Smithsonian Folkways Magazine™ Spring 2014

Anti-Apartheid Freedom Songs Then and Now

by Tayo Jolaosho

Between June 27 and July 8, 1990, the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife (now called the Smithsonian Folklife Festival) featured a program on "Musics of Struggle" that brought together artists and activists from various movements across the world. Eight South African activists, forming a double quartet, met with counterparts from across the United States, Ecuador, and Ireland, among other nations. Through a series of public conversations and performances, the South African presenters elucidated the clear role music played in the struggle to end apartheid. In 1990, apartheid, an untenable system, was already unraveling—Nelson Mandela had been released from his political imprisonment on February 11th. On February 2nd, the African National Congress (ANC) and other anti-apartheid organizations had been unbanned, and the De Klerk government had partially lifted a 25-year-old state of emergency. Twenty years into South Africa's democracy, ushered in by Mandela's 1994 election, 2014 offers opportune time for reflection. What endures of South Africa's sung revolution?

Emerging scholarship and media productions, including 2002's *Amandla! A Revolution in Four Part Harmony*, have helped establish the prominence of song and other cultural performances within South Africa's anti-apartheid struggles, as well as within the international solidarity movement (Hirsch 2002, Ramoupi 2013, Gilbert 2007, Gunner 2009). My research focuses on South Africa's freedom songs and outlines their origins and functions during anti-apartheid struggles and in post-apartheid mobilizations. This article details their broad musical features—call and response, repetition, and embodied rhythm. It also investigates the circulation of South African freedom songs beyond South Africa (Jolaosho 2012, Gilbert 2007), paying particular attention to their performance at the 1990 Festival of American Folklife. Situating our knowledge of freedom songs in the transmissions of that festival offers a rare opportunity to refine our understanding of the geographic and historical particularities of collective protest singing, as well as to recover songs that may have slipped from popular consciousness as mass-productions popularized select repertoires (including tunes like "Meadowlands," "Senzenina," "Thina Sizwe," and "Naants' Indod' Emnyama") at the expense of others. Finally, this article considers the emotional impacts that that these songs have on the activists who performed and who continue to perform them.

According to the archival record of the 1990 Festival of American Folklife, South African participants travelled to the National Mall from the New York metropolitan area. Six came from New York City, while two—Sipho Bavuma and Mbongiseni "Champ" Tshabalala—travelled from Jersey City. One participant, Tsepo Mokone, had left South Africa as a cast member of *Ipi Ntombi*, a South African musical that played in Las Vegas. He had previously worked in the mines, and this

experience informed his use of performance to address Johannesburg's exploitative working conditions. Another South African who contributed to the program had been trained as a language teacher and was thereby attuned to varied experiences of censorship and subversion in South African communities. In sum, these were artist–activists drawing on their range of experiences to elucidate the origins, functions, and shifting dynamics of freedom songs in struggles to end apartheid. Festival events took place on two main stages—a music stage on which performances were held, and a narrative stage on which performers provided exegesis through conversations with one another, guided by a facilitator, and available to public audiences.

One of the facilitators, a woman named Nenze, offered an apt aphorism on the origins of South African freedom songs: "[the present] is built in the womb of the old." The music of South Africa's struggle emerged from communal practices in which music accompanied everyday activities, from rising in the morning to work routines to settling in at night. Storytelling, song, and poetry—orally transmitted and for the most part democratically accessible—have long informed history and collective identity for the South Africans who hear and perform them.

Freedom of expression shifted under apartheid, as policies censored verbal expression, severed economic freedom, and delimited black mobility. In the struggle to resist oppression, performance played an important role, offering a vehicle for disguising subversive messages. "As much as there has been censorship," Sipho Bavuma noted, "our composers have used all forms of subtlety...to preserve their dignity by reaffirming themselves and their people through the music."

Sonic disguise is thus an important component of freedom songs. By taking melodies that were familiar (like the seemingly guileless tunes of renowned composer Reuben Caluza, according to one participant) and changing the wording to express messages of protest and concern, South Africans created songs of freedom that could be widely sung, even amidst apartheid-era censorship.

At times, though, artists made their messages quite explicit. When trade unionist Vuyisile Mini—a standout composer of popularly adopted freedom songs, like "Sizobadubula nge'mbayimbayi," and "Izakunyatheli Afrika"—was arrested and hanged by the apartheid regime, he is said to have gone to the gallows singing the song for which he is best known, "Naants' Indod' Emnyama." Mini's songs captured a shift in the 1950s toward militant self-assertion. "Izakunyatheli Afrika" warned then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd that "Africa will trample you. Watch out! You will get hurt." "Sizobadubula nge'mbayimbayi" stated, "we will shoot them down with cannons, they will flee."

