical relation to the social. I show then, as my last argument in the chapter, how the jazz imperative affected the careers of both Mrwebi and mbaqanga.

'Hamba Gwi': introducing a Rascal, a Swingster and a Dazzler



Music Example 1: 'Hamba Gwi' in Appendix

²⁴ Paul Oliver (ed.), *Black Music in Britain: essays on the Afro-Asian contribution to popular music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).

²⁵ George McKay, *Circular breathing: the cultural politics of jazz in Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) and Ian Carr, *Music outside: contemporary jazz in Britain* 2nd Edition (London: Northway, 2008)

²⁶ Sazi Dlamini, 'The South African Blue Notes: Bebop, Mbaqanga, Apartheid and the Exiling of a Musical Imagination' (Unpublished PhD diss., Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2010)

²⁷ It has not been reissued since 1961. I purchased it second-hand, online, from a seller in Kent.

The tune 'Hamba Gwi' was composed by Gwigwi Mrwebi. Its title is in the performative mode – it translates as 'go Gwi' in isiNguni – but Mrwebi himself never emerges fully: he never takes a solo. The Jazz Dazzlers recorded the song with Gallo Africa on 15 July 1960, soon before Mrwebi was to leave South Africa for London with *King Kong*. Despite this coincidence, this is not a farewell song. The Jazz Dazzlers for this recording date included Kippie Moeketsi on first alto saxophone, the composer on second alto, Makhwenkwe (Mackay) Dvashe on tenor saxophone, Hugh Masekela on trumpet, Jonas Gwangwa on trombone, Sol Klaaste on piano, General Duze on guitar, Jacob Lepere on bass and Ben Mawela on drums. Most of these musicians would travel with the African jazz opera to the United Kingdom.

Besides Masekela and Gwangwa, the members of the Jazz Dazzlers typify the lot of many South African jazz musicians. Their names, their musical prowess and their importance in South African jazz remain beyond dispute in the stories written about this music. For example, Kippie Moeketsi's virtuosity and intellectual generosity is held in awe, encapsulated by his symbolic comparison to another alto saxophone icon, Charlie 'Bird' Parker.²⁸ Dvashe's compositional ingenuity stretches abroad.²⁹ The rest signify as legend and as insider knowledge unavailable to most. They dot and enable our larger investigations and are uttered in passing by those who remember them, fondly or otherwise. One reason for this absence is that South African jazz and popular music studies arose at a time when extensive criticisms were directed towards scholarship that privileged 'great men'. More immediately, music studies followed the example set by historians during the revisionist turn,

²⁸ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* 243-8 and Titlestad, *Making the Changes* 156-64.

²⁹ Ballantine, 'Looking to the USA: the politics of male close-harmony song style in South Africa during the 1940s and 1950s' in *Popular Music* 18, 1 (1999) pp. 1-17.

from the late 1970s to the 1980s.³⁰ From the 1970s, cultural historians countered apartheid's hegemony by adopting broadly materialist perspectives that interpreted apartheid as 'racial capitalism' and took on board increasingly influential black consciousness perspectives in their interpretations of black cultural practices. These conceptual frames profoundly influenced how jazz was incorporated into black South Africa's cultural history, and how its meanings and significances could be gauged. Because little was known about the music and its practitioners, musicking as such was more compelling as a subject of study. Musicology that was explicitly aligned with the country's leftist politics also debated the degree to which focussing on individual musicians helps to explain and interpret society or its music.³¹

Reading lives need not be a conservative project; as I hope to show it can illuminate the contexts and themes with which jazz scholars remain stubbornly preoccupied. Moreover, reading peripatetic lives is becoming well-nigh unavoidable for South African jazz studies to extend beyond the symbolic economy supplied by the over-familiar Miriam Makeba,³² Hugh Masekela,³³ and Abdullah Ibrahim.³⁴

³⁰ For these changes see Paul Maylam, *South Africa's Racial Past: the History and Historiography of Racism, Segregation and Apartheid* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001). For music see Muff Andersson, *Music in the Mix* pp. 32-5; 102-3. David Coplan, 'The African Musician and the Development of the Johannesburg Entertainment Industry, 1900-1960' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 5:2, (1979)135-164 and 'The Urbanisation of African Music: Some Theoretical Observations' in *Popular Music* 2 (1982) 119-129; *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985); 'Ideology and Tradition in South African Black Popular Theatre' in *The Journal of American Folklore* 99: 392, (1986) 151-176.

