

SONG AND STRUGGLE

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I think that it is not the form of music that necessarily needs rigorous examination but the lyric content and the context of the music. Of course I am talking now of music that has words. Obviously there are instrumental pieces, like Dollar Brand plays and I needn't spell out in great detail what everyone knows. The majority of South Africans love that music because it breathes of everything we have seen in South Africa, and everything we are fighting against, and everything we are fighting for. But how do we put into words what Dollar's tunes say?

What is progressive song? As far as the content goes, it is the song which inspires, which gives strength, which unites, influences and mobilises people who are involved in struggle. As far as context goes, it is the song which the oppressed communities can relate to. It is not the song which talks of glittering discos and foxy ladies in the city, and which ignores the thousands of squatters outside the city who are struggling to get through the night. Progressive songs can be funny or sad. They talk of oppression and misery as our families and friends are banned, jailed, exiled or murdered. But they also talk of the joy of people's victories, the joy and certainty of moving forward daily in the struggle for freedom for all people in South Africa.

What do we mean when we talk about community based song and music? Surely we are talking about how a community's consciousness is reflected in song, its ideas about itself in relation to those of the country: in other words the way the community sees itself and the issues that affect it. Song which comes directly from the community is therefore song which expresses the needs, the life, the loves and demands of that community. And because, when we talk about the majority of people in South Africa, we are talking about oppressed people, then obviously we understand that the need of those people is for a better life and the demand is for the right to that better life...so this should be reflected in the song.

In this way song has, like the other cultural forms that are being discussed at this symposium, a crucial role in keeping people aware not only of oppression, but also of resistance.

There are thousands of songwriters at home who ignore their communities, and who actually work against the struggle of their people by composing songs which obscure realities. I don't have to start naming individuals and groups - we've all heard of Soweto bands singing in American accents about people, places and events that would have more significance in the US or Europe than in South Africa. Well, it's obvious why this has happened. For years the "American" and "international" sound has been pumped out over the radio, and TV, even in supermarkets. There is a long tradition of western influence and attitudes which affect songwriters to the detriment of local music. People start believing that this music from other countries is superior, and they try to imitate it - not just the tunes, but the ideas and lifestyles suggested by that music.

On top of this, the institutions through which music from South Africa is distributed - the SABC, the record companies - demand that local music meets standards which are set by these institutions, not by the communities. So you have a process of a songwriter composing a song which he or she knows will be acceptable to those institutions. Then those institutions shape it, record it, give it airplay, and sure, the song gets bought and maybe even within the composer's community people will hear the song, and maybe they'll even like the catchy tune and what what, without ever questioning that the substance of that song bears no relation to anything which affects their daily lives. The problem is that all those institutions are not controlled by the struggling communities, and nor do those communities have any say over what music those institutions decide to put out...so that by the time it comes to be listened to by people in the communities, the song is likely to be something which promotes the interests of the institutions in anything from the most subtle to the most overt way, and not the interests of the people themselves. It is merely imposed on the people.

Surely there is more joy for a songwriter to have his or her songs accepted directly by the community because they come from that community, than to have them channeled away from the community to serve other interests? You've only got to listen to Blondie and Pappa to see a group which is steadily losing its community base, and the only way Blondie and Pappa now go back into the community is when lots of money has been spent all round, and through the vehicle of those institutions which serve the interests of the rich.

It is essential that musicians keep dynamic contact with their communities, and that they know how the issues that are affecting their communities are tied in with the national struggle. Music is one of the things that can provide the link between all different communities.

In South Africa we are lucky to have so much music. Apart from the traditional vocal style in which the freedom songs are sung, there are so many other forms which can easily lend themselves to progressive use. I know this argument causes a lot of controversy, because some people feel that only if traditional forms are used all the time then will we have thrown off the cultural imperialism of radio and so on. But this needn't be true. There's a song they sing in the Cape, an adaptation of Pete Seeger's "Little Boxes", only it's about Group Areas, and resettlement areas, and the lack of amenities. I've also heard hundreds of students from the University of Durban Westville sing another old folk tune "Donne Donne", only they sing "Donner Donner" and the words were adapted during the time of the schools boycott. These forms are also valid. The problem would be if the words weren't changed so that people were singing about things which didn't affect them.

And mbaqanga...there's no reason that mbaqanga shouldn't be used for progressive purposes. Unfortunately so much of it has already been pinched by the enemy for its propaganda use on radio, but its time people in the townships reclaim mbaqanga and inject it again with the spirit of township. And by that I don't refer to the "jawler" spirit of township which is often still retained in the SABC mbaqanga tunes, but the spirit of the people to overcome the system which keeps them living in matchbox houses in appalling conditions.

As far as the traditional music goes, we've already seen how much of it has been stolen and distorted by the "Ipi Tombis", and again by Radio Bantu. But before this music was stolen and distorted it was a living music that spoke of community...now it often just sneaks of bantustans. Yet it belongs to the people, and it must be reclaimed and restored.

Again there are forms like jazz and fusion and rock and roll and just everything you can think of, and because some are inherited forms doesn't mean to say they are not valid. It is good that we can listen to the music of other cultures and it is good that we can learn from these other

forms. The trouble is when those forms are promoted as something worth striving for to the exclusion of what we have and can develop ourselves.

Songwriters and musicians are only going to produce songs that mean anything when they have their community base. It's important that we realise that our songs, our songwriters and musicians and even the technical knowhow that is presently in the hands of the enemy, are of great importance in the struggle.

At this point I would like to quote Domitilia Barrios de Chungara, the wife of a Bolivian mineworker, from the book "Let Me Speak":

"I think that it's essential to know that we're all important in the revolutionary struggle...no? We're such a large machine and each one of us is a cog. And if one cog is missing, the machine can't work. So we've got to know how to assign each person his or her role and know how to value each one. Some are good at making pretty speeches. Others at writing well. Others of us are good for providing bulk, at least to be present and be one more in the crowd. Some of us have to suffer, play the role of martyr, others have to write our history. And that's how all of us have to work together. And like a leader once told us: 'No one, no one is useless, we all have our roles'. And we're even going to need a person who knows how to nail a shoe well, because for just that reason a battle can be lost, or even a revolution. We're all going to contribute in our own way. The important thing is that we be well directed in the struggle of the working class and that each one carry out what is assigned to him or her in the best possible manner."

She puts it so simply. And when you look at all the sections of society—the workers, the women, the students...they've all already defined themselves as participants, or in Domitilia's language, cogs, in the machinery of struggle. The people in cultural activity are cogs too, and should our songs provide the oil that will keep those cogs moving on and on.

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