



## MUSIC AND CENSORSHIP IN SOUTH AFRICA

This article is an edited and much shortened version of the paper by Ian Kerkhof *Music and South Africa: A Study in Censorship and Repression*. Readers interested in a copy of the full paper should write to RIXAKA Editorial.

South Africa is a country ruled by force of arms; a country where the internal order is based on exploitation and racist oppression; a country which extends state terror across international borders into neighbouring states; a country stifled by a welter of legislation inhibiting personal freedoms and denying people the most basic rights of existence. It is hardly surprising then, that South Africa enjoys one of the most draconian systems of censorship ever devised. It is the purpose of this paper to briefly explain the precise nature of censorship under apartheid and explore the implications this has for the production and consumption of music in South Africa.

### Censorship: 3 Forms

In South Africa censorship operates clearly on three levels. i) state, ie. legislation-punishment ii) capital, ie. consumerism-marketing and iii) self-censorship as a result of i) and ii). The way these general characteristics combine under apartheid give the system its particularly intense quality, so that for example, the definition between censorship by the state and by capital is blurred within the operation of state-controlled "commercial" media which act as effective agents of censorship for both interests.

### State Censorship

The law under which publications, films, records, public entertainments and other "objects" are subjected to the scrutiny of the state is the Publications Act, no. 42 of 1974, and its subsequent amendments.

The introductory paragraph of this law states that in its application "the constant endeavour of the population of the Republic of South Africa to uphold a Christian way of life shall be recognised". It goes on to provide for a number of committees whose function is to "decide in the first instance whether publications or objects, films or public entertainments are *undesirable* or not".

The selection of these committees is done by the Publications Board (itself selected by the State President), based on lists of nominees chosen by either the Minister of Home Affairs or the State President. The Act entitles members of the public, customs officers, police or even the State President to request the Directorate of Publications to arrange for a committee to examine any publication (or object, or record, or film, or graphic artwork, or photograph, or public entertainment) for undesirability. In practice this means that a single complaint from the most extreme right wing element necessitates the reviewing of a publication.

### Kinds of Banning

There are three different kinds of legislative banning. Firstly, the committees can declare a publication (and if it is a periodical, all future issues of it) "undesirable". This means that the publication may not be further imported into South Africa, or produced within South Africa, or brought or sold or displayed in South Africa.

Secondly, the committees can declare a publication "undesirable for possession". This goes a step further and prevents a person from retaining a publication which they had purchased or otherwise acquired before it was banned. Penalties for the transgressions of this clause are harsh.

Thirdly, the committees can prohibit the importation of all publications published by a particular firm (say all records released by Recommended) *regardless of individual merit!* Furthermore they may prohibit the importation of all publications *dealing with any special subject!*

Given the incredibly high percentage of publications banned in South Africa over the last decade (an average of 60% of publications submitted!) this law effectively means that South Africans would need to constantly read editions of the government Gazette to ensure they are not inadvertent law-breakers.

Recent legislation (Publications Amendment Act of May 1985) allows any publication seized by police or police agents to be legally "freezed" where it was found for a period of four working days, whilst it is submitted to a committee for a decision. Should the committee, within the four day period, decide that the publication is undesirable the possessor would be guilty of a crime under the Act, despite the fact that the publication was *not banned on the day of confiscation!*

### Censorship "Relaxation"

A great deal of hullabaloo and noise was made recently in the white-dominated commercial press regarding the "relaxation" of censorship and the accompanying flood of "un-bannings" of various publications. A closer look at this "liberalisation" reveals a more insidious process at work.

On the one hand this development centred around the unbanning of publications associated with the "counter-culture" of Europe and America of the sixties and seventies. Drugs and sexuality became available to the South African public as consumer subjects. The screens were suddenly filled with films like Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice, Satyricon, The Nightporter, Easy Rider, etc. Bookshops could now stock the Kama Sutra, including the illustrated edition!



STEVIE WONDER: in a move of crass stupidity, the SABC banned his music after he dedicated his award to Nelson Mandela.

On the other hand, a number of local texts, mainly by black authors, usually dating from the fifties and early sixties were unbanned. Although some of these unbanned texts have considerable cultural merit, it is very evident that only those works whose content was not considered threatening to state power were unbanned. This tactic is undoubtedly allied to the more general apartheid strategy of creating a black middle class economic and cultural zone as a buffer between white power and the impoverished black working class.

At the same time there has been no noticeable decrease in either the percentage, or the actual number of publications being banned. The claims for liberalisation serve merely to mask the changing composition of what is being regularly banned in South Africa. There has been a drastic increase in the banning and suppression of popular and democratic publications with a clear political message in the fields of books, records, film, video and even graphic art.