³¹ Ballantine, 'Music and Society: the forgotten relationship' in *Music and its Social Meanings* (New York: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1984) pp. 1-35.

³² Miriam Makeba and James Hall, *Makeba: My Story* (New York: New American Library, 1988); Miriam Makeba and Nomsa Mwamuka, *Makeba: The Miriam Makeba Story* (Johannesburg: STE Publishers, 2004).

³³ Hugh Masekela and D. Michael Cheers, *Still Grazing: The Musical Journey of Hugh Masekela* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004).

³⁴ Chris Austin (dir.), *Brother with Perfect Timing* (Indigo Productions, 1986); Lars Rasmussen, *Abdullah Ibrahim: a discography* (Copenhagen: Booktrader, 1998).

Gwigwi Mrwebi was of the first generation of jazz musicians in South Africa and perhaps the most archetypal. He was stationed with a concert unit in North Africa during the Second World War, as sergeant-in-charge of the unit which entertained Allied troops all over North Africa.³⁵ On his return he took a number of piece jobs as a shop assistant in Sophiatown, a boy's club secretary, and was an assistant circulation manager of *Drum* Publications.³⁶ In post-war apartheid South Africa, Mrwebi was a formidable alto saxophonist and clarinetist and a core member of the Harlem Swingsters and the Jazz Dazzlers.³⁷ He was also a composer of South African classics in the style of African jazz/Majuba jazz/mbaqanga and, as I have shown, was credited by Todd Matshikiza as integral to marabi's rebirth as mbaqanga. As a member of the *King Kong* opera bound for London, Mrwebi had to negotiate Hendrik Verwoerd's Native Affairs Department.³⁸ Protagonists in this story include bureaucrats at various tiers of the State with specific briefs (Native Commissioners, the Minister of Bantu Administration and Development); security

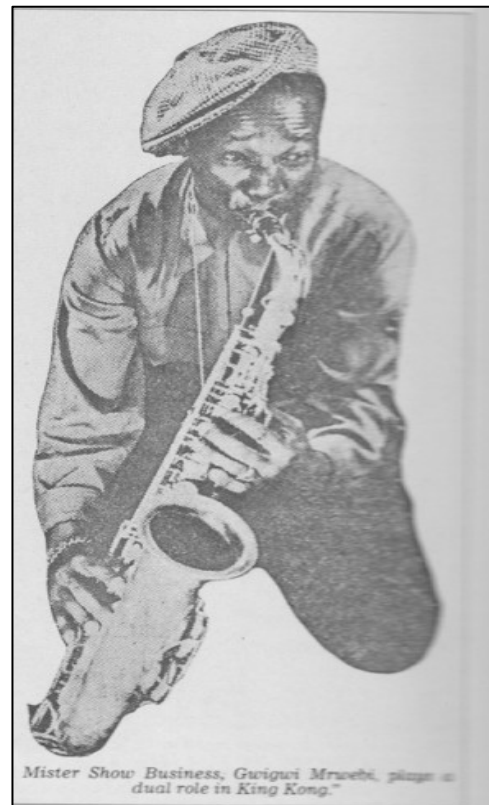


Figure 1: Gwigwi Mrwebi, *Drum*, 25 February 1959.

personnel tasked with protecting white South Africa from communists and African nationalists (the Special Branch and the Commissioner of Police), and a beleaguered Secretary of the Interior who had to co-ordinate their sporadic approvals and disapprovals of

³⁵ Dugmore Boetie adopts just such an identity in his 'autobiography' *Familiarity is the Kingdom of the Lost*. Barney Simon (ed.) (London: Arena, 1969), pp. 75-81.

³⁶ Mona De Beer, *King Kong: a venture in the theatre* (Cape Town: Norman Howell, 2001 [1960]), p. 31.

³⁷ Gwangwa in Ansell, *Soweto Blues*, p. 47.

