

footnote to the paper “The Political Situation,” namely that Rhodes (and the Afrikaner Bond, then his allies) were so worried by this particular “broadside” (co-authored by Olive and Cronwright and delivered with characteristic vigour by the latter) that they despatched the youthful Jan Smuts to Kimberley to answer the Cronwright-Schreiners’ allegations. Smuts spoke under the auspices of the “De Beers Political Organization.” According to Cronwright (*Life* 276), “the hall was not half filled, the chairman went to sleep, and Smuts went on [. . .].” Cronwright further wryly notes Smuts’s subsequent “political back somersault [. . .] some three months later, when the [Jameson] Raid occurred; [Smuts . . .] became violently hostile to Rhodes, De Beers and the ‘Capitalists’ and went to the Transvaal where he became State Attorney to Oom Paul.”

I have drawn attention to this episode as an instance of the historical subtext to Schreiner’s writings, a sense one gets again and again in this fascinating collection of a radically intelligent, highly individual mind addressing issues of urgent national and international importance. One senses the urgency, but one also senses the often bitter aftertaste: so much passion, so much intelligence, yet so little (apparent) effect – “the great world rolls on and *you* cannot reshape it” (Gray 212). And yet Schreiner’s “striving and striving” did not – ultimately – end in nothing. On a more positive note, the striving ended, rather, in the writings collected in *Words in Season*: in season at the time of writing, in season as they live again a century later. And Schreiner “ends” as a living (and lively) voice “treasured up” in her writings for a life beyond [her physical] life.

Paul Walters

Michael Titlestad, *Making the Changes: Jazz in South African Literature and Reportage*. Pretoria/Leiden: University of South Africa Press, 2004. ISBN: 978-1868-882915. Pbk. xvi, 275 pp.

Marabi Nights, Merry Blackbirds, Epistles and Exiles

At the end of *But Beautiful* – a 1991 collection of imaginative improvisations on the lives of great mid-twentieth-century American jazzmen – Geoff Dyer quotes a thought experiment by George Steiner. In *Real Presences* (1989), the intellectual asks us to “imagine a society in which all talk about the arts, music and literature is prohibited,” where only the real thing, the act of creation itself, is permitted. In this “republic for writers and readers,” there would be no secondary, parasitic discussion about the latest exhibitions or concerts, no more essays debating the finer points of Hamlet’s madness. Instead, in Steiner’s vision

this would constitute an ideal artistic climate where the columns of reviewers and professional opinion makers would be abandoned in favour of listings of coming events, all other commentary rendered redundant since, he maintains, the experience of any genuine work of art also constitutes the best critique in and of itself, and the continuum of which it is part. Yet while he dismisses this utopia – “the fantasy I have sketched is only that” – Dyer uses it as a starting point to explore a real place that for much of the century “has provided a global home for millions of people. It is a republic with a simple name: jazz” (183–84).

From the writings of W. E. B. Du Bois to George Clinton’s mothership, the idea of the sprawling, uncategorisable family of musics that grew out of the blues as transmitter and repository of the most important cultural energies is ever present in African American literature. For James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and many writers, the marriage of European and African musical languages – or rather, series of marriages, not only in the American South, but also in Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil, and Africa itself – is the prime conduit of an awareness of the diaspora, the unwritten, unwritable history which most profoundly embodies the formidable permutations and complications of the black Atlantic. As Dyer comments, simply trying to track the lines of influence and borrowing from jazz wellsprings like Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk or Charlie Parker must inevitably lead to a kind of conceptual meltdown: “If we drew lines between all available songs in a kind of flow diagram of homages and tributes the paper would soon become impenetrably black, the meaning of the diagram obscured by the quantity of information it would have to convey” (187). Nonetheless, the fascination of trying to model the operations and transmission of music and to link its modes with those of writing remains, and has produced in Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s work the basis of a theory of African American literature, evolved from within. His account of “Signifyin(g)” shows the creative possibilities open to musicians and writers for whom a whole corpus of self-aware musical and verbal riffs is immediately present, embodied, quite literally, at their fingertips.

