The Blue Notes: South African Jazz and the Limits of Avant-Garde Solidarities in Late 1960s London

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For the Blue Notes, an ensemble comprised of South African jazz musicians living in Britain, 1968 was pivotal. After three years on the margins of the London jazz scene, their debut album *Very Urgent* was released in May that year to positive acclaim. *Very Urgent* was understood as an important statement of the British jazz avant-garde movement that captured the spirit of 1968, infused with the Blue Notes' musical South Africanisms. In this article, I explore how shifting understandings of jazz in the 1960s aided and undermined the Blue Notes' musical identities: as *mbaqanga*, hard bop and free jazz musicians. I argue that *Very Urgent* and, to an extent, the Blue Notes, cannot be understood solely in the terms favored by their early reception in Britain. Rather, both represent a complex matrix of personal, musical and political relations that constituted British and South African jazz art worlds in the 1960s.

Keywords: South African jazz, London, the Blue Notes, exile, *Very Urgent*

For me this conscious kind of South Africanism came in exile. It was caused by homesickness and a certain disenchantment with what from South Africa had seemed a magic and distant world – we realized we had our own movement and began insisting on our roots.¹

Introduction

A little more than a year after the events of 1968, a South African expatriate then living in Brighton, Alfred Hutchinson, wrote a letter to the *Observer*.² Hutchinson's letter had nothing to say about May 1968 in Paris or other upheavals in the United States, Vietnam, or Eastern Europe that year. It was also silent about contemporary developments in his native South Africa, which ranged from the country's hosting of the Miss Universe pageant to student protests at the University of Cape Town, ~~to and also included~~ the formation of a black student organization led

¹ Chris McGregor, quoted in McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 104.

² Hutchinson, "What's it Like to be Black, Sir?"

by Bantu Steve Biko and the emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement, the fallout caused by President John Vorster's veto of Basil D'Oliviera's presence in the English cricket team that was due to tour the country, as well as the tentative rise of Afrikaner cultural resistance in the form of the literary movement *Die Sestigers* (writers of the sixties).³ These omissions were not due to ignorance on Hutchinson's part. In South Africa, he had been involved in the more somber side of the *Drum* generation as a regular contributor to journals like *Fighting Talk*, with close working and personal friendships with activists like Es'kia Mphahlele and Ruth First. He was in the United Kingdom as a former Treason Trialist who had escaped South Africa with some ingenuity.⁴ The global events of 1968 would not have passed him by, yet his letter is a limited response to the conservative politician Enoch Powell's provocative utterances about race and immigration made on 20 April 1968. Hutchinson's response to these issues was prompted by a teenage student who asked, "What's it like to be black, sir?" He wonders:

But if I had tried to answer his question where should I have begun? Perhaps I would have had to journey back to my English highwayman grandfather the notorious pre-Boer War "Captain Moonlight"—and my maternal grandfather, a Swazi chief of note. I would have had to tell him about my impossible half-caste father and his brother [...] But how could I have described life in South Africa: the sweaty humiliations; the heart-tearing rages, the laxative of helplessness? How could I have told him of pass laws, arrests, prison, high treason, my flight from a treason charge to marry an English woman in Ghana? And England. And now Mr Powell and my loneliest bus ride after his first immigration speech [...] How does one begin to tell all this to a boy?⁵

Hutchinson's student did not ask what it is like to be a black South African or a black Briton. The teacher's imagined answer instructs readers of the *Observer* that Powell's "views were defeatingly and monotonously simple: people of different races and colours could never live together in peace. Mixing them was just asking for trouble. How tediously familiar South Africa [*sic*]."⁶ Stories like Hutchinson's are favored by postcolonial literary scholars, but are rarely put to use by ethno/musicologists of South African jazz in exile. This is the case even though South

³ Daniel and Vale, "1968 and South Africa," 137-146.

⁴ Hutchinson, *Road to Ghana*.

⁵ Hutchinson, "What's it Like to be Black, Sir?"

⁶ *Ibid.*

African artists exiled in Britain formed relatively strong and at times enduring networks.⁷ As Louise Bethlehem's work convinces, "exile generates new circuits of professional affiliation and new venues for cultural production."⁸ Apart from the likes of Abdullah Ibrahim, Miriam Makeba and Todd Matshikiza (for his writing) however, exiled musicians have until recently tended to fall in-between the cracks of nation-based jazz histories, or to be incorporated into jazz histories of their native or adopted countries.⁹ Elsewhere, I have explored how taking on board exiled South African jazz musicians' itinerant lives may enrich South African jazz studies. It would allow scholars to examine how South African jazz articulates with the exile's adopted country's jazzing traditions and the significance of these new forms.¹⁰ This argument dovetails with new modes of thinking about apartheid banishment beyond the break, or exile. Without ameliorating the trauma, scholars of apartheid cultures can consider more boldly how, "at determinate stops along the grid of their reception elsewhere, South African texts, images, and works of music were channeled through local paradigms of reception in taut negotiation with aesthetic, institutional, linguistic, and political considerations."¹¹ Rather than viewing exile as an event that excises jazz musicians from the nation's jazz histories, we may then rethink how South Africans' jazz was transformed by musicians' adopted countries, and avoid unhelpful understandings of the music as representative of nostalgia. Bethlehem incisively notes how this, for South African cultural studies, "gives rise to historiographic leverage."¹² In this paper, I explore these dynamics by focusing on the music of a relatively stable South African jazz ensemble in London's late 1960s: the Blue Notes.

In South Africa, this ensemble had a fluid personnel; in London, however, the Blue Notes consisted of Mongezi Feza on trumpet, Dudu Pukwana on alto saxophone, Chris McGregor on piano, Johnny Dyani on double bass and Louis Moholo on drums. They arrived in London, via continental Europe, in 1965, and were received as refugees from apartheid. Because of this status, they were exempt from the British Musicians Union's working rule stipulating that, for

⁷ Dalamba, "A Sideman on the Frontlines."

⁸ Bethlehem, "Restless Itineraries," 53.

⁹ Lucia, "Abdullah Ibrahim and the Uses of Memory," 125-43; on Makeba see Bethlehem, "Restless Itineraries," 47-69 and Sizemore-Barber, "The Voice of (Which?) Africa," 251-76; on Matshikiza see Thorpe, "I Slipped into the Pages of a Book," 306-20.

¹⁰ Dalamba, "A Sideman on the Frontlines."

¹¹ Bethlehem, "Restless Itineraries," 50.

¹² Ibid.

every musician entering Britain, a British musician must be guaranteed work in the other country.¹³ This is because as early as 1957 and in collaboration with South African anti-apartheid activists like Harold Bloom (of *King Kong* fame), the Union instructed its members not to perform in South Africa. The Blue Notes waited one year to gain citizenship and work as professionals.¹⁴ Whereas Maxine McGregor downplays the difficulty of this twelve-month qualification, Duncan Heining views the Union's stipulation, in light of the band's "unusual situation," as inflexible.¹⁵ It is worth remembering, and Heining concedes as much, that the Blue Notes were allowed to organize their own gigs.¹⁶ That these gigs could at first only take place outside the professional circuit, mostly as informal jam sessions, had its own consequences. For our purposes, the Union's act of anti-apartheid solidarity chafed against its responsibility to its members. Rather than inflexibility, this story shows the contours and contradictions of South African jazz and (political and musical) avant-garde solidarities in late 1960s London.

By 1967, the Blue Notes' legal and cultural citizenship was in order, and their popularity in the progressive jazz scene established. Having lost their tenor saxophonist Nikele Moyake, who had returned to South Africa in 1964, they added the South African tenor saxophonist Ronnie Beer to record the album *Very Urgent* as The Chris McGregor Group. The album was released in May 1968. Although recorded in December 1967, it is the month and year of its release, and its subsequent unavailability for forty years, which form the basis of its legendary status.¹⁷ This is evident in the May 1993 issue of the music periodical *The Wire*, which was dedicated to remembering May 1968 "25 Years On" and to exploring "music and the days of rage, how the world turned upside down, and how the beat changed with it."¹⁸ The main feature, "May 1968 Remembered," is a series of comments from writers and musicians who were active at that time. Their recollections highlight music's relationship to politics: how loud protests disrupted and halted symphonies, reflections on songs like "Sympathy for the Devil," or on the teachings of John Cage enunciated while on a choppy return journey from Yugoslavia.