³⁸ Keith Breckenridge, 'Verwoerd's Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid' *History Workshop Journal* 59, (2005), 83-108.

King Kong. Their names are familiar in South African historiography, which presents their involvement in serious events of the politically tumultuous 1950s, rather than a jazz opera. I have outlined the labyrinthine procedures the *King Kong* cast had to negotiate in Chapter Three. In this chapter, I note only that it is during this period that Mrwebi's biographical details emerge most sharply, captured as they were by the State (Figure 1). To be granted leave to travel, Mrwebi had to complete the procedure outlined by one Mr R. C. Lindeque to Leon Gluckman, the show's producer. Like the rest of the black King Kongers, Mrwebi had,

[I]n the first instance, [to]obtain passport application forms from the Principal Immigration Officer, Johannesburg ... The completed applications, together with the prescribed fees, photographs, etc., should be forwarded to the Department as soon as possible. Thereafter, the Bantu members of the group should present themselves to their nearest Bantu Affairs Commissioners.³⁹

From the submitted documents, we learn that Gwigwi Mrwebi was born on 5 December 1919, in Germiston, east of Johannesburg. His full name was Benjamin Bolanti Gwigwi Mrwebi, Native Identity number 524387, passport number P6809. For the Department of the Interior, Mrwebi's most important registration identity was P60/3932, which indexed his passport. Mrwebi's tenure as *Drum*'s circulation officer must have supplemented his meagre earnings from music, as by 1960, at the age of 40, he owned a house whose address was Perseel 38, Zone 1, in Diepkloof Location. In it, he lived with his wife and their two children.⁴⁰ The saxophonist's performance career was long, but his recording career only began in 1954, as Alec Delmont, the director of Gallo Africa at the time, testified that the Mrwebi had proven himself 'trustworthy ... honest ... of good character ... pleasant ... and reliable' for the last six years (Figure 2).

³⁹ SAB/BAO C100/6/2406. Vol. 3606. Letter from R. C. Lindeque, Secretary of the Interior to Leon Gluckman, 28 March 1960.

⁴⁰ SAB/BAO C100/6/2406. Vol. 3606. Letter from Location-Superintendent, V.R. Martin, to the Senior Superintendent, Meadowlands/Diepkloof, 4 August 1960.

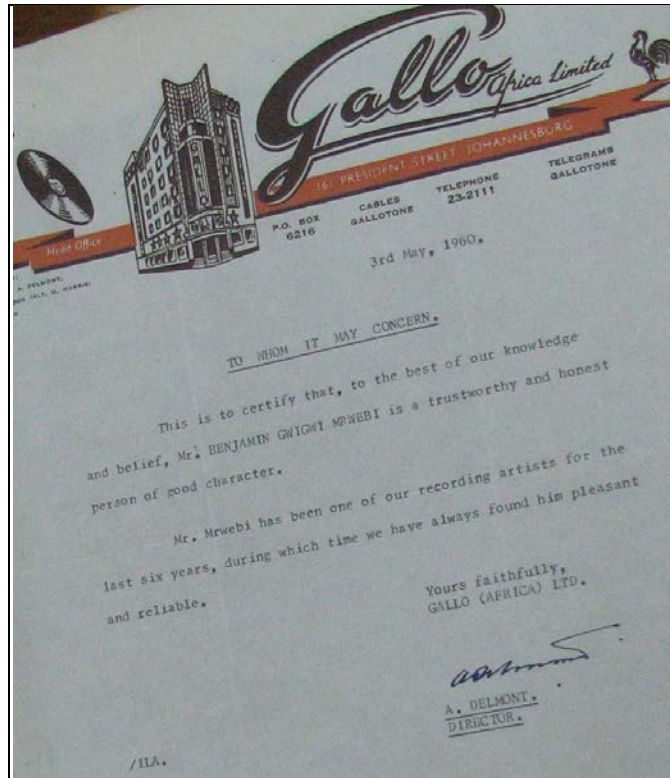


Figure 2: Testimonial from Alec Delmont on behalf of Benjamin Bolanti 'Gwigwi' Mrwebi, 3 May 1960.

