

Revolutionary Song

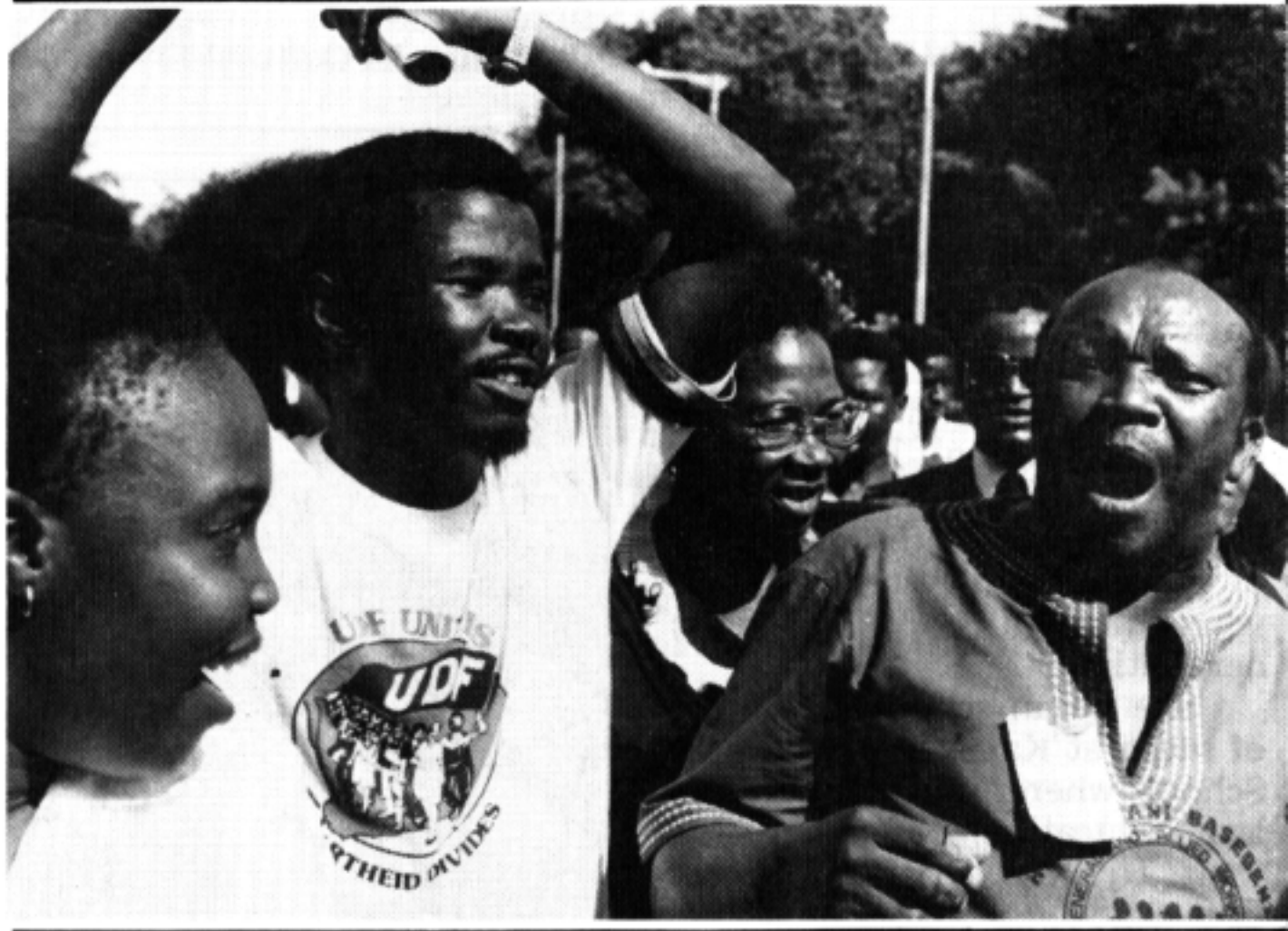
(A letter from Gugulethu)

Last week we were in a funeral and sang revolutionary songs. Mello-Yellos and khwela-khwelas were there in the distance (and there was that expectation that we might be fired at) but we continued singing, anyway, with our fists stuck into the air. When the coffins, which had been draped with the black, green and gold colours of liberation were lowered, one of my friends asked why we call these songs revolutionary songs. Did this mean that all other songs are reactionary? Should they be discarded and banned from our communities? Our reply is no!