¹³ The system was not absolute. In the mid-1960s, for example, both Ronnie Scott's club in London and Manchester's Club 43 were given a limited exemption by the Musicians' Union (and the Ministry of Labour) from the need for reciprocal agreements, and could employ some foreign nationals without exchanging days worked by employees. Frith, Brennan, Cloonan and Webster, *The History of Live Music in Britain*, 84.

¹⁴ Maxine McGregor, Interview with Robert Serumaga.

¹⁵ Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioneers*, 261-2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁷ The album was reissued in 2008.

¹⁸ *The Wire*, Front Cover.

The Blue Notes' inclusion in these memories indicates the extent of their influence. They are also honored in *The Wire*'s regular feature, "Great Lost Recordings," where Barry Witherden "recalls the flavor of 1968 in the shape of *Very Urgent*."¹⁹ In the main feature, the music journalist Brian Priestley recalls an "all-star RFH concert in May" that was memorable because "the only black majority group on the bill [was] the Chris McGregor Sextet."²⁰ The experimental vocalist Maggie Nichols encountered improvised music and "the musicians who had come to London from South Africa [who] had an explosive impact [at the] Old Place which was like a womb of experiment."²¹ For *Very Urgent*'s producer Joe Boyd, 1968 is consumed by memories of the South Africans, who for him were the center around which "the revolution that might have been" could have occurred:²²

They are all dead now, save Louis [Moholo], and the thought of the lightweight stuff we all raved about then compared to the divine inspiration which poured from those men makes me humble and sad. I guess there must be some connection between France's ability to shake its establishment far more profoundly than Britain ever did and its ability to make a home and provide a platform for Chris McGregor [in the 1970s].²³

For these musicians and writers then, the Blue Notes and *Very Urgent* captured the spirit of 1968, which included an increased understanding of jazz in "black cultural nationalist terms," as a symbol and voice of "black resistance" and as a species of postmodernism.²⁴ For George E. Lewis, these views "do not so much explain May 1968 as they take aspects of its behavior and graft them onto notions of jazz based in primitivism, exoticism, and immediate gratification."²⁵ A similar grafting is discernible in the recollections I have cited earlier, and in some scholarship on the Blue Notes in Britain.

In Britain, jazz in the 1960s was labelled by the trumpeter and bandleader Ian Carr as "a perpetual Cinderella of the arts."²⁶ Carr's focus was post-bebop jazz, which in the United

¹⁹ Witherden, "May 1968 Remembered," 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself*, 235-6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 239-40.

²⁶ Carr, *Music Outside*, vii.

Kingdom was variously termed “free form,” “experimental,” “contemporary” or, the more Atlantic-wide term, “New Thing.” His concern was to expose British free jazz as art that was deserving of state and media support. Later jazz scholars have expanded Carr’s class-focused argument to include race, nationalism and gender and have introduced issues of immigration and constructions of Britishness into jazz studies.²⁷ Hilary Moore, for example, concentrates her examination of black British free jazz on Afro-Caribbean practitioners. George McKay employs Paul Gilroy’s theorization of the black Atlantic to open up a space for discussing jazz’s role in social change “specifically around race” in Britain.²⁸ South African jazz features in all three studies. Carr devotes a chapter to Chris McGregor, where he discusses the Blue Notes and, more extensively, the Brotherhood of Breath. McKay fuses the Blue Notes with a broader narrative of black British jazz. Moore briefly detours to their importance in the 1960s for her examination of the Jazz Warriors’ formation in the 1980s. These writers sketch the Blue Notes’ musical interventions in 1960s London in line with the three views identified by Lewis: black cultural nationalism, black resistance, postmodernism. Each ultimately proves insufficient: the importance afforded to race is undermined by the Blue Notes’ non-racialism, resistance cannot account for what Lewis Nkosi described as their music’s “gaiety and humor,”²⁹ and postmodernism relies on the effacing of South African jazz. In what follows, I explore how these understandings of jazz aided and undermined the Blue Notes’ identities as *mbaqanga*, hard bop and free jazz musicians in London. I then trace the network of personal, musical and political relations that constituted South African jazz in the 1960s, to argue that *Very Urgent* may be more richly understood as a historically layered text.

The Blue Notes in London

The legend surrounding the Blue Notes took root in Britain soon after their arrival in 1965. The ensemble was celebrated for the excitement, newness and difference it brought to the London jazz scene. As Carr writes, in 1965 “the news that some new musicians were in town buzzed around the bush telegraph and most musicians got down to Scott’s old club in Gerrard Street to have a listen ... and a look.”³⁰ What they saw were four black males and one white male, all of

²⁷ Moore, *Inside British Jazz*, 67-132; McKay, *Circular Breathing*.

²⁸ McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 133-4; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*.

²⁹ Nkosi, “Jazz in Exile,” 35.

³⁰ Carr, *Music Outside*, 105.

them from South Africa. Adjectives describing their persons dot the legend of the Blue Notes to such an extent that they alone might constitute the many stories of the band. For example, trumpeter Feza is always tiny and alto saxophonist Pukwana is massive, pianist McGregor is big and affable and drummer Moholo is volatile. The whole band, from the legend, is uncontrollable and unpredictable. Such descriptions had less to do with the musicians' bodies (their album covers and various newspaper photographs show this to be the case) than they did with the music (Feza's tone tended to be pinched though intense, and Pukwana's saxophone has a rich, warm and broad timbre). More precisely, it was the split between the two. In the mid-1960s, the Blue Notes sported dark suits, thin ties and short hair, and had a neat business-like appearance—the uniform of African American jazz ensembles. Their image would not have emphasized or drawn attention to the musicians' physicality.

What the London musicians would have heard on that debut gig in 1965 was conventional hard bop.³¹ Two years later in an interview with Brian Blain for the *Morning Star*, McGregor would comment that the band had considered its music “pretty conventional in a ‘hard bop’ kind of way.”³² In South Africa, hard bop was used to distinguish the band from the more straight-ahead bebop of Abdullah Ibrahim's short-lived outfit, the Jazz Epistles.³³ Certainly in their early years abroad—in Europe and in Britain—the Blue Notes' repertoire consisted of tunes they had already perfected in South Africa. These were mostly composed by Pukwana and were identifiably hard bop. For George McKay, however, what distinguished the Blue Notes from ~~the~~ modern jazz in Britain was their Africanization of jazz. Here is McKay:

Three things set the members of the Blue Notes apart [...] First, they had a near instant impact on British jazz of the mid-1960s, musically, visually, socially, and politically. Second, they had an enduring commitment to experimental forms of improvisation, as they frequently set out to explore the possibilities of combining their township jazz styles of kwela and mbaqanga with European free improvisation, and to do this in collaboration with British and European players. Last and by no means least, the fact that the contribution of most of these musicians endured for all their lives in Europe is remarkable: their creative, liberatory, and inspirational African cultural presence has been a vital source of energy and innovation.³⁴

³¹ Nkosi, “Jazz in Exile,” 36.

³² McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 90.

³³ Beinart, “The Beginning of a Tradition,” 49-55.

³⁴ McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 167.

