

Southern Africa Through the Eyes of a Song

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The People

The Southern African music tradition dates back thousands of years. In Southern Africa, as in most parts of Africa, music has always been a part of all rituals, such as child birth, circumcision, weddings, ancestral worship and death. People of that region usually do not do anything without the accompaniment of song. The indigenous peoples of the region include the Hottentots and the Khoisan (also known as the Bushmen), the Nguni (consisting of the Zulu, Xhosa, Ndebele and the Swazi) who live in South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe, the Sotho, the Tswana and Herero who live in Lesotho, South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, the Shona and Ndebele who live in Zimbabwe, the Chewa, Tumbuka, Yao, Bemba and Shangaan who live in Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa and Zambia.

Languages and Traditions

The languages of the Southern African people have shaped and influenced the way their music is articulated, expressed and performed. The clicking sound, which is one of the most unique sounds in speech, comes from that region. The terrain in some parts of Southern Africa is flat and hot, and trees (which are necessary for making drums) are limited. Most Southern African ethnic groups were very nomadic people, moving from one place to another in search of food, favorable weather (seasonal migration) and trade. This made the carrying of extra loads such as the hand drum very difficult. So in place of the drum they used their clicking sounds for rhythm. The people of the region made other smaller instruments like the Mbira (thumb piano), the Kalimba (smaller version of the thumb piano), the Xylophone, Bull horn and Wooden Flute. Vocal chants also were used as a substitute for drums.

Foreign Influence

Things started to change in the 1600's when European explores and settlers introduced European music and instruments. They introduced a new style of singing and playing instruments which was based on the diatonic scale in the tonic so- fa. Since most of the settlers were missionaries coming to Southern Africa to spread their religion, the first music introduced was religious music. However, as more and more European missionaries and settlers arrived in the region they brought with them other music styles, such as classical and western folk music. Accordion, concertina, piano and guitar were some of the earliest instruments introduced to the region. Then came wind instruments such as the saxophone, trumpet and trombone. Other European type instruments such as the violin, cello and viola were introduced in the 1800's.

Music Formula

The introduction of European spiritual music and its form (based on the tonic so - fa) encouraged and inspired young African musicians like Enock Santonga to compose "Nkosi sikelel' iAfrica" in the late 1890's. The masterpiece went on to become an anthem for all liberation movements in Southern Africa. Today this song serves as the South African national anthem and has been adopted by other Southern African nations as their anthem. The song also inspired a new voicing for Southern African music bass notation whether it be the bass or baritone voice or bass instruments like upright bass, electric bass guitar, tuba and low keys on the left hand on the piano. In musical terms it is simply translated as 1>4>5>5 if your chord progression has a 1>4>1>5 structure. For those that strictly use the tonic so - fa or those not familiar with numerical terms in music it simply means that if you are in the key of C and you play a diatonic major scale 1=C and 4=F and 5=G. Another major music contribution by Enock Santonga in Southern African music styles is the use of a dominant 7, ninth degree or minor 6 used as a passing note when transitioning from the 1 (do) to the 4 (fa). Enock Santonga also influenced present day Southern African music through his style of shifting the chord progression interval of 1>4>1>5 to start on the 4 (fa) even though the key signature is 1(do). This is done for purposes of revamping the chorus in a monotonous song or to accommodate the busy call and response African styles in a three chord structure.

The Birth of New Music

With the discovery of minerals in Southern Africa, mines sprung up all over the region attracting young men and women to the urban areas where gold, diamond, uranium and other minerals were being mined. This caused the authorities to build temporary housing for the migrant laborers who were working in the mines. Johannesburg being the economic power house of the whole region, it ended up with new settlements at the outskirts of the city. Townships such as Soweto, Alexandra, Sophia Town and Thokoza became the creative centers and social attractions for people of all kinds. The introduction of African American Jazz made things more interesting for young African musicians as they found new inspiration and sources to draw ideas from. They created a fusion of Southern African indigenous music and American Jazz and called it African Jazz. African Jazz is different from American Jazz in a sense that it has more melodic phrases than the commonly used harmonic idioms in American Jazz. After going through slavery and racial oppression, the early African American Jazz musicians used a lot harmonic idioms because they found them to be more free and independent. African Jazz went on to inspire a new breed of musicians who wanted to continue with the African oral tradition.

Township Music Explosion

Subsequently, a new sound emerged which drew its inspiration from American Doo-Wop. The young musicians who played it and their fans called it Marabi (Jazz Pop in American terms). As with African Jazz, Marabi is a fusion of Southern African indigenous music and American vocal styles of the 1930's. Marabi borrowed the principle of 1>4>5>5 from African Jazz. The emergence of the two music styles took things overboard. In the Township of Alexandra northeast of Johannesburg came a sound which came to be known as Pennywhistle Jive/Kwela. When the music came out in the late 1940's it had no name, but a name would soon be found. It came in the

form of the Zulu word Kwela which means climb. This music emerged soon after the Afrikaner dominated nationalist party introduced apartheid laws (racial segregation) making it illegal for native Africans to work or perform in the cities without permits. But the young musicians would go to the cities anyway and perform without permits. Soon after the police would show up in their trucks and arrest the musicians and force them onto these trucks using the limited Zulu language that white policemen knew. They would shout "kwela" telling them to climb into the trucks. The African Jazz scene and the Kwela scene were intense in the townships around Johannesburg but they also were popular throughout Southern Africa.

The Impact of Indigenous Music

With foreign influenced music becoming popular in urban areas, musicians and singers within the migrant laborer community became determined to preserve their roots. This was evident when a young musician who was living in the hostels in Johannesburg (temporary housing for migrant workers) recorded a song which was drawn from a true personal experience in his native village in Natal in Zululand. The song was titled "Mbube" (lion) and it was about the story of how he killed a lion with his spear while growing up in Natal. The song went on to be called "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" or "Wimoweh". Today's indigenous Southern African music is dominated by accordion, acoustic guitar and concertina. Acoustic instruments (non-amplified instruments) are preferred in most rural parts of the region because some of these areas are not electrified.

African Music Identity

Throughout Southern Africa musicians worked hard to define their roots and sound. Mbira music, which because of its time signature and instrumentation has stayed in 6/8 and still continues to use the Mbira and the Kalimba, is one of the few Southern African music styles which has stayed pure.

Different artists have done collaborations with Southern African Mbira musicians but the one that immediately comes to mind is Paul Simon who recorded his "Graceland" album with Southern African musicians. The album "Graceland" contains a variety of music styles from the region. Another style of music which has been around since the 1960's and was included on the "Graceland" album is Mbaqanga. This is a mixture of Southern African indigenous music with American Rhythm & Blues and Soul music. This is one style that people might liken to America's Rock' N' Roll because of its prominent guitars. The music continues to attract lots of people due to its commercial success and mass appeal.

Isicathamiya (Mbube) is another style of Southern African music which drew its influences from African American vocal harmony groups. The music evolved in the 1950's when young musicians entered contests which were being held for upcoming musical groups. The foundation of the music was gospel choir songs but with an Africanized Zulu Doo-Wop. Ladysmith Black Mambazo has become a leader in this style of music.

Throughout the Southern African region there are so many indigenous styles of music that have not been labeled because for most of the artists who perform the

music, culture, tradition and art are the sole inspiration for their creativity. These styles are what people categorize as Shangaan Disco, Sotho traditional music, and African Gospel. All these styles are a part of the wide range of Southern African music culture. There is also the term "Township Jive" or "Township music". Throughout the region, artists come from the Townships (Ghetto) and critics and music fans call the music by it's place of origin which is the Township.