Delmont was more than generous in his praise, since there is little to indicate that Mrwebi recorded much with Gallo. Information is sketchy; however, it is well known that jazz musicians floated between recording companies in mbaqanga's culture industry – precisely to earn their 'daily bread'. Mrwebi's first noted recording was indeed in 1954, as *Benny G. Mwrebi* [sic] *And The Harlem Swingsters, with Taai Shomang*, but it was for Troubadour Records, Gallo's biggest competitor.⁴¹ Two years later, he released another album with Troubadour, as *Gwi Gwi and his Gwigzas*.⁴² His more visible output as a leader seems to have mostly been his recordings from July 1960, with USA Records (a Gallo label), as *Gwi-*

⁴¹ MATA 1251 / N133, Troubadour (RSA) AFC 166. The Harlem Swingsters were a large fourteen-piece big band that included, amongst others, Gray Mbau and Todd Matshikiza. For Troubadour's dominance in the music industry see Lara Allen, 'Commerce, Politics, and Musical Hybridity: vocalizing urban black South African identity during the 1950s' in *Ethnomusicology* 47, 2 (2003), pp. 228-249.

⁴² *Emhlabeni/Libala*. MATA 1599, Troubadour (RSA) AFC 320.

Gwi and his Jazz Rascals.⁴³ Delmont may have been referring to whatever work Mrwebi might have done, perhaps as a sideman, for Gallo beyond these recordings.

Beyond a brief note of alarm, communicated by the Special Branch that Mrwebi had attended a party hosted by the 'Student Fellowship Society' on behalf of the ANC [*ten behoewe die A.N.C gereël was*], Mrwebi departed for England with the blessings of his Rector from St. Hilda's Anglican Church in Senaoane and the Bantu Affairs Commissioner.⁴⁴ His last engagement with the State was in 1963, when he and thirteen other Bantu applied to renew their passports. Perfunctory correspondence between one J. van der Poel, the Administration Counsellor at South Africa House, and the Secretary of the Interior, J. Scholtemeyer, approved the request, valid until May 1963.⁴⁵ Supporting Mrwebi's application was a letter from Fleet Street, which explained that he was employed, by *Drum Publications (UK)* as a circulation clerk.⁴⁶

'Umgibe' and 'Hamba Gwi'

Mrwebi obeyed the injunction in his song and never applied for further renewal of his passport or employed other means to return to the country. The few albums he left in South Africa that bear his name most prominently nevertheless remain an important, though neglected, record of African jazz in the 1950s. Their sound, their paratexts and the recording companies that released them present a curious picture of mbaqanga's relationship with the entertainment industry and its attempt to shape, predict and influence black South Africa's popular music imagination. Building on the excellent work that covers popular music

⁴³ Two albums were released on 15 July 1960 from one recording session. These were *Kwa-Obaas/Diepkloof Ekhyaya* ABC 19076-7/USA120 and *Hamba Gwi/Fika Swanee* ABC 19074-5/USA 148. *Hamba Gwi/Fika Swanee* was reissued in an anthology compiled by Rob Allingham, *Township Swing Jazz! Volume 2* (1991), CDZAC 54. Allingham's compilation presents the band as the Jazz Dazzlers.

⁴⁴ Secret Report, Commissioner of South African Police to the Secretary of the Interior and Secretary of the Department of Bantu Administration and Development SAB/BAO C100/6/2406. Vol. 3606, 3 May 1960.

⁴⁵ J. van der Poel, South Africa House, 'Renewal of Passports: Thirteen Ex-Members of "King Kong" cast: Race – Bantu' to J. Scholtemeyer, Secretary of the Interior SAB/BAO C100/6/2406. Vol. 3606, March – May 1962.