Whether subtle or strident in their condemnation of the apartheid regime, freedom songs served as vehicles for protest, and often changed to express evolving social concerns. Their adaptation involved lyrical changes that were structured by melodic and—just as crucially—rhythmic foundations. Offering one example, Mbongiseni "Champ" Tshabalala shared the song, "kusasa ekuseni." The leader calls "kusasa ekuseni ngo 4 o'clock" (tomorrow morning at 4 o'clock), to which the response is "s'khululu Mandela, Mandela, s'khululu Mandela" (we are going to release Nelson Mandela). Tshabalala explained that the song emerged before February 11th of the year when Nelson Mandela was released, and the wording of the song changed upon his release.[1] In these adaptations, Tshabalala noted, "you incorporate what happened for the day or what you read in the news about the situation...in such a way that it fits the pattern or the rhythm itself."

Songs also adapted according to their contexts of use. Because many freedom songs were work songs, musical features often needed to relate to the tasks at hand—transporting materials, building tracks, and working in sync with a team. As Jerry Mofokeng explained, workers synchronized their movement to sung rhythms, which facilitated their physical coordination during important, often dangerous shared tasks. For example, iron workers' shared singing of "abelungu," a chant, and "shosholoza," a well-established song among international audiences of South African music, facilitated acute awareness of one another's movement—critical because, as Mofokeng explained, "If anyone misses the rhythm, they are as good as dead."

This example also reveals songs' critical capacity: The chant workers used, "abelungu," lambasted their white bosses for routinized indignities, like referring to workers not by their first names, but with the generic designation, Jim. "Whites are damned, they call us Jim," the chant lyrics in translation proclaim. Freedom singing was therefore a prevalent phenomenon that occurred not only in protest marches but also in routine spaces. In each case, individuals and communities were able to adapt the songs' form to their everyday contexts of use.

Paying attention to the practices underlying song formation and their contexts of performance provides insight into a more provocative question: What did these songs *do*, and how did they contribute to the social and political victories of the anti-apartheid movement?

South African presenters at the 1990 Festival explained that freedom songs relayed information as the anti-apartheid struggle unfolded. As Tsepo Mokone noted, these songs, prone to lyrical adaptations, "let the people know what's happening." "Imayini Yase (Coalbrook Mine)" is one of the most exemplary songs in this regard; it memorializes the 1960 underground collapse at Coalbrook mine near Sasolburg in which more than 400 lives were lost. Sung after the collapse to mourn the dead and spread the word, the song condemns the mines, which too often devoured healthy men in their prime and devastated the communities they left behind.

As our previous example illustrates, song often organized collective action by coordinating workers' tasks through sung political commentary. Even as workers experienced ill treatment, many could not afford to risk losing their jobs—a likely outcome of logging a formal complaint. Performance thus offered an outlet for subversion. Miners, for example, expressed their grievances through gumboots dances. While these practices were framed for bosses and tourists as recreational entertainment, they organized political action: they offered venue for coded complaint, redress, and collective planning, so that "by the time they wrap up for the day, [workers] know what to do." Workers took advantage of the recreational avenues available to them to organize among themselves even while under the scrutiny of employers. Disguise bypassed censorship; workers mobilized among themselves through the abstract medium of dance.

Song also helped downtrodden workers persevere. As Linda Bukhosini observed, performance fortified communities, and some songs (like "Qiniselani") were particularly effective for uplifting people's spirits in the face of danger. Other songs (like "Bayasibiza") helped bond South Africans abroad to the ongoing struggles taking place within the country. In each case, they built community among protesters in the face of opposition.

Participants from the 1990 Festival and the songs they shared with audiences attest to the fact that freedom songs emerged from past practices to articulate a wide range of present-day experiences.

But South African participants also used songs to cast off the yoke of apartheid and "create a new South Africa." As Nenze described, freedom songs help create "an aesthetic of the future."

As we celebrate 20 years of South Africa's democracy, freedom songs matter as much as they ever did. In contemporary social movements, South Africans are adapting apartheid-era songs and creating new expressions to bolster their ongoing struggles. The continued prevalence of these songs recalls the message of a particular civil rights classic: "Freedom is a constant struggle." Not only do freedom songs constitute legacies from the past, they indicate present dynamics and offer directives toward the future.

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[1] Mandela remained a prominent mobilizing figure even during his political imprisonment. "Kusasa ekuseni" is just one of several songs addressing him. Others include "Tshotsholoza Mandela," urging him to "go underground," and "Umboso Ka Verwoerd (Verwoerd's Regime)," which declared "Mandela, you are the one to bring about the fall of Verwoerd's regime."

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