The musical, visual, social and political impact McKay cites was a result of the band's self-fashioning as a hard bop outfit—an important musical identity for the band *that* he does not mention. In his review of the Blue Notes for *The Financial Times*, the composer Patrick Gowers disputes the band's description as "strange and exotic;" he "was unable to find anything about *the music itself* which could rightly be called strange, let alone exotic ... the quintet's idiom is perfectly normal post-bop modern jazz."³⁵ To understand this further, we need to remember that by the mid-1960s, hard bop had acquired the status of what David H. Rosenthal summed up as "a new mainstream" and was disseminated most consistently by the Blue Notes record label.³⁶ This new mainstream was marked above all by experimentation. As "race music," however, it partook of that "historic ethnocentric energy" that characterized post-bebop jazz styles;³⁷ the increased flexibility of its jazz's soundworlds included other black popular musics such rhythm and blues, gospel and soul. For the Blue Notes, the ethnocentric styles were *kwela* and *mbaqanga*. My point here is to stress the Blue Notes' jazz ordinariness as a hard bop group, a musical identity black South African jazz musicians had fought to maintain.³⁸ They used what Rosenthal has described as hard bop's heterodoxy to create this musical identity, rather than to revitalize the British modern jazz scene with their African cultural presence.³⁹

McKay's second and third reasons for the Blue Notes' enduring impact on British jazz are more applicable to the musicians' individual activities in the spaces offered by the live performance scene. Of particular importance here was the opening of saxophonist Ronnie Scott's Old Place in October 1966, billed to open nightly, from 8pm to 11pm, with weekly Monday night jam sessions. The Old Place remained active for eighteen months.⁴⁰ Despite its short life, it provided, along with the Little Theatre Club, space for networking and for musical experimentation. John Wickes' research shows how avant-garde musicians like John Stevens, Trevor Watts, Evan Parker and others frequented the scene and workshoped their experiments. The South Africans moved in and out of the temporary configurations that formed at the Old Place. For example, Pete Lemer's trio, "E", which was noted for its experimental works

³⁵ Nkosi, "Jazz in Exile," 36 (my emphasis).

³⁶ Rosenthal, *Hard Bop*, 41-61.

³⁷ Ramsey, *Race Music*, 3.

³⁸ Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*, 124-5.

³⁹ McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 167.

⁴⁰ Wickes, *Innovations in British Jazz*, 61-78.

influenced by Timothy Leary, included the Blue Notes bassist Johnny Dyani. Mike Westbrook's Concert Band featured the South African bassist Harry Miller (of the Brotherhood of Breath and his own band Isipingo). Indeed, Wickes points out that many of the musicians who would form the first Brotherhood of Breath big band—whose core members were the Blue Notes—were drawn from Westbrook's personnel.⁴¹

The South Africans' ubiquity in this live scene familiarized them to the British jazz avant-gardists in a different way to their first appearance. Rather than exhibits on stage (recall Carr's "to have a listen ... and a look"), the Blue Notes—as a group and as individual musicians—established intimacy through musical co-creation in these clubs and pubs. Because these spaces were crucibles for free jazz,⁴² which undercuts and may eschew jazz conventions such as harmonic progressions, heads (melodies) or charts (scores), their music could be inserted into the clubs' soundworlds without initial "othering." Understanding the Blue Notes' early encounters with British avant-gardists requires a move beyond notions of "combining" township jazz styles with "European free improvisation." Rather, improvisation itself—from Scott's decision to repurpose his club, to the activities inside the space—may be viewed "as a space in which conventions for encounter are modeled, tested, reconceived, critiqued, and renewed or destroyed."⁴³ The gaze, which had overwhelmingly shaped the reception of *King Kong* in London in 1961, becomes secondary to engaged listening and musical dialogue.⁴⁴ Moreover, most of the clubs frequented by the Blue Notes and the British avant-gardists were managed by fans or musicians, so the delicate balance of turning a profit and furthering the music was the goal (although profit tended to suffer).⁴⁵ Fan or musician ownership might explain why commercially shaky avant-garde jazz could be accommodated, and why the Blue Notes members could play in these clubs' jam sessions despite the Union's twelve-month embargo. Had they been sanctioned to perform regularly, the story of the Blue Notes and of South African jazz in Britain might have proceeded quite differently. As it is, the Union's solidarity with anti-apartheid activism had to reckon with the presence of anti-apartheid jazz musicians in London, who needed work. The inability to work resulted in new kinds of affiliation, enabled by free jazz

⁴¹ Ibid., 62-5.

⁴² Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioneers*, 100.

⁴³ Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 99.

⁴⁴ Dalamba, "Passports to Jazz," 51-80.

⁴⁵ Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioneers*, 265.

aesthetics and the kinds of spaces that encouraged the experiment, all of which were conditions of possibility for the Blue Notes' "near instant impact on British jazz of the mid-1960s."⁴⁶

The richness of these dynamics has become eclipsed by emphasis on the band's visual impact which, in view of the band's ordinariness that I discussed earlier, is an alibi for race. Since Britain boasts a long history of black British jazz, and had long hosted African American musicians, the arrival of four black South Africans should not have been all that remarkable. McGregor's whiteness also looms large in the accounts of visual impact. For example, after acknowledging the Blue Notes' importance, Mark Banks and Jason Toynbee soon note that "interestingly, it was a white South African, the pianist Chris McGregor, who led both groups."⁴⁷ Heining renames the band "Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes" and describes the Johannesburg-born Brotherhood's bassist Harry Miller as "a South African Jew who had arrived in the UK in 1961."⁴⁸ These descriptions give weight to Banks and Toynbee's assertion that we need to examine how South African jazz musicians "influenced (or were shaped by) race and racial politics in the British jazz context."⁴⁹ In their illuminating reading of Carr's *Music Outside*, they point to "the primitivism at stake" when the cultural politics of race, which to them "is at the heart of jazz" in Britain, is not enfolded into our stories about jazz. The authors' focus is on black British jazz and is in dialogue with George McKay's examination of whiteness and British jazz.⁵⁰ Importantly for this paper, both studies agree that "jazz and race in Britain have always existed together in a profoundly ambivalent relation whereby dominant colonial discourses persist alongside anti-racism and resistance."⁵¹

This ambivalence is acute in narratives of the Blue Notes' arrival in London, precisely because of the band's demographics. What was strange and exotic about the band was that it was mixed and it was a tight unit. When they arrived in London in 1965, the band members embodied, staged and challenged British jazz's cultural politics of race. It is, in my view, this challenge that leads to the curious kinds of separation I have alluded to earlier in naming the band "Chris McGregor and the Blue Notes," where McGregor emerges as leader. This splitting

⁴⁶ McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 167.

⁴⁷ Banks and Toynbee, "The Making of the British Jazz Avant-Garde," 104. The other group is the Brotherhood of Breath.

⁴⁸ Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioneers*, 100; 264.

⁴⁹ Banks and Toynbee, "The Making of the British Jazz Avant-Garde," 105.

⁵⁰ McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 87-128.

⁵¹ Banks and Toynbee, "The Making of the British Jazz Avant-Garde," 106.

in my view, is one example of how “the translocal movement of works of expressive culture in arenas defined by racialized power relations” are transformed by these new contexts.⁵² The separation was echoed at the musical level. It enabled members of the London jazz scene to disaggregate the styles that constituted the Blue Notes’ South African jazz, which since the 1960s has been described variously as “urban Zulu popular music called kwela [and] a passionate lyricism inspired by hymns and black South African church music,” “township jazz styles of kwela and mbaqanga,” and “township and kwela musics from back home.”⁵³ These nuggets of styles could then be *mixed* with African American jazz and European free improvisation. Lewis Nkosi addressed this disaggregation best in 1966 when he wrote:

The reason why European critics have been having such a hard time trying to characterize South African jazz is that, most of the time, it betrays no perceptible differences in formal structure from jazz as it is played elsewhere ... As for actually isolating anything in the intrinsic structure of the music which could be described as an ‘African Sound’, well this was more than the critics could do.⁵⁴

I am inclined to agree with Nkosi. Evident in these descriptions of the Blue Notes in London is the strain to understand the South Africans’ jazz in black cultural nationalist terms. Jazz’s emancipatory role in South Africa had long been acknowledged: its liberatory energy is buoyed by “vital, creative, ever-changing” fusion, and its posture towards the world is internationalist.⁵⁵ The desire to isolate “African elements” that can then be mixed with something else is a desire to identify an Africanness that is insular, that exists before fusion (even if the element is popular music) and is static. The ambivalent relation of jazz and race in 1960s London marks the limits of jazz solidarity. British jazz’s “radical experiments in musical multiculturalism” conflict with progressive South African jazz’s nonracialism, which was forged in South Africa’s late 1950s and early 1960s, where jazz solidarities were also formed and destroyed by race.⁵⁶

⁵² This is the case even when works of expressive cultures come from racialized contexts. Bethlehem, “Restless Itineraries,” 49.

⁵³ Banks and Toynbee, “The Making of the British Jazz Avant-Garde,” 104; McKay, *Circular Breathing*, 167; Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioners*, 261.