⁴⁶ Letter, D. K. Sleaf to Passport Division, South Africa House SAB/BAO C100/6/2406. Vol. 3606, 15 February 1962.

production in 1950s South Africa,⁴⁷ I examine two songs from Mrwebi's South African repertoire. 'Umgibe' was recorded by Benny G. Mrwebi and The Harlem Swingsters (with Taai Shomang) and was named after its composer's name, Gideon 'Mgibe' Nxumalo. In the song, we have an aural demonstration of Matshikiza's description of mbaqanga. The song begins with a strong introductory phrase from the trumpet that is answered by the band, which suggests the trumpet intro was not entirely ad lib. The short intro gives no indication of the rhythmic pulse that dominates the rest of the tune: this is introduced by the rhythm section and the brass in a span of four bars, and played twice. The first eight bars also outline the song's harmonic cycle, which moves in strict I-IV-V-I6/4 on B-flat. The rhythm section and the lower brass hold a swing-shuffle groove throughout, while the frontline trades the two main themes that constitute the song, with minor variations. Solos (alto sax, trumpet and tenor sax) are eight bars each. The saxophone solo is followed by a 'bridge' section that displaces the rhythmic accents, with fills from the piano. The second theme is repeated for eight bars and the song ends. While 'Umgibe' is tightly structured, its cyclical harmony and repetitive bass line makes it open for potentially infinite melodic variation. This is a classic form of composition for American big bands, such as those of Count Basie, because it is built on riffs. These characteristics identify 'Umgibe' as classic African jazz or mbaqanga.

The song's recording date, 1954, is significant: it was exactly in this year that the emergence of a new style – vocal jive – was announced in *Bantu World*.⁴⁸ For Allen, the 1950s 'constituted a significant moment in the evolution of black popular music in South Africa because it was the period between the establishment of the mass media for black consumers and the full institutionalization of high apartheid'.⁴⁹ It was also important in this evolution *within* black popular music as such. To the degree that every decade had its jazz, which played some specific ideological role in black identity, so did each decade have its

⁴⁷ Allen, 'Commerce, Politics, and Musical Hybridity' pp. 229-232; Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* pp. 205-6.

⁴⁸ Allen, *ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁹ Allen, *ibid.* p. 229.

musical Other that furthered different ideological ends. This break was definitive in the 1950s. It was never a static break or permanent divergence; indeed, each new popular style drew on that being surpassed, creating the multitude of hybrid styles Allen perceives as definitive of this decade's black musics. While I am in broad agreement with Allen's findings, inasmuch as they pertain to vocal jive, I deviate slightly with them when it comes to the subject of mbaqanga. Allen's nuanced article unpicks certain assertions about black, vocal, popular music of this time by locating the shifting foundations of their popularity, their political relevance and their commercial success. She does much to discredit the view, held by 1950s anthropologists and ethnomusicologists and others, that hybrid music was little more than the 'candy-floss of popular culture'.⁵⁰ Allen argues that her findings are applicable to other 1950s styles, and her investigation of these styles proceeds by way of the following questions: were they 'inherently hegemonic, perpetuating government discourses of racial and ethnic purity that championed a return to pre-colonial cultural identity for black people, or did it have a subversive effect? If there was a subversive element, did it constitute political resistance? Did the style's commercial guise render any political aspects more or less powerful?'⁵¹ There is a fusion of hegemonies at work here: political and commercial. This fusion constructs her argument's elaboration: it enables a positive reading of popular music's hybridity as opposed, and at times oppositional, to the apartheid government's retribalisation policies. This is a generally accepted reading of popular music by South African scholars and effectively subverts certain 'interpretations of popular culture' that perceive commerce success and radical politics 'as antithetical, for the urge towards profit generally does not coincide with radical political agendas'.⁵²

This counter-reading, however, proceeds by assuming that commercial interests and apartheid policies were constantly in tune. They were not necessarily so and as scholars like

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 243.

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 228.

⁵² Ibid. p. 238.

Deborah Posel have shown, there was no easy rapprochement between economic ‘pragmatists’ and ideologues in favour of ‘total segregation’.⁵³ This suggests, therefore, that the question of hybrid music’s hegemony or subversive potential needs to be answered on two fronts that constitute a whole. In other words, we need to ask what hegemonies were set up by the *commercial* imperatives of the culture industry, in the form of the recording companies we study, as well as recognise that the cultural-political effects of the music in relation to separatist and retribalising ideology more broadly.

