

Why Jazz? South Africa 2019

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Abstract: I consider the current state of jazz in South Africa in response to the formation of the nation-state in the 1990s. I argue that while there is a recurring sense of the precarity of jazz in South Africa as measured by the short lives of jazz venues, there is nevertheless a vibrant jazz culture in which musicians are using their own studios to experiment with new ways of being South African through the freedom of association of people and styles forming a music that sounds both local and comfortable in its sense of place in the global community. This essay uses the words of several South African musicians and concludes by situating the artistic process of South African artist William Kentridge in parallel to jazz improvisation.

It's been really incredible to be an ambassador of South Africa and South African music when you go abroad. I feel like our heritage and culture has nothing to do with a skin tone. I really feel like it's got to do with South Africa and being South African, really trying to hold the flag very high, singing the national anthem, singing a lot of South African jazz repertoire, it's always very nice, and a very proud moment when you are overseas and you can say *this is my culture, this is where I come from*.

– Vocalist Melanie Scholtz, 2010¹

I spent winter break 2018–2019 with University of Pennsylvania undergraduates in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Pretoria. We visited a series of newly built or reconceptualized museums in the three cities, entities that had been created or reimagined in the post-apartheid era to reflect on South Africa's colonial and apartheid past and to move its peoples toward reconciliation and national unity in the present and future. We visited Cape Town's Slave Lodge, the District Six Museum, the Bo-Kaap neighborhood; we spent time climbing Table Mountain, Lions Head, and then rested in Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens; we listened to

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live music in the Mojo Hotel Food and Drink Market in Sea Point every evening; we watched the Goema festival musicians parading through the city center. At Mzansi Restaurant in Langa township, we heard and watched a marimba group perform while we ate. At the Amazink theater-restaurant in Kayamandi Township outside of Stellenbosch, we experienced an amazing musical theater production that resonated with the strands of Lady-smith Black Mambazo's *isicathamiya* and Mbongeni Ngema's *Sarafina* musical theater style but focused on personal stories. That was Cape Town. Then we flew to Johannesburg: visiting the Apartheid Museum and the Wits University Museum of Human Origins. Then onto a township tour of Soweto: stopping at Regina Mundi, a township restaurant, and the Hector Peterson Museum. On our final day, we traveled to Pretoria: first to the Afrikaans Taal (Language) Monument and then directly across its path, to the newly constituted Freedom Park.

Despite all of the monuments to the apartheid past, the only live jazz we could locate was at the Crypt restaurant of Cape Town's famous St. George's Cathedral, the site of much anti-apartheid resistance led by religious leaders like Archbishop Desmond Tutu. To reach the music, we walked through exhibits of acts of social and religious justice under apartheid. While the place was filled to capacity that night, it was hard to fathom the complete absence of South African jazz in early January – its peak holiday period – because South African jazz was arguably the music that most embodied the struggle for human and artistic freedom under apartheid. And yet, just after we landed in Cape Town, British-born South African jazz journalist and blogger Gwen Ansell announced and commented on the closing of Johannesburg's famous, if relatively short-lived, center for jazz: the Orbit.²

I had attended a very lively and sold out performance of South African multi-instrumentalist Kyle Shepherd and his band at the Orbit in late July 2018, and like so many others, struggled to understand how this amazing venue, a site of so much innovation and musical energy, had shut its doors. Sadly, what had happened to the Orbit was already true for so many other live venues for South African jazz: optimistically opened in the post-apartheid moment in Cape Town and Johannesburg, by early 2019, they had simply disappeared from the city's nightlife.

Even with the shuttered sense of live jazz venues in South Africa, like Ansell's blog post, my reflections on jazz and its purposes in post-apartheid and contemporary South Africa remain, nevertheless, largely optimistic. My optimism springs less from the capacity to propose a sustainable financial model for jazz venues, or a certainty that jazz as we know it – coming out of the United States with its distinctive sound and stylistic periods – will continue its close relationship with South Africa. Rather, I suggest that in many ways, South African jazz, like the nation itself, has come into its own since the 1990s, and as a result, South Africans are often more interested in defining a place for themselves, rooted in the knowledge of South Africa's own music histories, jazz or otherwise, than looking toward American musicians and models. While, ideally, everybody wants to make a living from their music – and often that means traveling to the global North with its more secure currencies – I will suggest that what sustains the drive to make music is rooted in a kind of post-apartheid embrace of the individual and collective freedom to use the music to explore the full range of what it means to be South African in the contemporary moment, to restore narratives previously suppressed, to celebrate place, to sound

local, and perhaps also to connect musically to other genres that are often deftly woven into the fabric of jazz improvisation. In other words, while South African jazz continues to exist in a condition of precarity, constantly threatened by loss and even extinction, it pushes its way to new modes of experimentation, renewal, human connectedness, healing, spirituality, and the celebration of newly found human freedoms: musical, political, and unfortunately much less so, economic.