⁵⁴ Nkosi, “Jazz in Exile,” 35.

⁵⁵ Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*, 4; 10.

⁵⁶ Banks and Toynbee, “The Making of the British Jazz Avant-Garde,” 105-6.

Die Sestigers: the Rise of a South African Jazz “Art World”

Maxine McGregor’s biography of her late pianist husband’s early life dwells on his urbanization, from a rural Transkei mission station to urban Cape Town. Her life, she wrote, was far more “orthodox,” except for her family’s migration from Durban’s “relatively easy mixing of races” to Johannesburg.⁵⁷ 1957 was an important year for the couple, for it was then that Chris McGregor, in the second year of his music studies at the University of Cape Town, started playing jazz, Claude Debussy, Béla Bartok, Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern. That year also saw his involvement in student politics and the beginning of his mixed-race big band and smaller ensembles.⁵⁸ For Maxine McGregor, 1957 was also the year she travelled to London, from where she understood the politics of apartheid South Africa.⁵⁹ Six years prior to their meeting in 1963, then, both had stepped out of white South Africa’s conventional social world: one by crossing the nation’s borders and the other by immersion in Cape Town’s black jazz cultures.

The latter world has been documented aplenty, with Hardy Stockmann’s and Ian Bruce Huntley’s photographs depicting a non-racial and convivial atmosphere of backstage fraternizing, laughter, eating, drinking and smoking, of jam sessions and performances in Cape Town’s legendary jazz clubs, halls and other locations.⁶⁰ Often, these images have been used by South African music historians to argue against descriptions of the 1960s as a decade of silence.⁶¹ For example, David Coplan refers to this world to maintain that black jazz musicians remained popular with white liberal audiences.⁶² Gwen Ansell’s 1960s are characterized by four forms of attempted repression: the closure of jazz venues, the entrenchment of apartheid ideology as forced retribalization, the “creation of distractions,” and “exile.”⁶³

These writers identify the decade as especially difficult for black jazz musicians. Much of black jazz’s struggle for them lay in the closure of venues and in the co-optation of jazz production by record companies, a move that undermined the musicians’ agency and engendered an anomic relationship between South African jazz performers and their audiences. Music

⁵⁷ McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 1-9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7; 12.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁰ Rasmussen, *Cape Town Jazz, 1959-1963*; Albertyn, *Keeping Time, 1964-1974*.

⁶¹ Ballantine, “Introduction,” 1-4; Eato, “A Climbing Vine through Concrete,” 241-67.

⁶² Coplan, *In Township Tonight*, 233.

⁶³ Ansell, *Soweto Blues*, 109.

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festivals, especially those sponsored by South African Breweries, were a temporary and problematic solution: they led to the recording of excellent South African jazz, but they were commercial enterprises that occurred annually and therefore could not sustain an ordinary jazz culture.⁶⁴ For South African jazz to remain an ordinary culture, it had to remain accessible to ordinary people. But not all post-Sharpeville jazz was of the townships; an important institution, which was mostly unwilling to take on this role but was urged by its few radical members to do so, emerged as jazz's temporary space: the "liberal" university.⁶⁵

The university was an important space because, despite the increase in beer-sponsored music festivals at this time, these festivals were often violent. They were framed by strict legislation prohibiting mass gatherings by black people and were therefore closely policed. This is why McGregor had to "black up" and hide his hair to look "colored" at the 1962 Moroka-Jabavu Cold Castle jazz festival, on his first trip to Johannesburg with the Blue Notes. As his brother Anthony McGregor recounted:

I don't think he would have been very welcome there [at the festival] from the authorities had they known he was white. Chris said himself that what finally tipped the scales for him, what finally made him realize that he had to leave South Africa was when they were playing [...] an open-air festival in Port Elizabeth. The police started [...] beating up some of the spectators, and it became quite a tense scene. And Chris realized that just by being there, just by playing that music, and being a white playing in black areas mostly, he was actually endangering people's lives. That he might get away with it because he was white, but other people might in fact lose their lives from just listening to the music.⁶⁶

Such incidents were sure to shock to a musician who was used to playing in Cape Town's fringe leisure scenes and bohemian hang-outs, both of which were extensions of student life. For even while clubs like the Vortex Coffee Bar (immortalized in the Blue Notes repertoire as "Vortex Special") were for whites only, they were open to everyone once jazz began playing at the end of an evening. Performing in blackface for a Xhosa-speaking Anglo-South African child of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 127-8.

⁶⁵ In South Africa, a liberal university is one that attempted to ward off the state's systematic implementation of "university apartheid," which was underwritten by the Extension of University Act of 1949. Phillips, "What did Your University Do during Apartheid," 173-7.

⁶⁶ Ansell, *Soweto Blues*, 133-4.

missionaries in the Transkei, who chose to abandon his degree in classical music ~~at~~ a prestigious university, must have radically changed McGregor's sense of being-white-in-the-world and jettisoned any sense of apolitical jazz solidarity with black musicians. Before 1963, white jazz bohemians were still visible, though small in number. Their alternative ideas were influenced by the so-called "Beat generation" and owed much to Jack Kerouac and Ernest Hemingway, and to the writings of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.⁶⁷ As in the United States, this scene's soundtrack was jazz and it was populated by those who would form the nucleus of a self-proclaimed radical Afrikaans literary movement, *Die Sestigers*, whose most famous members were André Brink and Breyten Breytenbach.⁶⁸ As John Daniel (who was the President of the National Union of South African Students and hosted Robert F. Kennedy's visit to South Africa in 1966) and Peter Vale remind us, in 1964, Etienne Leroux published a novel called *Sewe Dae by die Silbersteins* [*Seven Days at the Silbersteins*], which many came to regard as the founding of [the] new writing movement."⁶⁹ The scene was webbed by New Age discussions that were "taken much too seriously," with alcohol, marijuana and the newly-available drug (at least in South Africa) LSD, whose virtues Chris McGregor would regularly "extol".⁷⁰ More than three decades later, Maxine McGregor referenced this scene to explain the couple's coming of age in the 1960s.⁷¹ The literary *sestigers*, Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink, had imbibed the mood of May 1968 while living in France; the scholar Richard Turner, assassinated in 1977, inspired a generation of radical South African scholarship.⁷²

The combination of liberal and radical student politics with jazz led to the rise of a jazz art world that was similar to that of the international scene that has been examined by Paul Lopes.⁷³ This scene, which included the rise of jazz's reception as "art" and whose most visible face in the United States was Dave Brubeck, conferred "a new legitimacy" to jazz because it pursued "the college market as a new source of income and prestige."⁷⁴ South African jazz musicians and liberal students would have been aware of these trends: the former admired

⁶⁷ Lunn, "Hippies, Radicals and the Sounds of Silence," 63.

⁶⁸ McDonald, *The Literature Police*, 258.

⁶⁹ Daniel and Vale, "1968 and South Africa," 145.

⁷⁰ *Cape Town Jazz*, 116-8.

⁷¹ McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 11.

⁷² Daniel and Vale, "1968 and South Africa," 145; 141.

⁷³ Lopes, *The Rise of a Jazz Art World*.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 235-6.

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Brubeck, and the students would have been interested in jazz's invasion of universities that otherwise paid no attention to the music.

The making of South Africa's jazz art world, however, would have slightly different nuances to its American counterpart. First, in South Africa, many of the white jazz players involved in this art world were otherwise pursuing conventional Bachelor of Music degrees.⁷⁵ As liberal students, some participated in what Helen Lunn has described as the drive towards community work,⁷⁶ by volunteering to teach musicians otherwise barred from the music departments of the universities. One result of this outreach, as Chris McGregor recalls, was that he "found [himself] in charge of classes for some dance and jazz musicians" who became members of his first mixed big band.⁷⁷ During this time, too, *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* arrived for the Cape Town leg of its countrywide tour in 1959. For Chris McGregor:

It was a period of jazz explosion. I found myself playing each night wherever the music was and studying each day; I *never* slept. It passed like a dream, as if in another world. *That was a real education!* I took those musicians, [trumpeter Hugh] Masekela, [alto saxophonist Kippie] Moeketsi, [trombonist Jonas] Gwangwa, with me to the College of Music and with my rhythm section we gave lunchtime concerts which became quite an event.⁷⁸

The acceptance of jazz on the part of the College derived partly from its contribution to McGregor's degree requirements in composition (the same College denied entry to Abdullah Ibrahim). It was also because of the changed repertoire of this music in the jazz scene, which began to lean further towards extended forms and compositions that privileged listening over dance. For example, 1961 saw the first performance of Abdullah Ibrahim's suites, *Indigo* and *Jazz History – Moods*. The titles of the tunes, and their designation as suites, are overt nods to Duke Ellington's *Mood Indigo* and *Black, Brown and Beige*. In the same year, the trombonist Dave Galloway was commissioned by the University of Cape Town Arts Festival Committee to compose what Lars Rasmussen describes as "arguably the first example of Third Stream music in the country": the *Imagination '61* suite for a jazz nonet.⁷⁹ Galloway's "third stream"

⁷⁵ *Cape Town Jazz*, 44; 60.