‘Hamba Gwi’ [Music Example One], the song that first introduced Mrwebi’s African jazz is useful to compare with ‘Umgibe’ [Music Example Two]. Both songs were released in historically significant years of mbaqanga career. Mrwebi is also significant in both: in the first he is isolated as a ‘star’ attraction along with the Harlem Swingsters and Shomang, while in the second he is the tune’s main author. Bearing in mind that ‘Umgibe’ was composed by Gideon Nxumalo, a university trained pianist who would soon make forays into explicitly modernist formal and harmonic elaborations of South African jazz with his *Jazz Fantasia* (1962), we can nevertheless contrast the earlier song with ‘Hamba Gwi’. The latter song has retained some features of the first, including its cyclical form and indebtedness to mbaqanga’s harmonic characteristics. ‘Hamba Gwi’ however is more contained. There is essentially one melodic statement varied by a ‘fourth’ (the first statement begins in ‘C’ and varies by moving to ‘F’). There is only one beautifully simple 16-bar solo, by Kippie Moeketsi, which stays pretty close to the tune’s main statement. The song is decidedly more up-tempo compared to its original 78rpm flip-side, ‘Fika Swanee’, which contains breathing space between its melodic riffs. The musical contrast makes for a good session; that the contrast itself was deliberate is suggested by the titles of the song ‘Hamba’ (go) and ‘Fika’

⁵³ Deborah Posel, ‘The Meaning of apartheid before 1948: Conflicting interests and forces within the Afrikaner Nationalist alliance’ in *Segregation and apartheid in twentieth-century South Africa* William Beinart and Saul Dubow (eds.), (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 206-230.

(come or arrive). ‘Hamba Gwi’ bears traces of another contemporary hybrid style, kwela, suggested by its melodic structure, its type of variation and its conciseness in form (undisturbed by too many improv solos).

What interests me in the difference between the two songs involves not only their sound, but also their representation. It is worth noting first, that whilst the Harlem Swingsters had closer musical affinity to American big band jazz and more closely approximate earlier big band African jazz, their tenure with Troubadour.

Figure 3: A typical Troubadour cover, 1950s



Figure 4: Packaging African Jazz, 1956



Troubadour was firmly committed to popular music, rather than marketing jazz as a musical product as such. This might explain why in 1954, they could advance the cause of jive (note that Gwi Gwi and his Gwigzas are labelled ‘Jive’) while pressing music from mbaqanga bands like The Harlem Swingsters. Echoing Allen, Coplan has pointed out that Troubadour’s talent scout/producer, Cuthbert Mathumba, ‘had little use for the literate Sophiatown jazzmen. The jazz audience, declining in an age of American ‘bop’ and ‘cool’ in any case,

preferred imported recordings'.⁵⁴ Jazz, African or otherwise, in other words had to seem as close to the hybrid musics surrounding it, that *were* proving popular with township consumers. What was taking place here is in fact what I have termed mbaqanga's internal contradiction. For mbaqanga, considered as African *jazz*, had to be liquidated into the mass musical hybridities that assured profit to the music industry. For African jazz to remain African required a re-packaging and recasting into a generalised jazzy popular music to which audiences could jive. Furthermore, as we have noted from the differences between Mrwebi's musical language in 1954 ('Umgibe') and 1960 ('Hamba Gwi'), this musical misplacement, had *aesthetic* consequences that cannot fully be accounted displacing msakazo from mbaqanga.

The manner in which mbaqanga *was* marketed as African *jazz* brings out this contradiction even more sharply. As I have written above, *Hamba Gwi/Fika Swanee* was recorded with Gwi-Gwi and his Jazz Rascals (or as the Jazz Dazzlers according to the archivist Rob Allingham). This 1960 session was pressed by USA Records, prior to its assimilation into Gallo Africa later that year:⁵⁵



Figure 5: Mrwebi with USA Records, 1960

⁵⁴ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* p. 205-6.

⁵⁵ Rob Allingham, 'Gallo (South Africa)' in *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World Part 1 Media, Industry, Society* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2003), pp. 723-4.

