

# **ARTISTS NEED**

## **A UNION**

— SAM NDABA

Apartheid has reduced a black musician to a beggar whereby the road to a job is obstructed with competition among musicians. One sees at recording companies queues of men pleading to be recorded, if not, looking for a job as a studio artist. Poverty keeps musicians worried about the next meal, rent, clothes for himself and his family and money to pay off the hire purchase musical instruments. There is seldom time to reflect upon the past and the future and whenever musicians meet in large numbers, it is normally at concerts or massive festivals where the mood is not conducive to any serious discussion. The talk is often about the whereabouts of the next gig, who to contact for which job, when is the SABC offering jobs for commercials, etc. There is no time to get together to discuss problems that have to be tackled by a union, let alone the problem of realising the Freedom Charter. In most cases bands split within two years of their formation. Musicians often end up frustrated and standing at factory gates for jobs. A few band 'make it'. These are those bands that master the trick of keeping the master content by churning out the 'right sound and beat'

Efforts have been made in the past to bring Black South African artists together into a united National Force but were not successful. In the late 50's and early 60's we had a cultural centre in Johannesburg, the Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC), the offices of Union Artists, the only coherent body which represented artists then but which for one reason or the other died in the early 60's.

Since then nothing concrete has come up which stands for the unity of artists and articulates their aspirations, frustrations and objectives. The coloniser has taken the land, exploits our wealth and labour, calls the political tune (to some extent) but has failed to colonise our cultural heritage. Having realised that, his next move was to arrest the culture so that it advances no further and in its place popularise western (mainly American) culture among the oppressed. This has to some extent succeeded as witnessed in the entry into our society of American style clothes that went with gangsterism, popularised by Mafia, El Capon movies in the 50's and 60's. This went together with Jazz, and different periods in the US reflected themselves in South Africa in clothes, music, theatre, , etc. For four decades we have witnessed a proliferation of western cultural styles and values in all forms.

The Nationalist government through the myriad of laws has closed all avenues of free musical expression. This they have done by excluding any type of music that went against their interest of perpetuating white supremacy from the radio and now TV through the Broederbond-controlled South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). Faced with this state of affairs recording companies, capitalist owned and quick-profit oriented, became willing partners in the campaign to throttle the black song. Only music that set the nation dancing and the most banal songs were recorded and popularised. Choral music that had anything but the reality of our situation was

not accepted. Simultaneously with the above-mentioned events by the end of the 50's, the boers realised the foolishness of their policy of prohibiting Africans from drinking western liquor, although there was also the frustrating question of their inability to tax illicit brews that serves as an alternative, opened the door widely to the African.

This was an act which served the system in two ways:

1. The capitalist made huge profits as well as the government which gave itself the sole right of operating bars and bottle stores in townships.
2. The black masses happily drank, openly danced to the state-controlled music, went to church on Sunday and reported to the boss on Monday with a legal hangover.

## **STRUGGLING MAN**

To drink, host and attend parties over the weekends the worker had to stay employed. To relieve himself from frustrations stemming from exploitation and the futility of the vicious circle he found himself in, the bottle and the noises from gramophones and radios was his only solace, and finally the priest told him to pay his tithe to the church, serve his boss well and look for a better life after he dies. That was and still is the vicious circle, complete and serving to dull the consciousness of the masses regarding their surroundings, future and plight.

Let us, then, look at the position of the musicians. Throughout the past four decades, bands have sprung up and disappeared. A few made their mark on the scene and are remembered mainly through their records. The most famous of the early period were the Dark City Sisters and individuals like Lemmy "Special" Mabaso and several others. A few "flew out of the cuckoo's nest" like the Masekelas, Brands, Gwangwas, Semenyas, Mbulis, Makebas and countless others. Some like Kippie Moeketsi, Zakes Nkosi, Ben "Satch" Masinga remained behind to face a slow death in the bantustans and ghettos of apartheid South Africa. Others emerged in the 60's and 70's while some are emerging presently. All these groups and personalities have more than once been exploited by recording companies, agents, managers, producers and promoters. The practice still continues and it is still difficult for musicians to unite.