⁷⁶ Lunn, "Hippies, Radicals and Sounds of Silence," 77-81.

⁷⁷ McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 12.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁹ *Cape Town Jazz*, 60-1.

commission was an important chapter in the creation of new jazz South Africanisms in the 1960s; since its labelling by Gunther Schuller in 1957, the third stream has indexed jazz music with strong influence from Western classical music.⁸⁰ This was McGregor's world and Galloway's suite formed part of its politics. It represented a cautious step in the changing face of jazz in South Africa as "art." Galloway's composition, however, did not have the same impact on South African jazz's repertoire as that of another South African, who was commissioned to compose a jazz work for the Johannesburg Arts Festival Programme that was later recorded at the University of the Witwatersrand's Great Hall in 1962: Gideon Nxumalo's *Jazz Fantasia*.

Jazz Fantasies of Black Liberation

Nxumalo is famous in South African jazz history as a "university trained pianist" who popularized the word *mbaqanga* during his tenure as host of the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) program called *This is Bantu Jazz*. He was fired from this post for voicing his political convictions after the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960. David Coplan has commented that Nxumalo was influenced by Dave Brubeck's jazz composition and pianism, and also by those African American musicians who looked to the continent for inspiration and thereby encouraged black South Africans to "re-examine their own indigenous sources."⁸¹ Nxumalo was commissioned to compose *Jazz Fantasia* in June 1962 and soon "got down to actual composition and arranging."⁸² His ensemble for the project was a Quintet featuring Kippie Moeketsi on alto saxophone, the Blue Notes's Dudu Pukwana on alto sax, piano and Chopi xylophone and their current bassist Martin Mgijima, with the Jazz Epistles's Makhaya Ntshoko on drums.

The 1962 configuration of the Blue Notes, which included McGregor and Pukwana as founding members, would have met Nxumalo during their performance as opening acts for Alan Paton's musical, *Sponono*. They shared that stage with the production at the Wits Great Hall prior to the show's departure for Broadway. Nxumalo had composed *Sponono*'s music but, as Jonas Gwangwa recalls, he was denied a passport to travel with the show to New York.⁸³ The Blue Notes hung out at Dorkay House and played gigs sponsored by Union Artists at Wits while

⁸⁰ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 95-6.

⁸¹ Coplan, *In Township*, 243.

⁸² Nxumalo, Liner Notes.

⁸³ McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 46.

awaiting the South African Breweries' 1962 Cold Castle Jazz Festival. It was also in this year that Moholo and Feza would meet their future colleagues (Dyani would join them thereafter).

The composer viewed his commission as an opportunity to work with mbaqanga beyond its industrial production line. Once approached, he writes:

One of the first things that hit me was [...] here is an opportunity of *experimenting*; one that might not occur again. So I decided to experiment timidly, of course, but experiment I did. Why not try and use indigenous sounds, or as an alternative, why not try writing music that would try and portray the sounds around us. Township sounds, traffic noises, machines hammering in factories? That's the first question I asked myself.⁸⁴

Nxumalo in other words wished to narrate musically South Africa's spaces and rhythms of modernity. Mbaqanga had long done exactly this. Musically, however, *Jazz Fantasia* is indebted to the more experimental wing of the hard bop school in its South African aspect. For example, while tunes like "Isintu" exploited mbaqanga's *marabi*-based harmonic progressions,⁸⁵ others, like "Split Soul", utilized hard bop's reliance on dirty timbres. Also distinctive in this recording is the use of the Chopi xylophone in "Chopi Chopsticks" – a sonority employed by Nxumalo "to show that indigenous African instruments [...] can be used as [...] jazz instruments".⁸⁶ Rather than an African element, "Chopi Chopsticks" presents traditional music *already* transformed by jazz.

These experiments place the composer in the company of those post-bop musicians who tended towards experimentation through composition: the black Atlantic jazz avant-garde. More precisely, Nxumalo's aesthetics in *Jazz Fantasia* resonate with those of the American drummer Max Roach. The album's structure and thematic concerns obliquely reference the latter's *Freedom Now Suite* (1960), which was banned in South Africa because of its commentary on Sharpeville (in "Tears for Johannesburg"), but nevertheless circulated underground. Despite the diasporic concordance, South Africa's answer to the music's political statement dislodges the primacy of slavery as heard in the *Suite*. There are different histories layered here. *Fantasia* tells the story of southern African peoples from the "traditional" ("Chopi Chopsticks"), to a

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⁸⁴ Nxumalo, Liner Notes.

⁸⁵ On marabi as the foundational music of South African jazz see Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*.

⁸⁶ Nxumalo, Liner Notes.

philosophical statement of *ubuntu* using African jazz (“Isintu”), to an affirmation of these styles’ transformation into hard bop’s language (“Split Soul”). Also like the *Suite*’s “Triptych: Prayer; Protest, Peace,” the eponymous tune consists of three movements, but tells a different story through a soundtrack of the ordinary: “The Rat Race” of industrial racial-capitalism, leisure in “Home at Night,” and the perils of pleasure in “Having a Ball.” Nxumalo’s triptych is perhaps one of the earliest instances where black South Africa’s post-bop response to its hostile 1960s may be seen to be met with laughter rather than with rage.

This laughter is of course a misdiagnosis. Because *Jazz Fantasia* was composed in a decade of concerted retribalization, Nxumalo’s almost casual description that the work was meant “to show the everyday life of a typical urbanized African” was at least an equal insistence on civil liberties as was Roach’s on civil rights.⁸⁷ That Nxumalo considered both to be intertwined or at least equal may be heard in the explicit citation of the then-banned “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” near the closure of “Home at Night.” Pukwana’s involvement in Nxumalo’s project while already a Blue Notes member is important for tracing the anatomy of the Blue Notes’s hard bop, mbaqanga and new jazz South Africanisms in the 1960s. For, whereas McGregor’s world was preoccupied with presenting a changed face of jazz as “art,” Pukwana’s experimental jazz world engaged with new performance styles that were modeled on the African American jazz avant-garde.

As these worlds merged, the Blue Notes took up invitations to play at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) for their arts festival at least twice, in 1963 and in 1964. They also played at the historic black Fort Hare University in the small Eastern Cape town of Alice, performed at the black University of Natal Medical School (Biko’s alma mater), and a few more times at the University of Cape Town and at Wits.⁸⁸ Their presence in Cape Town was strengthened by the staging of (another *King Kong* luminary) Stanley Glasser’s musical, *Mr Paljas*, for which McGregor composed the music. Beyond this, their repertoire for these engagements remains uncertain. We do however know that, in line with developments in the fine arts and photography, the Blue Notes were included in multimedia performances. For example, they headlined the line-up for *Beyond the Blues*, a show that integrated poetry and jazz, similar to

⁸⁷ Nxumalo, Liner Notes; Fischlin, Heble and Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now*, 99-140.