Figure 6: Packaging jazz for Africa

The cultural politics of ‘looking to the West’, specifically to the United States and increasingly to projections of African America in films, print media and music are South African cultural and musical historians’ own mbaqanga and hardly need elaboration here. For immediate



purposes, what is worth noting is that jazz in Africa is curated by a symbolic economy that represents in brazen colours where African jazz might be more suitably placed. It is also the first time, from available evidence, that ‘Jazz’ is linked overtly with Gwigwi Mrwebi’s music (Jazz Rascals/Jazz Dazzlers), even while the jazz contained within the album’s sleeves is already the product of that undifferentiated hybridity to which mbaqanga had to mould itself to sell as popular music in the 1950s.

This, then, is another aspect of mbaqanga’s internal contradiction. Whereas mbaqanga was seen as a culmination of black South African jazz musicians’ reckoning with African American jazz towards the creation ‘an authentic syncretism’ (to borrow from Coplan again), its marketing and packaging here suggests mbaqanga as a style that falls under American jazz and may be appreciated for its difference within this frame. By the end of the 1950s, it would seem, mbaqanga’s position in the world of black popular musical culture, which has been variously lauded for articulating African urban aspirations, was also reflective of that popular culture’s changed consumer mores. With this came mbaqanga’s need to prove its popularity otherwise: through its entertainment and commercial value. It is no wonder, then, that both Lara Allen’s vocal jive and Louise Meintjes’s *isimanje-manje*

(now-now) could, in their respective decades, assume the mantle of *mbaqanga*.⁵⁶ The only thing left to appropriate from it by this time was its ‘prestigious urban image’.⁵⁷ It is to this aspect of resistancelessness to which music historians may look to actually locate *mbaqanga*’s resistance. The impossibility of ‘African jazz’ without purposive accenting of either part of the term itself indexes its *musical* resistance to South Africa’s commercial hegemonies in the first decade of apartheid.

Ghetto Musicians and the Jazz Imperative – ‘provisional notes’

King Kong – an African Jazz Opera, was the most significant example of *mbaqanga*’s ambivalence, not least because it illustrated *mbaqanga*’s possibilities for musical translation into the medium of a jazz opera and other extended forms. When the jazz opera was staged in Britain (as *King Kong – all-African musical*), I have shown elsewhere in the dissertation how the production’s complicated story was interpreted as a compromise in jazz aesthetics, and was instead seen as an extension of ‘folk ideals’. The show’s renaming – from an African jazz opera to an all-African musical – is a timely reminder of how *mbaqanga*’s travel abroad, and especially to the United Kingdom, in significant ways echoed the ambivalences it had acquired in South Africa. I have also shown how its impact has been minimised by a strain of British jazz musicology that has (wrongly) written the *King Kongers* as ‘visitors’ whose music had negligible impact on the London jazz scene.⁵⁸ The *King Kong* hangover saw many of its members in voluntary ‘exile’ in London. Many chose ordinary employment; others chose music. Of the latter, Gwigwi Mrwebi was perhaps the most archetypal. Mrwebi arrived in London as *King Kong*’s alto saxophonist, second to Kippie Moeketsi on first alto sax and clarinet.

⁵⁶ Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁵⁷ Coplan, *In Township Tonight!* p. 227.

⁵⁸ Paul Oliver (ed.), ‘Introduction’ in *Black Music in Britain: essays on the Afro-Asian contribution to popular music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), pp. 3-15.

Records of Mrwebi's post-*King Kong* life are sketchy, although I will present evidence that he continued gigging around London, especially in Soho. He is absent from listed jazz recordings at this time, however, so it is difficult to ascertain what kind of jazz he played to make a living.