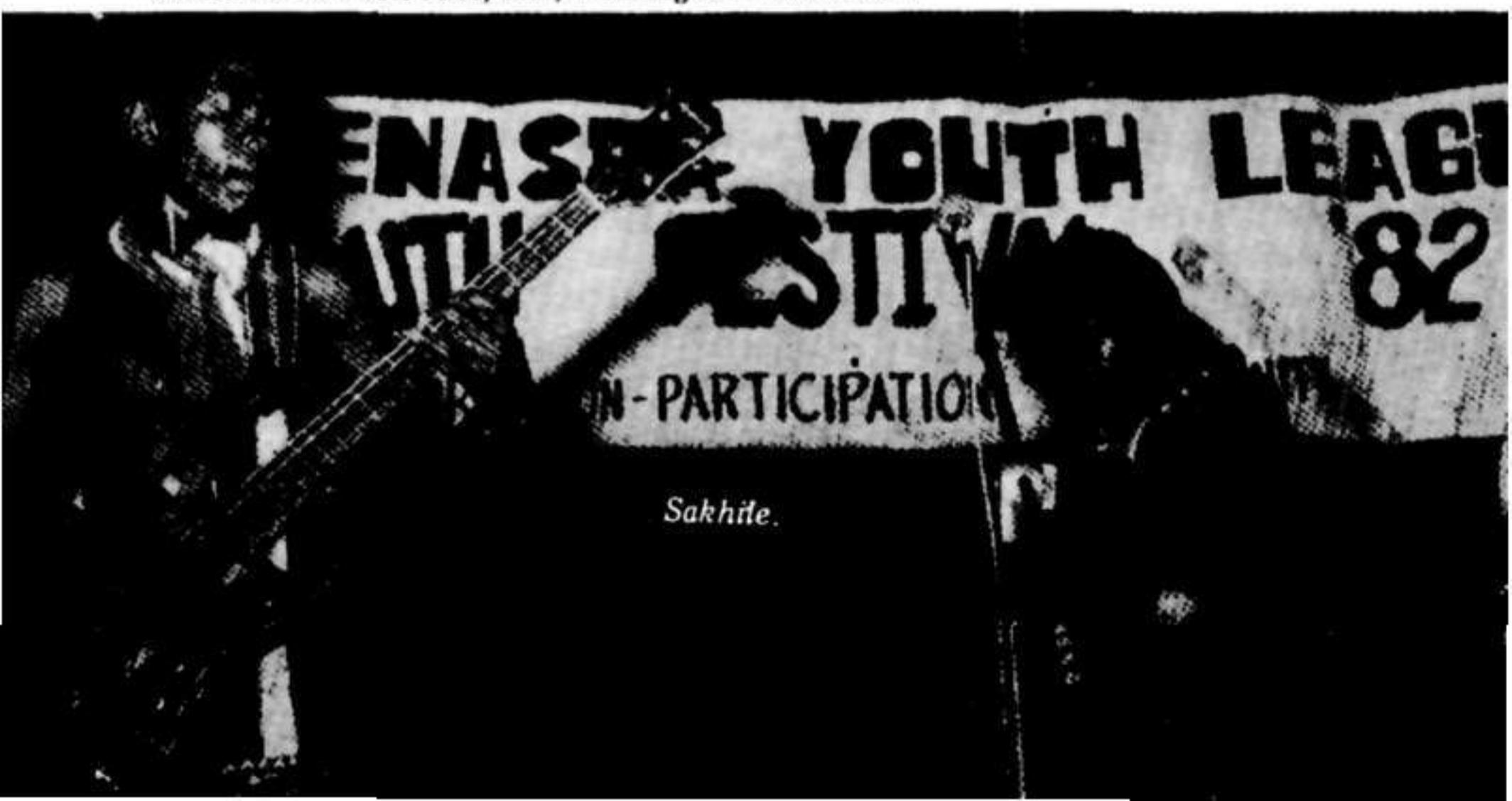
Harari, which adopted the name after playing at Harari township during racist Smith's rule, comes from the stock of bands of the 60s which fused American soul with township beats. Most of them like the Teenage Lovers, Flaming Souls, Inne Laws, Movers, Young Ones, of the 'monkey' jive era died in the seventies with the change of American sound. Harari, formerly known as The Beaters, moved from soul to Britain-American rock (woodstock era), Afro-rock (Osibisa influence) and presently a mixture of Afro-rock and disco.

Galla, a top recording company in South Africa, went on a massive recording-publicity campaign for Harari. The band got white management and is solidly on top, resting assured of airplay, stable income... reason? They keep the nation dancing and also advertise capitalist products. When asked about the band's future, the leader of the band, Siphon Mabuse, answered that Harari's dream was a trip to the US. They did get their trip to Uncle Sam's country but the plight of their own country and people remained the same — colonised and oppressed. The only competition Harari faces is from groups that play 'crossover' like Juluka, Steve Kekane and others.

**THEATRE SUPPRESSED**

'Quality' theatre left our shores for Britain and USA in the early 60's (King Kong, Sponono) and the vacuum was filled by boring, drab third rate productions. The advent of the Black Consciousness Movement brought a sudden upsurge of radical theatre with students mainly taking part. One should not get the illusion that there were no obstacles in the way of this new development, harassment, detentions, censorship were rife. The demise of this era saw the advent of two-man plays popularised by Winston Ntshona and John Kani (*Sizwe Banzi is dead*). The themes were mainly the satirical portrayal of the black reality. In a bid to counter this development the government through its administration boards demanded to see and approve scripts before they are put up in government halls in the townships which serve as the only venues for theatre, concerts, bioscopes, boxing and some entertainment activities. This is how radical theatre was pushed off the township stages after which plays like *School girl and the Taxi Driver* served as the only source of entertainment. Radical theatre found home in liberal centres in the cities like the Market Theatre in Johannesburg, Baxter and People's Space theatres in Cape Town, etc., and also at liberal universities. But here the theatre is far from the working masses, due to cost, and is patronised by white and black intellectuals and students.