⁸⁸ McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 46-64.

such performances in African America.⁸⁹ These occasions were organized by the actor Zakes Mokae, who remains famous for his collaborative work with Athol Fugard. According to Chris McGregor, Pukwana was also a member of the orchestra for Ben ‘Satch’ Masinga’s *Back in your own Backyard*, one of the post-*King Kong* musicals of the 1960s.⁹⁰ These performances and favorable notices in the literary press saw the Blue Notes compared to Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington and Ornette Coleman, thereby aligning them with a genealogy of jazz experimentalisms that already included Coleman’s “free jazz” *while still in South Africa*.⁹¹ Indeed, South Africa’s 1960s bohemia viewed the group so favorably that their reputation spread to West Africa, with the University of Ibadan offering to sponsor the band. When the group decided to leave for France, the Nigeria-based Mbari Writer’s Club, until recently run by Es’kia Mphahlele, sent a sum of £140 to assist their departure.⁹²

The Blue Notes’ activities in 1960s South Africa’s jazz art worlds allow us to trace the aesthetic and political avant-garde solidarities that would shape the band’s jazz identities in exile, first in the live scene and in their debut album *Very Urgent*. They reveal how the white musical *sestigers* attempted to form a counterculture and to some measure succeeded, until the radical challenge posed by Black Consciousness rendered them mute or otherwise forced them to find new ways of expressing their political engagement through jazz. It must be said, though, that while in the United States Dave Brubeck’s “jazz goes to college” concerts and recordings engendered a jazz culture that aimed to be “more upscale, less interested in social protest, and whiter,”⁹³ in South Africa this was demonstrably not the case. Black jazz *sestigers* forged new musical South Africanisms that transformed 1940s mbaqanga in response to their radically changed context: timbres were darker as the tenor saxophone usurped the alto sax’s popularity; improvised solos were longer than record companies had previously allowed; the syntax of South African traditional musics jostled with rhythm changes. Jazz’s forced removal from shebeens to often hostile upscale venues did not efface its socio-political importance as a symbol and voice of black resistance, though it resisted being reduced to anti-apartheid protest.

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⁸⁹ Lopes, *Jazz Art World*, 266-8.

⁹⁰ McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 23.

⁹¹ Beinart, “The Beginning of a Tradition,” 49-55.

⁹² McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 51 and 65.

⁹³ Monson, *Freedom Sounds*, 94.

“Don’t Stir the Beehive:” The Musical Rhetorics of Urgency⁹⁴

Very Urgent was recorded by The Chris McGregor Group for Joe Boyd’s Witchseason

Productions, to which the band was signed in 1967; it was released by Polydor in 1968. As its personnel consisted of Dyani on double bass, Feza on pocket trumpet, McGregor on piano, Moholo on drums and Pukwana on alto saxophone, the album is also the first recording of the South African Blue Notes in Britain. The addition of reedman Ronnie (Ronald Irving) Beer to the Group would not have been especially disruptive. In South Africa he had played with all members of the Blue Notes in various ensembles.⁹⁵ His inclusion suggests that the Group either wished to recreate the soundworld with which they were familiar or to explore a different soundworld with a familiar musical configuration. The naming of the sextet as The Chris McGregor Group is probably due to a combination of these desires. Sazi Dlamini suggests it was connected to McGregor’s “conceptual leadership”, as four of the six tunes in the album are his compositions.⁹⁶

On its release, the album was understood as an important statement of the British jazz avant-garde movement. Its music encouraged this interpretation, as it ventured far out of the hard bop aesthetics the band had previously favored: in their performance approach in the first track “Marie My Dear,” in McGregor’s compositional style in “Travelling Somewhere,” “Heart’s Vibrations,” “The Sounds Begin Again,” and “White Lies,” and, in the band’s improvisational approaches throughout, which embrace to varying degrees characteristics associated with free jazz. Free jazz has been labelled postmodernist because it partakes in the cultural sensibility characteristic of the post-1960s, when established notions of structure, form and expression were increasingly challenged and rethought in literature and across the arts. At a broader level, *Very Urgent*’s embrace of musical postmodernism is evident in its loose conception of tunes as such, and therefore of the idea of the composer. For example, Pukwana’s “Marie My Dear” segues into McGregor’s “Travelling Somewhere,” and both appear as one track in the album. A different

⁹⁴ Louise Bethlehem’s seminal paper on “The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid” has little immediate correlation with my discussion here, since music, unless understood crudely or else when deliberately programmatic, cannot easily be understood as “stenographic.” It is worth noting however, that music may be engaged in certain kinds of semiotic contracts, whose elucidation is more properly the work of music theorists. For now, I borrow her terminology for its sheer rhetorical force. Bethlehem, “A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger,” 365-89.

⁹⁵ *Cape Town Jazz*, 93.

⁹⁶ Dlamini, “The South African Blue Notes,” 317.

kind of listening is therefore required, bearing out Lewis's observation that "the listener also improvises, posing alternative paths, experiencing immediacy as part of the listening experience."⁹⁷

Two alternative paths are possible here, which I, following George E. Lewis, term "Afrological" and "Eurological."⁹⁸ As he explains, the terms refer to "musical belief systems and behavior that [...] exemplify particular kinds of musical logic."⁹⁹ The Eurological path allows *Very Urgent* to be interpreted as an important example of British avant-garde jazz of the late 1960s, evident in how it was packaged and marketed as such and in how its musical arrangement has been understood. *Very Urgent* is of its time and place. Released in May 1968, "it was quite probably the most 'out' recording made in Britain to date."¹⁰⁰ Like Ornette Coleman's *Free Jazz* (1961), whose album cover featured Jackson Pollock's *White Light*, and like Cecil Taylor's *Unit Structures* (1966), *Very Urgent*'s cover announced its relationship to contemporary underground music and popular culture scenes. Whereas its equivalents in the United States could trace their packaging to an individual artist's influence, however playfully signified (as in *Unit Structures*), *Very Urgent* highlights how live popular music happenings were promoted in late-1960s London.¹⁰¹ This was partly because Boyd's company also produced jazz influenced folk-rock groups like Fairport Convention and the Incredible String Band. Typical of this scene, the album's cover, which was designed by Osiris Visions, favors a psychedelic aesthetic.¹⁰² Gentler than the riot colors and swirling texts of psychedelic art, *Very Urgent* is presented in earthy colors of brown and orange seguing to a warm yellow. Instead of *Unit Structures*' Warholian block repetition, or the dissolution of form in *Free Jazz*, its design is contained by the uniform roundness of the overall image. The title is in much smaller typeface than the group's name and is placed seemingly randomly—much like a postal package or envelope would be marked "urgent," with a red sticker.

In its abstract visual design, *Very Urgent* is thus presented as a post 'modern jazz' (or post-bebop) offering, transitioning past Britain's bebop mainstream. The album's liner notes

⁹⁷ Lewis, "Improvised Music after 1950," 148.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 131-62.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁰⁰¹⁰⁰ Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioneers*, 264.

¹⁰¹ Frith et al., *The History of Live Music in Britain*, 169-196.

¹⁰² Osiris Visions was an offshoot of the London underground newspaper, *The International Times*, in charge of designing it posters and album covers. Its work appears on albums for bands like Soft Machine and The Who.

were written by the critic and Blue Notes aficionado Danny Halperin, who describes the record as “a few of their moments together,” an event or temporary consolidation of their appearances in the live scene.¹⁰³ Absent from his description is the language of liner notes in the era of hard bop. For example, Halperin makes no mention that the Group is a sextet, or which musician belongs to the frontline or to the rhythm section. Indeed, playing is absent entirely from his narrative; what is emphasized instead is the musicians’ need for communication and singing. Jazz structures as mediators of musical expression——12-bar blues, AABA 32-bar forms, Tin Pan Alley-derived forms——are similarly unnamed. The materiality of the record as mediated and as a mediating access to the Group’s music is minimized by attributing the event of the album’s production to an urge, as the musicians’ “need precedes the deed, the recorded legacy of their very urgent insistence on playing what they hear.”¹⁰⁴ Only when identifying this “very urgent insistence” does Halperin admit social environment as a context for the Group’s style of music. In contrast to the naturalism inspired by the chance happenings he earlier eulogizes, he later concedes that,

not many may sing suddenly, anywhere, and not all can [...] From their coming together in South Africa and through subsequent travels, tribulations and separations the Chris McGregor Group has tried, not always successfully, to begin to arrive at the point where six musicians can hope to start to translate what they have absorbed and are absorbing into a part of what they play.¹⁰⁵

Halperin’s insertion of struggle into the *Very Urgent* story enables the album to gain meaning beyond anarchy, indeterminacy and pure chance——beyond what Lewis has described as a broadly Eurological formulation of freedom championed by John Cage.¹⁰⁶ His inclusion of South Africa as the context from which the musicians’ very urgent insistence to play germinated, recalls the South African jazz art worlds I earlier discussed. The allusion to struggle should not be reduced to apartheid. Halperin locates struggle in the musicians’ insistence on playing what they hear rather than bow to jazz convention. This kind of authenticity, however, is not unrelated

¹⁰³ Halperin, Liner Notes.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, “Improvised Music after 1950,” 136-7.

to Afrological free jazz, whose musicians struggled to perform and own their music beyond the reach of the dominant white culture industry.