Yet what happens when the notion of jazz as an imaginary homeland is relocated to the South Africa of the 1950s, the “Fabulous Decade” during which the shebeens of Sophiatown and the offices of *Drum* magazine provided a place where fiction, reportage and an emergent form of African jazz famously, even mythically, cross-fertilised each other? Here Steiner’s formulation takes on a starkly literal dimension for African artists, for whom the possibilities of any kind of expression – creative or critical – were steadily closed down as the Nationalist government’s legislative engine gathered momentum, a political project that would manipulate the idea of ‘traditional’ African music for political ends and eventually debase the linguistic currency of the word ‘homeland’ itself. The process is doubly complicated when one attempts to map a “moment of the boomerang” more joyous and unpredictable than that which Sartre spoke of in his preface to Fanon (20): the process whereby jazz “returned” to Africa over

more than a hundred years, via performing troupes in the nineteenth century, through mechanical reproduction in the twentieth, always aided by the immense cultural capital of successful African American artists. Yet if, as Dyer suggests, the entire corpus of jazz criticism could disappear without any great loss to the body of work itself, what does seem to merit an examination in the South African context is how writers used the possibilities suggested by the voracious, relentlessly hybrid form that was jazz to negotiate the pressurised urban experience of the 1950s, finding in the soundtrack of Johannesburg (and later the music of exile in clubs of Europe and New York) a way of exploring a deeply contradictory sense of the modern, and of maintaining threads of continuity between this earlier, failed African renaissance and the protest literature of the 1970s onwards.

In a finely detailed survey of jazz in South African literature and reportage, *Making the Changes* (2004), Michael Titlestad suggests that "each era in South African literature has discovered (often, we might argue, invented) the jazz it needed" (xv) – from the early twentieth-century *marabi* and the 1940s slick "concert and dance" routines, via street corner *mbaqanga* to the uncompromising bebop-inflected aesthetic of the 1950s onwards. He also suggests how it offers a means of tracing musical lines, improvised identities and literary trajectories that must always exceed or evade the demands on the political on the aesthetic. The title of Titlestad's book, suggested by Dollar Brand's 1967 suitably nimble and ironic poem "Africa, Music and Show Business: an analytical survey in twelve tones plus finale," suggests how the lingo for bebop's complex harmonic progression effortlessly supersedes the inevitable overtones of social and political transition. Or as more plain-spoken Albie Sachs put it in his well-known 1989 paper expressing impatience with the solemn formulas of commitment expected of writers, South Africa's distinctive jazz idiom "bypasses, overwhelms, ignores apartheid, establishes its own space" (1990: 21).

How then is this space imagined, constructed (and inevitably traduced) by writers of the period? What are its parameters, its relationship to an increasingly segregated cityscape, and how can it be approached in a way that avoids the essentialist clichés about roots and rhythm which mar so much writing about this music? As a musician famed for bridging the sounds of Cape carnivals, Johannesburg dance halls and the pianism of Ellington and Monk (his mentor and formative stylistic influence respectively), a Jazz Epistle who pioneered, with Hugh Masekela and Kippie "Charlie Parker" Moeketsi, the first 'modern' jazz in South Africa, it seems that the figure of Dollar Brand (later Abdullah Ibrahim) emerges as the most accessible "standard" for exploring representations of jazz in South African literature. His musical trajectory provides an entrance to a shared cultural vocabulary which sustained tenuous links among the generation of black writers dispersed in the 1960s, joining a multitude of other musical practices which played their ultimately incalculable

part in effecting, as this pre-eminent jazz ambassador described South Africa's transition in a recent documentary, "A Revolution in Four Part Harmony."

He wrote as he spoke, in a brisk tempo with a rhythm in every sentence. He attacked the typewriter like a piano. Our readers loved 'Matshikese,' as we called it, which was the way they talked and thought, beating in time with the jazz within them.