In this essay, I respond to the question “why jazz?” by engaging interrogatively with how musicians relate to South Africa’s apartheid past, how they want to be in the present, and how they think themselves creatively into the future. I do so from an intergenerational perspective, remembering that the South African jazz community includes those born before apartheid, those who lived under apartheid, and a growing number of those who have recently gained diplomas, certificates, or degrees in jazz performance as the “born free” generation: that is, they never experienced the brutality of the apartheid regime and so carry mixed feelings about constant references to apartheid experience and history. That said, what is clear is that in post-apartheid South Africa, with the return of those who left the country in the late 1950s and 1960s, the creation of jazz education programs at several universities starting in the 1980s and the presence of a handful of annual jazz festivals and clubs in several cities, many South Africans at least know something about a category of performance called South African jazz. And yet, with all the monumentalizing of South Africa’s brutal past – new and reconfigured museums, tourism routes and destinations, documentary films, and new school history curricula – there are very few spaces or buildings that pay tribute to South Africa’s rich and varied jazz history. That heritage/history is

mostly heard in the living performances and recordings of old South African jazz standards or performed by contemporary musicians paying tribute to a living or deceased jazz legend.

I begin my response to the question of “why jazz?” by briefly outlining some of the challenges in South African jazz infrastructure. This discussion draws on the stories, motivations, and experiences of a handful of musicians who speak to the many ways in which the relatively small South African jazz community positions itself in South Africa, living as jazz composers, improvisers, and performers in the post-apartheid era. I cover concerns about the long shadow of political history in jazz performance; about defining the styles of South African jazz history; on the place of memory in jazz; on the use of jazz as a medium of individual and collective healing; on gender, non-racialism, moving beyond categories, building relationships across genres inside the frame of jazz improvisation, restoring the past through the sounds of jazz; on the continuing dissension in jazz; and reclaiming a place in the writing of national history. Nurturing global connections through musical travel remains important for many musicians in terms of recording and performance opportunities. In the final piece of this essay, I contextualize the work of jazz in South Africa by refracting it through the discourses of a similar process of collaborative art and music-making directed by Johannesburg-based artist/performer/director William Kentridge. I came to Kentridge’s brilliant narrations of art-making when I hosted two South African jazz musicians in the Arthur Ross Gallery at the University of Pennsylvania in October 2018: saxophonist McCoy Mrubata and pianist Paul Hamner played their version of South African jazz surrounded by an installation of Kentridge’s black-and-white prints.

Writing about the 2015 Cape Town International Jazz Festival, a three-day annual fiesta of jazz, loosely defined, National Public Radio contributor Giovanni Russonello captured the why of South African jazz: under apartheid, the “major art of resistance” was jazz, with its blending of a variety of influences from South Asia, Africa, Cuba, and the United States; but since 1994, with the first democratic elections at the end of apartheid, South African jazz has lost its “revolutionary edge. Jazz musicians now enjoyed free rein, but played a less clear role in the national narrative” even as musicians have begun to play along with the digital revolution that accompanied the political transformation of the last three decades.³

This idea frames the first response to the problem of shuttered venues, which is found in comments about South African opera and jazz diva Sibongile Khumalo’s 2016 album *Breath of Life*. Blogger Majola Majola remarks that the recording of a live performance is a remarkable feat in a context in which the modes of musical production and consumption have been “transformed by technology, affecting monopoly in music consumption trends, and reconstructing the marketplace all together.” The positive side is that artists are put in the driver’s seat creatively, and they are able to control the business side of creating their music. The negative side is that there is far less demand for their work because of the diversification of the marketplace, the emergence of a range of alternative marketing platforms, and, as he remarks scathingly, because South African radio “treats local musicians like a loathed step child, condemning them to the destitute position of begging and bribing in order to be heard.”⁴ There is simply a lack of support for jazz in the old venues, yet there are new possibilities with new technologies and privately owned studios.