### Penalties

Arrests and convictions in terms of censorship legislation occur with distressing regularity. We list only a few of the more extreme cases: Jacob Mashigo received five years imprisonment in August 1983 for possessing a cassette with *one song* by Miriam Makeba and Harry Belafonte. Thabo Moloi received two years imprisonment for possessing a cassette with a speech by ANC President Oliver Tambo, interspersed with Freedom songs. Derek Tsietsi Makomoren received five years imprisonment in January this year for possessing a 60 minute cassette with the music of the ANC Cultural Ensemble Amandla on it.

In 1980 two musicians of a reggae band called Splash were sentenced to five years im-

prisonment each for singing a song by Steel Pulse called Tribute to the Martyrs wherein Nelson Mandela was mentioned.

These are just some of the cases that have reached newsprint — the daily fines and short sentences go unrecorded, but occur nonetheless.

### Radio

Before moving on to capital censorship, it is important to look at the nature of state-controlled radio in South Africa — a "grey area" where censorship is doubly enforced, both directly as a result of government policy, and indirectly as a result of capital marketing.

All in all the South African Broadcasting Company transmits 13 internal, and one external services. These are:

The English Service and the Afrikaans Service — entirely state-subsidised and non-commercial. For white listeners

The essential strategy behind this enormous, unwieldy structure is the division of black South Africans into language-based "tribal" entities. The overall policy ensures the segregation of information and culture on the airwaves. No black music is ever played on "white" radio, although the reverse is not true as the state promotes "white-culture" in the black communities.

Within the six black stations a strictly enforced language code prevails, whereby for example, a Zulu song can only be played on Radio Zulu and no music in other indigenous languages is ever played on Radio Zulu. In this manner, spurious ethnic divisions are fostered and the population is denied the common culture which is the heritage of the combination of all strands. Needless to say, iron control is exerted on news and all topical coverage.



**SPIRITS REJOICE:** groups whose stature makes it hard to ignore.

and broadcast nationwide.

Springbok Radio and Radio 5 — commercial stations, white and bi-lingual (Afrikaans and English). Also nationwide.

Radio Good Hope, Radio Highveld and Radio Port Natal — these are regional, bi-lingual, commercial white stations.

Radio Zulu, Radio Xhosa, Radio South-Sotho, Radio North-Sotho, Radio Tswana and Radio Venda-Tsonga — these are commercial, regional stations aimed at black South Africans.

Radio RSA — this is the external service of the SABC, broadcasting on short wave in 11 languages for 211 hours a week at a cost of R16 million a year, funded directly from the taxpayer and not from the general SABC coffers.

### Form

Form too is strictly controlled and incorporated into state strategy. Mbaqanga, initially a people's music spawned in the townships and ghettos was rapidly taken up by radio and record companies who robbed the form of its original meanings and associations.

It soon became clear to musicians that their music would only be recorded and played on radio if the lyrics wholly avoided community issues and social comment and conformed to the banal patterns required by the authorities. Through the sixties the Mbaqanga form came to voice the most reactionary and negative aspects of township life — tribalism, sexism, crime, etc.

In the seventies and continuing into the eighties however, the form was rescued by the wave of highly politicised music that emerged initially from black consciousness circles and which was characterised by close attention to formal innovation coupled with relevant texts. Thus a vital and exciting cultural alternative has thrived — recorded only with great difficulty and not heard at all on radio!

### Banning from Airplay

Statistics relating to the amount of music banned for airplay by the SABC are unavailable. It is conservatively estimated by sources within the radio services that these run into many hundreds of times the number banned by legislation. Decisions as to what may or may not be played on radio are made by a secret all-white panel, only one name of which has become public — Peter Human, director of the pop music programme of Radio 5.

The banning of a record from airplay effectively cuts it off from a mass audience and ensures its commercial non-viability. Thus in these cases the state is obviated from having to resort to legislation, and music taste is to a large extent controlled.

When Juluka's single *Afrika* was banned for airplay on Radio 5 an interview with the afore-mentioned Human led to a revelation that a staggering 96% of all local music was rejected for airplay on Radio 5! The most recent well-publicised instance of radio air-time banning has been complete banning on all music by Stevie Wonder following his dedication of an Oscar award to Nelson Mandela.