(Sampson 27)

At first glance, Anthony Sampson's portrait of the *Drum* writer, Harlem Swingster and jazz opera composer Todd Matshikiza might seem tainted by a primitivist conception of African rhythmic vitality. Yet the description is poised at a moment of South African cultural history which throws such a glib assessment into disarray. Matshikiza's prose, Sampson remembered, transformed *Drum*, until then at cross-purposes with readers, running a quasi-anthropological column about 'traditional' African customs ("Know Yourselfs") and another by a white ethnomusicologist ("Music of the Tribes"). "Ag, why do you dish out that stuff man?" the incoming editor recalled a man in the street asking, someone for whom the white hand of proprietor and owners (or as Matshikiza put it, "the white claw") was too much in evidence: "Give us jazz and film stars, man! We want Duke Ellington, Satchmo, and hot dames! Yes, brother, anything American" (Sampson 20). For all the subsequent debates that have developed over how well it used its opportunities and what ideology it fostered, *Drum* was at least, as reporter Obed Musi put it, the first publication to ditch the "Jim comes to Jo'burg" cliché for the "Jim is *in* Jo'burg" reality (Nicol 35). In the words of Lewis Nkosi, it was "a symbol of the new African cut adrift from the tribal reserve – urbanised, eager, fast-talking and brash" (6) and if nothing else, a new stage of articulation embodying all the stresses and compromises this entailed.

Fittingly then, it was jazz, inherently allergic to categorisation – "If you've got to ask, you'll never know" in Louis Armstrong's apocryphal riposte – which entered the writing and reportage of the time less as music criticism than a metonymic shorthand for cultural brio, an evolving set of lifestyles, practices and strategies for existing within a changing and often threatening cityscape. In contrast to the way it was apprehended by the first generation of European critics like Hughes Panassié, for the *Drum* writers, African jazz was a headlong flight from any notion of the primitive pulse, or fixed, ethnic identities (the so-called "development along separate lines") which apartheid ideology hoped to instil. And for all the subsequent charges of escapism, naïvety and misplaced idealism levelled at the writing of the Sophiatown set, it is worth noting that this music was a subject returned to by the most urbane and clear-eyed critics of the time in Lewis Nkosi and Es'kia (then Ezekiel) Mphahlele, both impatient with

any notion of an innate 'Africanness' and the claims of Négritude evolving in Francophone intellectual circles, both struggling to articulate the mixture that the music seemed embody: of unmediated access to communal affirmation and the lonely, exacting demands of individual performance.

The relation between music and the urban is, of course, at the heart of all histories of jazz and blues; at the most superficial level, Nkosi outlines a commonplace when he suggests how the cacophonous, hastily improvised environment of South Africa's youngest, biggest city found a natural analogue in jazz and journalism, both expressive forms deemed to exist in the present: "a music which has its roots in a life of insecurity of which a single moment of self-realisation, of love light and movement, is extraordinarily more important than a whole of a lifetime" (Nkosi 88). In American jazz historiography, the question immediately takes on its larger dimension when one asks, as Wilfrid Mellers does why "the music of an alien, dispossessed, black and often persecuted minority [. . .] became an urban folk music pertinent to most members of industrial cities, whatever the colour of their skin" (*Old Worlds and New* 62). In South Africa, jazz was never adopted or appropriated by a white establishment controlling access to recording and reproduction to the same degree; it never acquired the commercial veneer of the 1930s "swing craze" which would make an appalled Theodor Adorno dismiss all jazz as "the glorification of a highly rationalized section of mass production" in his diatribe against "Perennial Fashion" (203).