The second piece in the story of South African jazz is what seem to be musician-initiated spaces for jazz performance, composition, and recording. With the reduction in the cost of recording equipment, musicians have opened their own modest recording studios. There are far more privately owned recording music studios in Cape Town, for example, than there are live performance venues for jazz specifically. A quick Google search named eighteen such studios in the city. In the Johannesburg-Pretoria metropolitan area, seventeen studios are listed. While the studios are not just for jazz, they show the shift from commercial clubs to private studios, and show that musicians are assuming creative control, are freer to experiment with new musical possibilities, and are thus pushing the music in a wide range of directions.

A third dimension of the changing infrastructure for South African jazz is its ties to tourism – visitors can sign up for a four-hour “jazz tour” that will take them to a jazz venue and perhaps to the house of a jazz musician for a meal in both Cape Town and Johannesburg. There are several venues in the townships of Johannesburg and Cape Town that will occasionally host jazz performances: African Freedom Station and King Kong are art/coffee/jazz spaces in Johannesburg. There are restaurants/art spaces and community centers in the Langa, Nyanga, and Gugulethu townships in Cape Town. Jazz in the Native Yards is a production company that provides infrastructure and audio technology for such events. But most of these spaces, like the Orbit itself, will not be able to sustain themselves for more than a few years.⁵

The fourth piece in South African jazz infrastructure and capacity is the longer-term growth of jazz programs in universities, such as the University of KwaZulu Natal, the University of Cape Town, and

the University of the Witwatersrand. These programs were largely initiated by American jazz musicians: the first was Darius Brubeck, son of the late Dave Brubeck, who founded the Center for Jazz and Popular Music Studies at what was then the University of Natal in the early 1980s. Both Mike Campbell and Michael Rossi helped establish the jazz studies program at the University of Cape Town. There are similar programs in most South African universities. These music programs were radical interventions at the time of founding because they required bold solutions at the tertiary level for certifying the performance and repertory knowledge of so many skilled musicians who may not have had appropriate high school certification to enter the university, but who proved to be highly skilled performers. Brubeck and others were innovative and persuasive in finding ways to allow these musicians into university programs. Some of the early graduates of these programs are now themselves South African university teachers of jazz.

A fifth dimension of South African jazz infrastructure comes from organizations outside of the country that periodically host South African musicians and engage in some kind of educational mission. One of these is Jazz at Lincoln Center in New York City. South African born but educated in the United States, Seton Hawkins is the director of public programs and education resources at Lincoln Center, and in that capacity, he has created Jazz Academy videos on South African music and regularly contributes interviews he has conducted with South African jazz musicians to All About Jazz. I draw on the interview transcripts, Web pages with South African musician and recordings content, and Jazz Academy videos posted on YouTube as resources for this discussion.

It is impossible to convey the richness and sheer productivity of South African jazz, its histories, and contemporary meanings to local and international audiences in this essay. My purpose rather is to render contours of the complexity and diversity of contemporary music-making in South Africa and by South Africans, to capture the vibrancy of jazz as a creative, improvising, borrowing, and fusing vehicle for South African musicians, and to do so mostly in the musicians' own words. This means that only a handful of contemporary artists will be heard from here. In the spirit of a representative democracy, I hope that individual words speak to broader experiences, as I can only convey snippets of larger narratives and conversations. The sources of musicians' words are several: interviews conducted by others, promotional materials from the musicians, Jazz at Lincoln Center educational videos, the All About Jazz interviews by Seton Hawkins, and my own conversations with musicians. I have taken the liberty of extracting out from larger narratives, cutting and pasting, sometimes in favor of the pithy comment that conveys essential positions or a specific description, and at other times allowing for a fuller explanation. I have also found that veteran musicians often have more to say than the younger generation.