More than once, newspapers have carried stories of actors taken for a ride, left stranded on tours by producers. Worse still are stories of actresses having to use their bodies to get part in plays. On the whole one gets a picture of general disorganisation, depravity, insecurity among workers connected with theatre. Phoenix Players, a centre of actors, is and has been a place of exploitation. It has been run by one Ian Benhardt, a white businessman who has made so much that he is planning to emigrate to the USA. Efforts have been made to bring actors together to form a union. Some have had a temporary success, like the South African Black Theatre Union of the Black Consciousness era before the government clampdown. On the other hand white artists are protected by the law. There are organisations like the South African Music Association Pact, etc., securing their interests.



*Sakhile.*

Painters, sculptors and others are wholly dependent on the galleries which practice daylight robbery. The gallery owners pays the artist whatever fee he seems fit for the individual art item and in turn makes high profits on the sale of the items either in his gallery or in overseas exhibitions. Not united and unprotected, they get ripped-off everyday.

Nevertheless, there do exist bands that pose a threat to the system. There are also hosts of individuals and musicians who are part of this movement. In nearly every township there is a cultural group connected to a church, a youth club or autonomous. These are centres of experimentation where alternative theatre abounds, different art forms are learnt and more often than not you will be met by the sound of acoustic guitars, tamborines, congas, etc., accompanying voices singing an original song. You might find a well-equipped amateur band, a solo guitarist, a poetry group. The inclination is towards Bob Marley, original catchy tunes, freedom songs, traditional songs and poetry. It is some of these groups that appear at commemoration services, celebrations and political meetings to render a song, a poem, or a drama. Also there are the other professional groups which are patronised by intellectuals, students, the white left, etc. The number of these bands is not so big but they manage to survive as professional bands by playing at small clubs, universities, colleges, liberal theatres and centres (Dia-konia, Open schools). Some of these bands which emerged after 1976 are the AK-47s, Afrozania, Malopoets, Tou, Malimu, Badiri, Sakhile, Splash (a reggae group whose two musicians were recently sentenced to an effective four year term under the so-called Internal Security Act) and others. Also there is the third category which is comprised of recordable groups like Juluka, Joy, Steve Kekana and other Mbaqanga groups which have from time to time performed at concerts organised to raise funds for the cause of the oppressed.

Groups have been brought together during the Fattis and Monis and Wilson Rowntree strikes to raise funds for striking workers, and indeed it was gratifying to see these groups coming forward knowing fully well the likely reaction of the security police. Joy, the female vocal trio refused to perform for the "boys on the border" when asked



to do so by the notorious South African Defence Force during their tour of Namibia. Shortly thereafter the SABC stopped playing *Paradise Road* over the air and a feeble explanation was given, implying the existence of subversive undertones in the song. The song had long reached the number one spot on the ratings charts and was well within the second gold disc mark. All these groups, including those that have long been used by the recording companies need to come together into a strong anti-colonial and anti-imperialist union of South African musicians and artists.



*Kippie Moeketsi.*

### **CULTURE NEEDS UNITY**

The Federal Union of Black Artists (FUBA), which was built with Anglo-American Corporation and other allied capitalist organisations' funds has always been and still is that glamorous institution that produces different calibres of artists, as a recruiting centre for the Americans and acts as a gallery for its rich patrons. Early this year FUBA hosted an exhibition of paintings of some of American and European artists at the posh home of Harry Oppenheimer's daughter, Mary, in Lower Houghton. South African artists did not take part and then the director was asked for an explanation by the press. He replied that black artists are difficult to reach (meaning that they are not at the phone, live far from towns, etc.) What a feeble excuse for class discrimination!

The Music, Drama, Art and Literature Institute (MDALI), which fancies itself as the messiah of South African cultural workers has so far managed to antagonise a lot of artists with its race exclusiveness and philosophy of narrow black consciousness. Of the two organisations, MDAI is the oldest, coming from the early black consciousness days and could easily have gained respectability and support from the community at large and membership from the artists in particular. But MDAI, like an old spider, sits in its web in the dark corner refusing to move out into the light. The organisation is led by Vusi Nkumane, as its chairman, a former PAC Robben Island prisoner and Zakes Mofokeng as general-secretary.

Progressive cultural groups like Mpumalanga Arts in Pietermaritzburg are found in various parts of our country. Yet, the establishment of a single union of artists, uniting all the artists throughout the length and breadth of our country, still remains a pressing need if our artists are to offer any meaningful opposition to apartheid and imperialist exploitation.