Whereas Fletcher Henderson, Chick Webb and Duke Ellington would gain a mass audience via radio, beamed direct from Harlem's Savoy or the Cotton Club, successive South African governments would systematically destroy the spaces where the local equivalent came of age, eventually replacing African jazz on the radio with anodyne forms coaxed from guileless musicians from rural areas and labelled *msakazo* by a sceptical audience who remembered the music of previous decades – "broadcast." This contorted history, combined with the loss and destruction of countless recording archives by Gallo Records and the SABC, has created a tradition "scandalously amnesic" of its own history (Ballantine 2). The belatedness and rupture that attends the proper assessment of early South African jazz is most clearly evinced in that many white consumers only became aware of its early twentieth-century idioms when these were relayed to them by musicians like Pete Seeger, Paul Simon or Elton John; clearly it is a domain where the notion of a living, audible body of received styles – "trad jazz" – among the initiated cannot be taken for granted in the same way as in America. It seems that written accounts must necessarily assume a greater importance in reconstructing the development of *marabi* and *mbaqanga* in the early twentieth century and speculating on the origins of its distinctive sound.

In one his fifty or so *Drum* articles giving a potted history of the genesis of South African urban music, Matshikiza defines *marabi* as the "the name given to the 'hot,' highly rhythmic repetitive single-themed dance tunes" of the period

from 1910s to early 1930s (*Drum* 1951). Like the blues, *marabi* used the chordal cornerstones of tonic, subdominant and dominant, giving it a harmonic coherence which could sustain endless melodic elaborations, while musicologists agree that in their short cyclic structures, both are ultimately derived from the "root progressions," "harmonic segments" or "short forms" present in neo-traditional musical forms throughout sub-Saharan Africa (still immediately evident in the rocking, left-hand *ostinati* of Ibrahim's piano style). Yet instead of employing the minor tonality and flattened notes that make the blues bluesy, *marabi* stayed largely within a vocabulary of major seventh chords that would ultimately give African jazz and jive (*mbaqanga*) its warm, reverent vibe. Just as migrant labour compounds created the hothouse conditions that gave rise to the extraordinarily delicate sound and feline dance steps of *iscathamiya* (South Africa's other major international musical export) so the context of the labour yard, with its carnivalesque, weekend-long release seemed to demand this unbroken, "nice-time" keyboard music, also known as *ndunduma* after the mine dumps that symbolised the city for many Zulu migrants.

Recalling many of the responses in which the early "jass" of New Orleans elicited petit bourgeois disdain from all those not confined to the ghetto, *marabi* was routinely vilified by the black middle classes, often described by concerned letter writers to *Bantu World* in terms of pathology and contamination. Writing for *Ilanga Lase Natal* [*I. L. N.*] in August 1927, R. R. R. Dhlomo warned that this "jazzing craze or madness has its victims in its octopus-like grasp." In his 1928 novel, *An African Tragedy*, the everyman Robert Zulu's moral decline begins at a shebeen dance where "an organ was being hammered by a drunken youth" and "Couples – literally fastened to each other – were swaying giddily wildly, to this barbaric time" (qtd. in Ballantine 76). Yet *marabi* culture receives a more evocative and tellingly divided depiction from H. I. E. Dhlomo; remembering that "Ndunduma concerts were real refuse dump affairs, musically and morally" and "attended by degenerate young elements, the uninitiated newly-arrived country bumpkins and the morbidly curious," he continues:

And yet what naturally talented players the ragtime and the ndunduma concerts had! Vampers (as they were called) who improvised many 'hot' original dance and singing numbers at the spur of the moment, and who play or accompany any piece after hearing the melody once, and did so in any key...men who like tribal bards of old, created beauty they knew not and flung it back unrecorded to the elements which gave it birth.

(*I. L. N.*, 20 June 1953, qtd. in Coplan 127)

This portrait of the *marabi* dance as the first port of call for migrants and greenhorns surely gives a sense of why Matshikiza's mythic, jazz-inflected life