I start with born-free musician Vuma Levin, who is a guitarist, composer, and bandleader, and who captures the changing priorities of jazz since the end of apartheid:

I think it would be a mistake to say that any of our music today is divorced from apartheid. On the other hand, we are moving more towards asking existential questions. How do we make meaning for ourselves in this new age, in the absence of a common oppressor? . . . This notion of the human and its acts of cultural production as contingent and dynamic rather than fixed and

essential made a lot of sense to me. I'm half black, I'm half Jewish, and it would be difficult for me to point to some essential history that I could call my own. So [Homi Bhabha's] mimicry and hybridity idea was a perfect way to understand what I am, from the vantage point of things I picked up along the way, musical or otherwise. . . . When the African National Congress was developing this "New African" ideology, a lot of the African nationalists' ideology filtered into the music. You hear it particularly in choral traditions, and also in jazz musicians' work. . . . But in terms of the music I write, it's Vuma. It's a very personal thing.⁶

Then, I discuss three jazz veterans, brought together for a panel at Stellenbosch University in July 2010 by British scholar Jonathan Eato. The panel was recorded by filmmaker Aryan Kaganof and the African Noise Foundation and hosted on Vimeo.⁷ Fortuitously, it captured the voice of saxophonist Zim Ngqawana, who died so suddenly in May 2011. Zim Ngqawana performs/converses alongside veteran pianist Tete Mbambisa and drummer Louis Moholo-Moholo. For all three musicians, prioritizing freedom, not just politically, but culturally, musically, and spiritually, fed the purpose of their music-making.

After hearing Zim Ngqawana's composition "Qula Kwedini," based on a Xhosa traditional song, Zim elaborates on his search for freedom in life and music by explaining:

I did that (Qula Kwedini) music because I felt I was born into a culture, a group of people from the Eastern Cape, the Xhosa people, a society. I had to pay my dues, I had to acknowledge I was coming from somewhere. But that's not all my interest anymore. I've done that. I'm not that committed to a culture, tradition. People ask these questions of me, if I am committed to African music.

I am not really interested in African music. I am more committed to universal consciousness. The music that I play now reflects that.

The band I am working with now [in 2010] is in New York, William Parker on bass, Nasheet Waits on drums, Matthew Shipp on piano. I met them at the Vision Festival. . . . So the music I'm dealing is improvised, totally improvised music. 100%. That is what I want to do all the time. Not to over-rehearse the music, we never rehearse at home traditional music. I used to say to people it's strange that we have to rehearse for hours on end. I've never rehearsed for a prayer meeting or funeral, for traditional ceremonies. I always wanted to go back to that where I just do things naturally. And now I have arrived at that. We play without rehearsals. We meet thirty minutes before the gig and that's it. The music we create is amazing. The chemistry we have, it helps me transcend. And it's beautiful.⁸

A little later he sums it up:

I would like to leave my children the legacy of freedom, free thinkers, intelligent young people, no fear, no greed, not being bound by tradition, culture, history. I had to drop all of that. . . . I don't consider myself an African. I'm not interested in that. It didn't help me. . . . I have no identity, I am not interested in identity because identity is false.

There's another thing about improvised music, we have to come to the music as equals. Nobody's going to count you off, nobody's going to tell you where you have to start. . . . It's not a performance that I do, it's like being at home in the community. We are meeting, celebrating. It's not far out as a performance, I actually like to look at it as a meditation.⁹

Improvising musician Nduduzo Makathini, who was born in 1982 and who has lived much of his life beyond the reaches of apartheid, reflects on the

push to freedom from tradition, culture, and language in Ngqawana's music. He pairs Ngqawana with the late great pianist Bheki Mseleku, who followed a similar path to rid himself of the shackles of identity. Makhathini commented to Seton Hawkins in 2018:

What's interesting to me is that for both Bra Zim and Mseleku, is that towards the ends of their lives, they were both moving towards trying to extract themselves from the Zulu nation in Mseleku's case, and the Xhosa nation in Bra Zim's case. They were trying to disown the idea of being a Xhosa or a Zulu music; they felt the tags were limiting and restricting them from universality. I find them to be really interesting people. . . . It has to do with trying to deconstruct these aspects I was describing earlier. Things like him being a Xhosa person and thinking around the memories of his upbringing. He wanted, maybe not to disconnect, but to go beyond that, and it comes through in his improvisation. I don't know if you've heard the live recording from Linder Auditorium [*50th Birthday Celebration* (2010)], which is completely abstract, but you can feel connection to the hymnals he drew from Abdullah Ibrahim's music. You can feel connections to traditional music, but there is a constant movement away from that, too. He was into teachings about dissolving, this Zen state of No Mind. It plays in an interesting way in his music, especially when he was playing with people like Matthew Shipp at the Vision Festival. It was about creating an alternative space for people to freely express themselves, whether through music, dance, painting.¹⁰