The album's musical arrangement betrays a certain awareness of the product that would result from its making. In its original LP format, for example, the four tracks were evenly divided, with "The Sounds Begin Again" (segueing into "White Lies") the first track of the B-side. The arrangement, in other words, invites hearing *Very Urgent* as a narrative. For Dlamini, the narrative "is a document of a stylistic departure from the mainstream jazz-ness of the Blue Notes' post-bebop compositional approaches, towards an unbridled free-jazz approach".¹⁰⁷ Dlamini's thesis suggests that mainstream jazz is less "free" than so-called free jazz and that, for the Group to attain musical freedom, departure from their previous modes of expression was important. His argument is supported by Duncan Heining, who writes:

With the exception of Pukwana's "Marie My Dear" (aka "'B' My Dear") and "Don't Stir the Beehive," a traditional arranged by McGregor, the tunes [in *Very Urgent*] were penned by the pianist. It remains an important album of the period, if also a transitional one. The Pukwana track represents the *Blue Notes of old*, while "Heart's Vibrations" emphasizes the influence of Cecil Taylor and would not be out of place on *Unit Structures* or *Conquistador*. The same might be said of "The Sounds Begin Again," whereas "Don't Stir the Beehive" suggests Archie Shepp.¹⁰⁸

Heining's description of *Very Urgent* shows how the Blue Notes' turn to free jazz and the interpretation of this turn could displace some of the complexities surfaced by the Blue Notes' arrival in London. The ambivalent relation of jazz and race that the band's presence foregrounded is borne by Pukwana's "Marie My Dear," which was composed by the saxophonist in South Africa and now "represents the Blue Notes of old." The album's avant-gardism is attributed to newness forged in Europe and Britain, rather than to the experiments in South Africa's jazz art worlds. This linear conception of the Group's stylistic diversity is at odds with Moholo's description of *Very Urgent*:

¹⁰⁷ Dlamini, "The South African Blue Notes," 250.

¹⁰⁸ Heining, *Trad Dads, Dirty Boppers and Free Fusioners*, 264 (my emphasis).

We were strict and really very concentrated on this music. It was like something very urgent we had to do, and our first record was called *Very Urgent!* [sic] It was just like a flower that burst open.¹⁰⁹

For Moholo at least, departure, evolution, development or any other linear conception of the album is absent, even though legend holds that none other than the free jazz pioneer, Ornette Coleman, was present in Boyd's studio during the album's recording.¹¹⁰

The Group's most emphatic departure from hard bop soundworlds *is* on the album's final track, "Don't Stir the Beehive," which for Heining suggests the avant-garde saxophonist Archie Shepp. Drawing on Lewis, I want to suggest there is more to the piece than emulation of this African American avant-gardist. Comparing *Very Urgent* only to musicians like Cecil Taylor, Coleman and Shepp aligns British avant-garde jazz with the American scene, and black members of the Blue Notes expediently facilitate alignment with African American pioneers in this scene. This has consequences for the Group's identities as South African free jazz musicians; it erases history and memory, and exiles them from South African jazz history. Moreover, it reduces the musicians' South African jazz to the status of sources, which is why the Blue Notes' artistic success in Britain has been attributed to "a reading of African music as a kind of legitimately primitive form which might be incorporated into the new jazz-art that was emerging in Britain."¹¹¹ The choices are stark: you can be South African or you can be avant-garde; you can flavor jazz with your musical South Africanisms, but only for jazz's benefit.

"Don't Stir the Beehive" is labelled "Traditional," although which tradition is inferred is not specified. It has not been mentioned previously that the song was earlier performed by Gwigwi Mrwebi's band as "Beehive" and broadcast by the African Writers Club's Transcription Centre in 1966. In his introduction to the song there, McGregor explained that it was arranged by Pukwana (who played in Mrwebi's band), thus suggesting the tradition was South African.¹¹² Mrwebi's "Beehive" announces its South African provenance in "black Atlantic" ways. In his version, the tune bears strong traces of folk musicking traditions of the Western Cape. The melodic shape, its bouncy feel and "singable" distribution of intervals, the rhythmic comping

¹⁰⁹ McGregor, *Chris McGregor and the Brotherhood of Breath*, 117.

¹¹⁰ Wickes, *Innovations in British Jazz*, 65.

¹¹¹ Toynbee, Tackley and Doffman, "Another Place, Another Race," 5-6.

¹¹² National Sound Archives, British Library, "Mbaqanga – The Gwigwi Mrwebi Band".

from the piano on I-IV-ii-V (in E-flat Major), the syncopated rhythmic interaction between the acoustic bass and the drums, and the two-against-three relationship between the rhythm section and the frontline: all these suggest Mrwebi's "Beehive" to be a version of what Sylvia Bruinders has described as Cape Town's conceptual '*ghoema* musical complex' (Music Example 1).¹¹³

Music Example 1: Gwigwi Mrwebi's "Beehive", National Sound Archives, British Library, London, 1966. Author's transcription.

That this musicking tradition could, in London, be marketed as *mbaqanga* after Pukwana's arrangement, partly attests to the complexity of South African musical identities created abroad. Mrwebi's "Beehive" was performed by an ensemble of British, Afro-Caribbean and South African musicians as "London Mbaqanga." What is evident in Mrwebi's "Beehive" is *mbaqanga*'s mutant identity in pre-1960s South African jazz, when its relationship to *marabi* and other styles differed by degree according to one's location in the Union. Mrwebi's band may

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¹¹³ Bruinders, "Parading Respectability," 1-4.

sound the way it does because Coleridge-Goode's calypso-influenced bass, to which Laurie Allan responds on drums, reference a Cape mbaqanga that retained different musical relationships to marabi in comparison to the Zulu dance rhythms (*indlamu*) that dominated the style's recorded output from Johannesburg.¹¹⁴

John Fordham has compared the Group's "Don't Stir the Beehive" to "a New Orleans funeral dirge that becomes a deranged dance."¹¹⁵ The comparison has echoes of jazz primitivist discourse; of more immediate interest, however, is the reference to a New Orleans funeral dirge. The Group's "Beehive" is indeed dirge-like because of its slow pace that is carved and organized by block chords from McGregor's left hand from measure 6 (Music Example 2).

Music Example 2: The Chris McGregor Group, "Don't Stir the Beehive," *Very Urgent*, London, 1968. Author's transcription.

¹¹⁴ On *indlamu* see Ballantine, *Marabi Nights*, 80.

¹¹⁵ Fordham, "Chris McGregor Group."

The tune, and particularly McGregor's pianism here, is reminiscent of the hymn-blues popularized by Abdullah Ibrahim (4:55 – 7:25mins). Like Ibrahim's music, "Beehive" creates a shared "space of memory" by using musical signifiers that resuscitate "a whole *climate* of memory."¹¹⁶ Once Mrwebi's "Beehive" is heard in comparison with the Group's rendition, the latter's "traditional" clearly references what Christine Lucia, in her examination of Ibrahim's piece "Mamma," describes as "an essence, a residue of the syntax of centuries of [colonial, Christian, musical] encounter."¹¹⁷ Like "Mamma," "Beehive's" main "melody" is built on phrases that are conventionally singable for a Xhosa protestant church choir and, once church hymns were mobilized as political, by a larger protesting South African public (4:55 – 7:25mins and 12:10 – 13:20mins). Unlike "Mamma," however, "Beehive" makes little reference to the blues as a device to remember its own past musical occurrences. Both Ibrahim's and the Group's renditions may treat their respective hymnal chord progressions as jazz,¹¹⁸ but the musical terrain to which "Beehive" gestures is that of Xhosa-influenced Cape jazz.¹¹⁹ This is especially audible in the melody's final reprise, where the frontline instruments' manipulation of timbre—such as Feza's "buzz" effect on the trumpet and Pukwana and Beer's wailing on their saxophones—progressively recall the "spiritual" treatment of hymnal singing by church choirs (13:25 – 15:00mins). In jazz, such treatment may be compared to John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* (1965) and especially to the music of Albert Ayler. Because the medium of expression *is* jazz, the two "Beehive" tunes, as well as "Mamma," can point to the same climate, differently heard, voiced and configured.