stories of Solomon "Zulu Boy" Cele and Wilson "Kingforce" Silgee (*marabi* musicians who would form the Jazz Maniacs, one of the first ensembles to fuse its idioms with American swing) proved so popular. In a manner far more immediate than the retrospective autobiographical tradition beginning with Peter Abrahams' *Tell Freedom* (1954), they provided a way of imagining the shift from rural to urban, and of tracing the rare and precious strands of continuity between the two. As the inimitable Hugh Masekela put it: "the only thing you could relate to from a rural and traditional life was music, that was your way into like industrial life, you know" (qtd. in Titlestad 61). While dismissive of its lowly status, Herbert Dhlomo is alert to a rhythmic insistence and technical expertise symptomatic of a process of deep cultural transformation as the keyboardists ranged freely among different keys and influences, a sound that was ultimately prophetic in its momentum. With its voracious appetite for melody – whether drawn from the contours of African Christian hymns, neo-traditional ceremonial songs, Cape strains of *vastrap* and *ghommaliédjies* or popular commercial tunes – the endlessly repeated, propulsive I–IV–I–V sequence became the anvil on which syncretic yet distinctive local forms began to be hammered out.

Yet if a sociological analysis of the *marabi* era provides material traces, notations and emanations of the urban, the "concert and dance" craze co-existing with and then largely superseding it in the inter-war years requires an appraisal of the much more elusive concept of urbanity. If American swing band techniques were carefully mastered by orchestras like the Merry Blackbirds, this was no simple cultural transaction. In a fascinating section of his book, Titlestad juxtaposes disparate cultural quotations of the ultimate symbol of black American urbanity – Duke Ellington – within the South African imaginary in a way that suggests, as per Dyer's black flow chart, the unexpectedness with which influence circulates, pools and percolates. In his vivid, often painful autobiography, *Blame Me on History* (1986), Bloke Modisane remembered how a musical acquaintance with the man who seemed to rise so effortlessly above the petty segregation still entrenched in the American south suitably denoted access to an insider's clique within Sophiatown, and a way to participate in global flows of modernity that reached beyond the idea of the nation state so embattled in the aftermath of World War II: "there were circles which talked nothing but boxing, others who knew the mood and the colour of the shirt Duke Ellington was wearing when he recorded, say, *Mood Indigo*" (252). Similarly, Kippie Moeketsi remembered him as a marker of sophistication that would be lost on certain audiences – "You don't play Duke Ellington on the mines." Yet, as if to reveal the gaps and switchbacks of oral history, the leader of the Merry Blackbirds, Peter Rezant recalled a triumphant performance of "The General Jumped at Dawn" in just such a context: "And when we finished playing I turned to the boys and said, 'You know if Duke Ellington had walked in here he would have complimented you tonight.' Oh it was a great night" (qtd. in Titlestad 62).

A man who always took great pride in the fact that his group could be mistaken for an American society jazz orchestra by white Johannesburg audiences, Rezant nonetheless goes on to make a remark which reconfigures the terms of comparison: "I liked Duke Ellington; I liked his music because it always had that African sound, that sound of a fellow coming across the veld playing his concertina under his blanket, repeating this thing for a long time and also humming there: hmmmmm, ummmmm." The jump between these two figures is an extraordinary one: from the slick society orchestra leader to a solitary Mosotho musician, playing the instrument that, along with the guitar and mouth organ, became popular with migrants because it could be used while on foot and in transit, and an equally arresting invocation of the Duke which throws the opposed poles of "country" and "city" into disarray occurs later in Sampson's memoir. As a powerful counter melody to the urbane prose music of "Matshikese," there is an account of the Harlem Swingster's Xhosa initiation ceremony. During a period on enforced solitude after the painful circumcision, he lived a garden hut, smeared all over with white chalk and forbidden to eat anything except dried maize: "He lay alone in the hut, sleeping with only an old blanket on the hard floor. He could hear his brother playing Duke Ellington in the house. 'It was a wonderful time,' said Todd. 'I felt completely at peace'" (cited 63).