While these highly publicised bannings generally result in more focussing on the artist in question, it must be pointed out that these are the exceptions to the rule. Essentially the effect of the air-time bannings serve to prevent the bulk of South Africans from hearing, or even hearing about, music from within

and without South Africa which is formally or contextually progressive. Included under this air ban are virtually every single exiled South African musician, thus the situation arises today when most South Africans do not even know of the existence of such important figures as Mongezi Feza, Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana, Johny Dyani, Julian Bahula, Pinese Saul ....

the two giants were overtly hostile to each other, a joint venture into ownership of the enormously popular budget-priced label Music for Pleasure resulted in much closer co-operation. The extent of their monopolisation extends to every facet of music in the consumer society from instruments, through hardware (radio, record players), software (records, tapes), distri-



People's alternative to the racist culture of death: AMANDLA!

### Capital Censorship

The history of the recording industry in South Africa is characterised by ruthless monopolisation of ownership and distribution, as well as the systematic exploitation of both musicians and workers. South Africa's R100 million a year record industry is virtually controlled by two companies, Gallo (Africa) Ltd and EMI-Brigadiers. While up to 1978

tribution, promotion, publishing, and even performance (clubs, halls, stadiums, etc) — they have always been in a position to dictate to the musicians as to the nature of their music's form and content.

A practice more the rule than the exception right into the seventies, was the denial of copyright to musicians on their own songs. Flat studio fees for song recordings were

paid, sometimes hardly covering the taxi fare to the studio. Spokes Mashiyane and Lemmy "Special" Mabaso, popular pennywhistle performers of the fifties whose singles sold in the hundreds of thousands, were paid rates of between 5/- and £5 per recording session and never saw a cent in royalties!

White performers did much to worsen the lot of the black performers when in the late fifties they formed whites-only unions and gradually put an end to what limited performing possibilities black musicians had up to then enjoyed at venues in so-called "white" areas (ie. urban areas). This racist pressure brought to bear on a whole generation of great jazz musicians was one of the major reasons for the decline of South African Jazz through the sixties, as many important figures went into exile, leaving others such as the legendary Kippie Moeketsi to languish at home until eventual poverty-stricken death.

The worker within the music industry has meanwhile suffered the standard factory floor exploitation that is part and parcel of South Africa's racist cheap labour system. Workers in the Gallo factories particularly, have been amongst the most poorly paid in any sector of the manufacturing industry — as witnessed by the long record of industrial action at the company's various plants.

### Censorship and Ideology

Given the nature of the social control provided for in South African legislation, as well as the established partnership between capital and the state, it is clear that the record com-

panies must demand of the musicians that their output be undisturbing to the regime. Anything else would risk running foul of the law and might also disrupt profits, (as well as the cosy relationship between record companies and state-controlled mass media).

This means that the companies are constantly involved in a process of censure, ensuring that what is recorded is divorced from the ugly realities of South African social conditions, divorced from the real aims and aspirations of the communities from whence the musicians come, and of course totally divorced from remotely political, let alone revolutionary, content.

At the same time, a deprecation of locally generated forms is actively enforced and the musicians are constantly pushed towards copying the prevalent European and especially American trends.

The local forms which are pressed are marketed ethnically into artificial categories such as "Zulu jive", "Sotho Soul", etc. This process is well illustrated in the work of the great blind singer Babsy Mlangeni, who like most black South Africans is conversant in many languages, and will shift comfortably from SePedi to SeTswana to English to Zulu, etc, in a day's recording session. When the tracks are released however, they have been strictly segregated and compiled on record as *Babsy Mlangeni Sings Sotho Vocal* or *Babsy Mlangeni Sings Xhosa Jive*, etc, etc. Thus the marketing principles are totally imbued with the regimes ideological instruments of national oppression.

### Self-Censorship: The Response of the Musicians

There have been three broad responses by musicians to the censorship which pervades music production in the country. The first, and most resolute, has been flagrant defiance of the state. In most cases those that have shouldered this responsibility, incumbent upon all those who live under the conditions of oppression that characterise our country, have been made to pay dearly for their stand. Exile, loss of income, state and police harassment, black-listing from the recording studios bear witness to this fact.

Of course, the second group of musicians, who have succumbed and sold out to the system, have reaped the short-term rewards. For all their silk shirts, long Cadillacs and trips to the States, their "contribution" to South African culture will be forgotten as soon as next month's transient "hit" is out.

A third group however, of political pragmatists (some would say opportunists) have chosen to compromise by recording the bland music that pays the rent while using the popular benefit concerts as a platform for demonstrating their awareness and support for the struggle for democracy in South Africa.

Despite the veritable armoury of means at its disposal, the apartheid state has never been, and will never be able to stem the ever-growing tide of resistance to it, including cultural resistance. But censorship and repression will confront South African musicians until the day that the apartheid structures are wholly dismantled.