Two events return Mrwebi to the historian purview: Maxine McGregor's employment at The Transcription Centre, which was run by the Africanist, Dennis Duerden, and the release of his one and only album abroad, *Kwela by Gwigwi Mrwebi* ('77' Records, 1967). This chapter hones in on these events, arguing that they not only suggest the social and musical dynamics of South African jazz in 1960s London, but in fact shape these dynamics in significant ways. I examine, firstly, how Maxine McGregor's employment at The Transcription Centre – a company that made recordings of African plays, music and criticism for broadcasting inside newly independent African countries, whose offices were an important meeting point for African artists and intellectuals in London – and her introduction of South African jazz musicians to Dennis Duerden, contributed to mbaqanga's dissemination after *King Kong*. I discuss how this new mode of dissemination extended mbaqanga's reach to West Africa and, because of The Transcription Centre's links to the BBC, to the United Kingdom more broadly. Moreover, because South African jazz musicians in London remained a relatively small group, black and white Britons and musicians from elsewhere in Africa were often used to perform mbaqanga for broadcasting: availability and musical competence were more important than national origin. These two factors changed the sound of mbaqanga, such that a musical style that had once indexed the syncretism of South African popular music (marabi) and American popular music (swing jazz) now signalled an emergence of London's black diasporic jazzing subculture. Mbaqanga was extended to include calypso, highlife and Ghanaian rhythmic structures, such as *sibisa*, rather than American swing or Zulu *indlamu* stomp. Mbaqanga musicians, too, increasingly affiliated

with the carriers of these different musical traditions and came to an identification with them that was based not only on music but also on the fact of colonialism. Read as such, mbaqanga emerges as crucial in the stories of postwar black British cultural life told by scholars like Paul Fryer (1984),⁵⁹ Paul Gilroy⁶⁰ and Kwesi Owusu,⁶¹ whose focus is mostly on the larger Afro-Caribbean or West Indian communities of Britons.

The release of *Kwela by Gwigwi Mrwebi* in 1967, the second event in the chapter, is a study in British reception of South African jazz after *King Kong*. Contrapuntal to scholars such as Ian Carr⁶² and George McKay,⁶³ who attribute the importance of South African jazz to British jazz to the Blue Notes's arrival in 1965, *Kwela by Gwigwi Mrwebi* and its reception show that the vocabulary for understanding South African jazz remained dependent on previous interpretations of *King Kong* (in 1961). For example, while Mrwebi's album is called *Kwela*, the music within its sleeves is in fact mbaqanga. The music written *on* its sleeves, the album's liner notes in other words, is kwela. In an interview I conducted with Maxine McGregor, she speculated that kwela was used as a title because it was easier for the British to pronounce than mbaqanga. While this is a possibility, it is worth remembering that kwela was also one of the earliest manifestations of South African popular music in Britain.⁶⁴ Kwela, however, was also the predominant musical frame through which *King Kong* was explained by music critics to the British public. By 1967, therefore, kwela was a brand name for South African music and was used as such in this album (which was reissued as *Mbaqanga Songs* in 2006). To complicate the story further, the BBC African Writers Series used the occasion of the recording to interview Chris McGregor and, along with

⁵⁹ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power the history of black people in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

⁶⁰ Paul Gilroy, *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': the cultural politics of race and nation*. (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

⁶¹ Kwesi Owusu (ed.), *Black British Culture and Society: a text reader* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁶² Ian Carr, *Music Outside: contemporary jazz in Britain* 2nd Edition (London: Northway, 2008)

⁶³ George McKay, *Circular Breathing: the cultural politics of jazz in Britain* (Durham: Duke University Press)

⁶⁴ Lara Allen, 'Circuits of Recognition and Desire in the Evolution of Black South African Popular Music: the Career of the Penny Whistle' *SAMUS* 25, (2005), pp. 31-51.

Transcription Centre, they broadcasted *Kwela* in a programme aimed to profile mbaqanga. The presentation and reception of mbaqanga as kwela, I argue here, served to remove South African jazz from a desired jazzing tradition. Where in *King Kong* it had been domesticated as ‘folk’ music, the association with kwela here recast the style as generic South African popular music from ‘the townships’. Relations to African American jazz, and especially the socio-political importance the relationships with jazz had signified, were henceforth severed in popular and academic writings. Instead South African jazz was recorded as important in the formation of British jazz for its avant-garde stylistics, hence the veneration of the Blue Notes’s first recorded album in Britain, *Very Urgent* (1968), which they recorded as The Chris McGregor Group. Indeed, South African musicians themselves began to speak of mbaqanga only as a sign of musical nostalgia that commemorates ‘home’.

This was the jazz imperative at work. Gwigwi Mrwebi’s career after the 1967 recording demonstrates its injunctions, and my oral presentation will illustrate its role in the non-identity, rather than the reclamation of mbaqanga, of South African jazz in London.