Describing how the influence of Peter Rezant and remarkable jazz composer and educator Wilfred "Synco Fans" Sentso reached him at college in Lovedale, Todd Matshikiza was to remark that, in a context where some mission-educated musicians had internalised a disdain for local forms, the African undertones detected in American performance styles increased their appeal to South African acts. In one of the "contingent loops and fractal trajectories" of the black Atlantic, local forms which might otherwise have been dismissed were found to be "more alluring and acceptable when it returned in a transmuted, transatlantic guise" (Nixon 13). Just as Ibrahim remembered that Count Basie seemed to exist almost as the voice of an elder within the tenements of District Six, here Ellington has become part of the background susurrus, able to fuse with daily experience and give shape to events as opposed symbols of "tradition" and urbanity interact in a way that reveal them as hopelessly inadequate. And as Titlestad suggests of the entirely unexpected note struck here (courtesy of Todd's brother, Meekly "Fingertips" Matshikiza, pianist for Queenstown's Blue Rhythm Syncopators), this is a peacefulness that is deceptive, a condition better described as "a rebellious contentment that gives the lie to apartheid's categories by living in, and practising the space 'in between'" (63).

Yet if all this draws attention to the celebratory, hybrid potential of jazz, it is also crucial to acknowledge the perpetual compromise and hazard attending its performance, and the similarly improvised constructions of identity adopted by writers of the period. In a contemporary musical climate where an *oeuvre* like Ibrahim's is classed as "world music" – a marketing shorthand implying that all

kinds of musical fusion are easily possible (and indeed desirable) – it is worth trying to recapture the “insistent, angular dissonances” of the 1950s which Nkosi attributed to this underground innovator, “a jazz pianist so excessively bitter, rueful and astringent that anyone able to endure his music for any length of time must often feel compromised in some obscure, reluctant corner of the heart” (Nkosi 89). “Dissonance is our way of life in America,” Ellington once commented, “[w]e are something apart, yet an integral part” (qtd. in Heble 20), and doubtless in a cityscape reliant on cross-racial labour yet insistent on segregation, such social discord would be pitched all the more urgently. Indeed, many accounts of and by *Drum* writers suggest the more destructive aspect of compulsion to adopt and perform identities. Henry “Mr Drum” Nxumalo, “J. Arthur Maimane,” “the supreme intellectual *tsotsi*” Can von Themba, Casey “The Detective” Motsitsi: these were individuals who, like the wandering “i” of Wopko Jensma’s beat poetry, found themselves “in a situation.” This street slang (in Gates’s terminology, a supple, satirical “signifyin(g) riff”) described those members of the community with the English education enabling them to apply for “Situation Vacant” advertisements in the white city centre, which came to mean a condition of being in-between – the darker obverse of the improvisatory, free play of identity.

For if within the mid-twentieth-century jazz combo the attempt to sound exactly like somebody else – the apprenticeship at the gramophone – was a common step in the development of an individual sound, within the solitary domain of writing the dynamics of imitation and influence were entirely otherwise. Matshikiza recalled in 1954 that all the variations on the name of Jazz Maniacs saxophonist Makwenkwe Davashe – MaKay, MacCay, MacKay – meant “the boy that learned to play sax the penny-whistle way,” in a linguistic tag where copying foreign styles once again become fused with a local conception of the initiation rite. Imitating the lines of American saxophonists, Sophiatown penny whistlers evolved an entirely distinctive sound – *kwela*. Yet while musical ideas were transplanted and transmuted on the major tuning of these cheap but vocal flageolets to entirely new effect, aping the prose style of a James Baldwin or Langston Hughes was likely to prove merely derivative. Reading about Matshikiza at play on the machine – a description echoed by *Drum*’s second editor Tom Hopkinson, who recalled him handling the typewriter “as if it were a cross between saxophone and machine gun” (qtd. in Titlestad 50) – one thinks of Truman Capote’s put-down of Jack Kerouac’s self-proclaimed jazz novel *On the Road*: “That’s not writing; that’s typing.” Moreover, in the prose of the Sophiatown writers, particularly that of Nkosi and Mphahlele, a further black Atlantic triangulation is at work where American influence coexists with the sometimes schoolmasterly tone derived from an English liberal tradition; as Nixon writes, “one feels throughout the literature of that place and era the strong tug of the writers’ almost uniformly English, mission school education” (12).