The story of what was being remembered goes further than this. I have argued that the Blue Notes' avant-garde jazz solidarities cannot be contained by narratives of the British counterculture scenes of the 1960s, although they participate in them. By unpacking two versions of "Beehive," I have shown how the languages of South African jazz in Britain were inflected in radically different ways. The conventional perspective that *Very Urgent* and in particular "Don't Stir the Beehive" represents these musicians' enthusiastic adoption of European free and postmodernist improvisation, is in this way rendered suspect. For example, *Very Urgent's*

¹¹⁶ Lucia, "Abdullah Ibrahim and the Uses of Memory," 125-43.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 133.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 134.

¹¹⁹ Cape jazz has become synonymous with so-called 'Colored' musical signifiers like (Cape) Malay melodies and ghoema rhythms. This reductionist view is challenged by musicians' testimonies. Rasmussen, *Jazz People of Cape Town*; Martin, *Sounding the Cape*, 209-58.

“Beehive” also references a musical terrain whose status or identity as jazz was deemed unstable abroad. Its opening melodic statement (1:00 – 4:53mins), harmonized by the horns, recalls for this listener Christopher Columbus “Mra” Ngcukana’s important tune, “Koloni,” and, even more strongly, “Pondo Blues” by Eric Nomvete and His Big Five, from East London, South Africa. “Pondo Blues” is an arrangement of the Xhosa “drinking song,” “Ndinvalo Ndinomningi,” and denotes general agitation and unrest that was instantly recognizable to its 1962 Moroka-Jabavu jazz festival audience (where McGregor played in blackface to deceive apartheid police). Dlamini, quoting the avant-garde musician Ndikho Xaba, describes how the song incited violence from this audience: beer bottles were thrown and appeals to order ignored.¹²⁰ The origin of this response is not difficult to trace. By 1962, Pondoland had been involved in a protracted civil war, one incited by the proposed implementation of the Bantu Authorities Act and the creation of a nominally independent Transkei. Historians agree that this was the most widespread and organized of the rural rebellions in South Africa in the 1950s and early 1960s.¹²¹ It led to a state declaration of a local emergency, the political murder of civilians and widespread banning of suspected leaders and agitators. This history and experimentation in “Don’t Stir the Beehive” might also explain why the song is labelled “traditional” without any specific coding of an ethnic tradition: all members of the Group were from the Cape, and therefore shared the scene inhabited by Cape Malay choirs and bands, by Eric Nomvete and by Christopher Columbus Ngcukana; “Beehive” was first arranged by Pukwana from Port Elizabeth, Moholo and Beer were from Cape Town, McGregor grew up in Pondoland, Dyani was from East London, and Feza, from Queenstown, was a member of Nomvete’s ensemble.

But the story goes further still. In my doctoral dissertation, from which this paper is culled, the “Beehive” story ended here, in 1962.¹²² I next encountered the melody while delving into another world: Todd Matshikiza’s choral compositions. Matshikiza’s importance to post-1950s South African jazz history has tended to elicit only perfunctory acknowledgement, mostly for his composing *King Kong: An African Jazz Opera* (1959). I have argued against this myopia elsewhere, pointing out that the musicians who tend to be lionized in South African jazz studies regularly acknowledge their debt to Matshikiza. “Beehive” is a case in point. The source text for

¹²⁰ Dlamini, “The South African Blue Notes,” 160.

¹²¹ Badat, *The Forgotten People*, 118; Kelk Mager and Mulaudzi, “Popular Responses to Apartheid,” 392-393.

¹²² Dalamba, “Passports to Jazz,” 134

the experimentations of Gwigwi Mrwebi and the Blue Notes turns out to be Matshikiza's choral piece "Men's War Cry," which he composed for the musical *Mkhumbane*, collaboratively produced with Alan Paton in 1960 (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Todd Matshikiza's manuscript, "Men's War Cry," Cory Library, Rhodes University, Grahamstown (Reproduced with permission).¹²³

¹²³ I would like to thank Dr Cornelius Thomas of Cory Library, Rhodes University, for allowing me to reproduce this score prior to the cataloguing of Todd Matshikiza's Papers.

The complex history of *Mkhumbane* is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly: *Mkhumbane*, also the indigenous name for Cato Manor in Durban, was meant to commemorate the lives and music of the residents forcibly removed by the apartheid state to the distant township KwaMashu. Its premiere at the Durban City Hall was not to be, as it was scheduled for 28 March 1960, which was when the African National Congress's Chief Albert Luthuli called for a Day of Mourning the Sharpeville Massacre of 21 March 1960. This, and because it cannot be assimilated into the buoyant narrative of the so-called Sophiatown decade (it features very little jazz, for example), has submerged *Mkhumbane* into the silences of the 1960s. "Men's War Cry" (recorded as "Wathint' Amadoda") foreshadows the grim decade. The isiNguni lyrics of its melodic refrain are:

Wathint' uMkhumbane, Thint' indlu yenyosi

[Touch Mkhumbane, and you've touched a bee's nest]

Matshikiza's marginalia in Figure 1 show his deletion of the word "*uMkhumbane*", which he replaces with "*amadoda*" (men). This deletion, and the song's melody, allow one to hear the men's war cry against an earlier cry of protest: "*Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo*" [You strike a woman, you have struck a rock], the anthem of the women's anti-pass march to Pretoria on 9 August 1956. Indeed, the melodies for the women's protest song and the men's war cry are similar, and "*Wathint' amadoda*" is in any case performed by a mixed choir. In Paton's storyline, however, Matshikiza's potent coded reference soundtracks a shebeen queen's call for the men of Mkhumbane to rise up against tsotsis (gangsters) and the song is described as "a determined war dance." In late 1960s London, Gwigwi Mrwebi's jaunty 1966 rendition of "Beehive," arranged by Pukwana for the "London *Mbaqanga*" band, may now be heard in dialogue with the women's march's ten-year anniversary. The Chris McGregor Group's penetrating exploration of South African jazz language in free-form for their "Beehive" arguably captures the darker moment of the Sharpeville Massacre, when *Mkhumbane* could not be performed. It is also, for us, an elegy for the composer who was exiled in Britain and died in Zambian exile on 4 March 1968, three months after the album's recording in December 1967.

The Eurological and Afrological paths reveal the album to be a historically inscribed text. It points to a complex matrix of personal, musical and political relations that constituted the

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Blue Notes' lives up to the time of recording, and insists on the recognition of their roots without abandoning new jazz solidarities.

Conclusion

The Blue Notes worked through several jazz legacies to create socio-musical solidarities and meaningful lives as South Africans abroad. The musical currency of hard bop facilitated their entry into this world and enabled the mutual intelligibility from which further experimentation could be imagined. The cultural boycott, new left politics and the burgeoning counterculture further strengthened these relationships. That the entanglement of jazz with black civil rights could be less easily dismissed in the 1960s meant that the exiles' music could be understood as a symbol and voice of resistance. The story of the Blue Notes in Britain, however, also shows the limits of these solidarities, and cautions against viewing the musicians as mere beneficiaries of the 1960s ethos. Their presence in London foregrounded in the jazz scene the politics of race in Britain, of which Powell was only an extreme. Facing up to the Blue Notes as a nonracial band from a racist country produced contradictions and ambivalences that extended to their music.

Very Urgent's avant-gardism, for some, resolved these contradictions, but this was at the expense of the Blue Notes' musical identities as *mbaqanga*, hard bop and free jazz musicians, which were also forged in South Africa. Already exiled, the Blue Notes resisted this second exile.

Henceforth, their condition for solidarity was recognizing South African jazz as jazz.

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