In order to clarify this point, we shall briefly deal with the role of music as an art form in general and then go on to look at the specific role of revolutionary music in a society of oppressed and fighting people. In this way we can attempt to bring out the specific features of music which is qualified as revolutionary music.

Music, which is one of the oldest and most developed art forms, is no more than a means of communication. People, singularly or collectively, convey their feelings to society through music. That is why it is possible today to have a song for practically any situation or occasion. People who are not gifted at public speaking tend to be more comfortable singing songs.

Unlike a "dry" speech - - and some speeches can be dry - - music entertains in the bargain. In it, you don't only have lyrics. There is also a brilliant combination of voices of different pitch. These are voices of people, at that given moment, who hold similar views about specific issues. They are brought together by this exercise which also allows them to communicate an important message. The entertaining element means that a very broad section of the community listens



Patriots singing at the funeral of Comrade Moses Mabhida, Maputo, March 1986. Photographer — DAVID BROWN

to this message.

Unfortunately, the entertainment element in music has in the main been used for exploitation in our oppressed societies. In the United States and Britain, the recording industry was, until the recent world recession, one of the most flourishing. This is partly due to the emergence of discos and the technical improvement in musical and recording facilities that resulted in good "quality" sound and the subsequent demand. Entertainment then, has been over-emphasised at the expense of communication. Finally, what should have been educative, communicative and in tandem with the wishes and aspirations of a community becomes vulgarised and denuded of content. If it can bring in the dollars, then it's all right. Furthermore, the musician in these countries cannot escape the stranglehold of the ruling classes. It is exactly this type of musician who cannot understand the meaning of the cultural boycott against racist South Africa.

Our approach and attitude to culture and its role in society, be-

cause it wants the artist to be at the centre of the changing of things, becomes revolutionary. The corresponding songs we sing, in this struggle for change, can be nothing else but revolutionary songs.

Culture, the "cumulative responses of a people to their political, economic and social environment. . . which have resulted in stabilised behavioural patterns", becomes revolutionary when it really acquires a popular character and is used for the furtherance of the aims and objectives of those forces in society that stand for social progress; when it serves the transformation of society, the substitution of retrograde and obsolete socio-economic relations and traditions with new ones. It is essential that it be genuinely popular, that is, it must be the culture of the majority for it to be revolutionary.

REVOLUTIONARY CULTURE

If this, then, is what revolutionary culture is supposed to be, let us look at our revolutionary songs and see whether they satisfy these requirements.

*"Ityala labo
Ityala labo linzima
Ityala labo linzima
Bazoyitheth'inyani ngesib-
hamu*

*Bathumeleni
Bathumeleni ngoMkhonto
Bazoyitheth'inyani ngesib-
hamu".*

Here you have an unequivocal expression of what the masses think of the racists' crimes - - and what should be done to redress these wrongdoings. The might of Umkhonto We Sizwe is invoked as the final arbitrator when the South African Nuremberg comes.

SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE: NELSON MANDELA

*" Mandela Sereletsa
Mandela Sereletsa
Mandela Sereletsa
Sereletsa sechaba sa hesu*

*Marumo re itswaretse
I sale o refa
Rintse retlabanela
Tlabanela sechaba sa hesu."*

That symbol of resistance, Nelson Mandela, is here used by the popular masses to express their concern for the African Nation which is menaced by possible extermination caused by the regime's policy of genocide.

Characteristic of all these songs, the one above especially, is the determination to continue the struggle and bring about meaningful socio-economic and political changes. There is also the unmistakable commitment to the armed struggle and the confidence that this armed struggle shall emerge victorious.

The revolutionary songs, it must be stressed, are in themselves a very powerful mobilising instrument. When the morale is low, they serve as a booster; when disillusionment sets in

and threatens discouragement and disunity, these songs restore the confidence of the people. It is in these songs that the people are bouyed to a deeper understanding of the righteousness of their struggle.

To answer the question raised at the beginning, again we say other songs are not reactionary. One has to commend the artistry of our musicians, at home and abroad, who have expressed the hopes and aspirations - and anguish - of our people through their music. These songs, this music, speaks to us about the beauty of our land, about what has been done to the people of South Africa, both black and white. This music says to us that, were it not for a greedy racist clique, this country would reach new heights, the culture of our people would hold its own in the cultures of the world - and enrich them too. These songs, in a word, mean that South Africa must be changed, now!

Cradock, 1985. Matthew Goniwe at the microphone.

On the 27th of June 1985 Matthew Goniwe, Fort Calata, Sparrow Mkhonto and Sicelo Mhlawuli were brutally murdered by apartheid death squads.