Certainly never one for romanticising the *Drum* years, Mphahlele gave perhaps the most acute formulation of this double consciousness: “[w]e are digging our feet into an urban culture on impossible terms [. . .] ours is a fugitive culture: borrowing here, incorporating there, retaining this, rejecting that” (qtd. in Attwell, “Fugitive Pieces” 66). Despite the disdain for popular forms which sometimes emerges in his writing, this sense of being embroiled in an inescapable urban amalgam endowed him with a clear-sightedness which rejected both the claims of ethnic apartheid and nebulous pan-Africanism. As David Attwell points out, it is this that makes his autobiographical 1971 novel *The Wanderers* such an unusual and valuable product of the “African decade,” in that it is not concerned with “writing back” to European notions of the continent in its entirety, but with “the more specific complexity of a South African’s writing for his compatriots in the African diaspora” (*Rewriting Modernity* 24). Fittingly then, the jazz of a fictionalised Nigeria is not a welcoming embrace, but a reminder of difference and dissonance across the African continent: “Here in Iboyoru, of course, you couldn’t find good jazz. It was badly played, and the instruments drowned the vocalist” (192). The “high-life music that boomed from shop-radios and night club bands” becomes a disruptive phenomenal manifestation of exile, yet at the same time, in a correspondence with his brother, the narrator is to explore the death of his son Felang at the hands of the South African security police through the passing of John Coltrane, a figure who achieved an international following precisely because his restless musical innovation conveyed such dissatisfaction with received categories and traditions (192).

The cost of improvising an identity, or as Titlestad puts it, a “sense of urgency and threat, of being on trial in a performance that, at any moment, might lapse into either chaos or banality,” (63) reaches its most charged expression in the writing of Bloke Modisane. Describing the efforts of white and black socialites “to douse apartheid with suburban tea,” he perceived himself in retrospect as “a piece of rare Africana; subjected to such illuminations like: ‘I’ve never met an intelligent African before – I mean an African who is actually articulate.’ Most of them struggled visibly with the word ‘African’ which was almost always one beat too late” (qtd. in Nixon 24). Alert to the difficulty of keeping time in the complex two-step danced by “Niggerati and Negrotarians” (as Zora Neale Hurston dubbed the black elite and white sympathisers of the Harlem Renaissance), Modisane’s account of Sophiatown’s music renders the double-edged sense of a hybrid form imbued with a peculiarly local quality of waste and pathos despite, or perhaps because of its major keys:

[...] my life is like the penny whistle music spinning on eternally with the same repetitive persistency; it is deceptively happy, but all this is on the surface [. . .] beneath all this is the

heavy storm-trooping rhythmic line, a jazzy knell tolling a structure of sadness into a pyramid of monotony; the sadness is a rhythm unchanging in its thematic structure, oppressive, dominating and regulating the tonality of the laughter and joy.

(Modisane 117)

The perils of such border crossing, and the poised sense of assertion and fragility shown by its practitioners, is explored by Nadine Gordimer in her 1958 take on the period, *A World of Strangers*, one of the few attempts to integrate musical performance within the context of a large-scale, fictional prose work. The novel depicts the friendship of a narrator inspired in part by Anthony Sampson himself – a male, expatriate observer – with the apolitical, popular yet isolated Steven Sithole. Both virtual outsiders within their own communities, they criss-cross the city in unusual patterns, functioning as perceptual tools which enable Gordimer to acquire a necessary distance in her invaluable role as a self-aware and unsentimental chronicler of historical moment and social texture. Certainly it gives a scathing verdict of endeavours like Matshikiza's jazz opera *King Kong* that would eventually mark a vexed culmination of the Sophiatown era and the beginning of large-scale musical exile. Steven remarks of a collaborative effort between the sober, politically committed pianist Sam Mofokenazi and a suburban academic that is "more a white man's idea of what a black man would write, and a black man's idea of what a white man would expect him to write, than the fusion of a black man's and a white man's world of imagination" (112). Yet despite such bracing scepticism, Gordimer does try her hand at evoking a more spontaneous musical affair at a party that surely owes something to those held at Can Themba's House of Truth:

There was a little breeze of notes on a saxophone; it died down. A clarinet gave a brief howl. Somewhere behind the press of people, the big bass began to pant. Music grew in the room like a new form of life unfolding, like the atmosphere changing in a rising wind. Musical instruments appeared from underfoot; people who had been talking took to another tongue through the object they plucked or blew. Feet moved, heads swayed; there was no audience, no performers – everyone breathed music as they breathed air. Sam was clinched with the piano in some joyous struggle both knew. A yellow youth in a black beret charmed his saxophone like a snake, with its own weaving voice. The bass thumped along for dear life under the enchanted hand of a man with the bearded, black delicate face of an Assyrian king.

(127)

Deftly judged is in its evocation of the moment in which music begins – building itself out of silence in a call and response pattern, using whatever materials are to hand or, in a particularly felicitous touch, “underfoot” – the language then seems to become overblown in its vision of a seamless continuity between music, speech and breathing. Such notions of abandon and spontaneity, many jazz historians note, can efface the complex histories of tutelage, discipline and skill involved in transmitting musical idioms; yet Gordimer seems to hit another right note in the sense of fruitful resistance – the “joyous struggle” – provided by the instrument to the player, the disjointedness between the industrially manufactured kit and the human organism powering it. If the image of a saxophone snake charmer and Assyrian king on double bass seems jarring, one could reply that, considering the double and triple entendres embedded in the jazzing tradition, there is a knowingness to the exotic evoked here, the small room becoming carnivalesque space to sound out masks and societal roles.

Along with Herbert Dhlomo’s admonitions, Matshikiza’s potted histories and Mphahlele’s fugitive notations, Gordimer’s novelistic “thick description” embodies the fascinating difficulty of writing about music in general, and jazz in particular. Ted Gioia has called for an “aesthetics of imperfection” for appraising an art form where, in any given solo, some effects will be more successful than others, and even the tonal elasticity of the music may not be able to disguise some wrong notes (55). The ways in which imitation operates within a written as opposed to a musical context, the charged dynamics surrounding each cultural quotation, the analytical responsibility of prose which, if abandoned, makes it little more than a poor substitute for music itself – all these emerge as a caution against the careless equation of music and text. And in a contemporary critical climate that searches out and congratulates hybridity of all kinds, the value of examining this cultural moment seems to lie in its demonstration that the dynamics of each encounter will be entirely different, unpredictable and often painful. “It may not be a bad thing to be a Sophiatown Villon; but it is tragic if you can never be anything else,” writes Gordimer in the essay collection *Living in Hope and History*, where an admiration for how so much was made from so little shades into an awareness of the relentless diminution of opportunity that the not-so-Fabulous Fifties entailed: “The penny whistle is a charming piece of musical ingenuity; but it should not always be necessary for a man to make his music out of nothing” (109).

As such, Sachs’s comparison of writing with the inviolate space established by music is knowingly disingenuous. As it passes into words in the most vital depictions of music in the period, the psychic refuge provided by this “floating cabin of jazz and jive” (Sampson 122) is not an escapist domain, but always tempered by an awareness of what Ellison famously called the “cruel contradiction” implicit in the art form itself. Since as each “true jazz moment” is an art of individual assertion within and against the group, a daily exercise in

reinvention, perpetually demanding in its requirement for improvisation on received ideas, "the jazz man must lose his identity even as he finds it" (*Living with Music* 36). Yet imperfect as it is, the passage in *A World of Strangers*, along with so many others that seek to commemorate and celebrate defiant gatherings in stark Sophiatown premises, can at least gesture toward the divergent impulses that music in performance can embody simultaneously: the infinitely suggestive combination of vertical, static, assured harmony and linear, evolving, risked melody involved in making the changes. For even as the party swings and centres around Steven – a person who is "hopeless...committed entirely to the present" – it also includes Sam – a man – "full of dogged hope, a person whose life was pinned to a future"; he too is part of this momentary community, "clinched with the piano in some joyous struggle both knew" (Gordimer 127).

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