Free-jazz musician, drummer Louis Moholo-Moholo follows on from Ngqawana:

I'm happy, I'm happy that you say this because I started playing this avant-garde and I was blamed. Why don't you play your own

music? Your music, like now South Africa is free and we are dealing with the world . . . so the thing is we are about 45 million people, so we can't do mbaqanga all of us. It's good, but some of the music we did actually broke down the Berlin Wall. . . . The improvised music helped to bring down the wall. If you played mbaqanga music, it's ok, they knew about it. But then came this music, and it really pulled some punches. As I say, it's the first music that got into me, that makes sense to me. The free form: both hands free, feet free.

We're trying, but we've been damaged. How long will this go on? Coming back to South Africa and seeing this legacy, it's hurting, really. And I don't know what to do. I've been fighting all my life, to get this free music thing into the market. I've been fighting: I am one of the pioneers in this music.¹¹

Again, pianist, composer, and producer and the almost-born-free Nduduzo Makhathini reflects on the decades of Moholo-Moholo's fight for freedom in his music.

Jazz was always a music that could reflect people's pain, but in the Blues Notes' music, and Louis Moholo-Moholo's in particular, you find a confronting of what was going on in South Africa. There's an album of Louis Moholo-Moholo's called *Bra Louis – Bra Tebs* that has a song called "Sonke." On it, Bra Louis talks about how the music took them through pain, but also how it became a way of living and laughing together. It's such a powerful song, and also it sonically represents what it's talking about. It's got an ostinato in the bass, that to me represents the resistance, and then over that they develop these melodies over it and it goes abstract. But the ostinato remains. To me, it's a representation of what we've all been through, and Bra Louis captured the experience of exile in the 1960s in a profound way. He was trying to connect with a construct of home.¹²

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Jazz musician and film music composer Kyle Shepherd skeptically asks how one monumentalizes a living language, in response to us telling him that the Penn undergraduate class will visit the Afrikaans Taal (Language) Monument in Pretoria as part of our engagement with post-apartheid South Africa. Shepherd's question is wrapped in tones of emotional pain and anger, as he reflects back on his work with Afrikaaps, the Cape Town hip hop/spoken word collaboration from the early 2000s that sought to restore place and ownership of the language of Afrikaans to Cape Town's brown people.¹⁵ It was their ancestors who had originally forged the language of Afrikaans out of encounters with colonial Europeans. A language now widely recognized as originally written in Arabic script in the context of slavery, exile, and European colonialism, it was appropriated and repurposed as a whites-only language by the Afrikaner Nationalists in the twentieth century, as born out by the stories told and visually represented inside the Afrikaans Taal Monument in Pretoria.

Kyle Shepherd, Jitsvinger, and other Afrikaaps storytellers created a touring musical theater production to set the historical record straight, informed by academic research on the intertwined and complicated history of the Afrikaans language. Shepherd recalled with bitterness how the show was verbally slaughtered by the old Afrikaner journalists for the musicians' and poets' insistent restoration of the historical narrative of Afrikaans as one focused on the messy diversity and rich history of a language forged

in often brutal colonial encounters between those of European colonial disposition, and those who were exiled and imported from East Asia, Mozambique, Angola, and elsewhere as slaves. Quite literally carved in stone, the Taal Monument tells only one side of the story of Afrikaans history. But it stands, intentionally facing the more recently constructed Freedom Park, which in contrast monumentalizes the lives of those who fought the struggle for freedom from Afrikaner oppression. The Taal Monument remains a monumental reminder of the brutality of apartheid era exclusions and oppression. And it bears witness to the futility of building a museum to the language of a people. Perhaps like jazz and freedom itself, language should exist as a living entity, owned by no one group, freely shared, absorbed, borrowed, and localized.

I am tracking in my own musical way, chronologically, the story of Cape Town.¹⁶

At about the same time as the Afrikaaps project, Shepherd released a less controversial and more clearly jazz-inflected recording, a musical rendering of the restoration of a much-neglected piece of South African and human genetic history: the story of South African's KhoiSan, the first peoples, and indeed, the peoples with the most diverse and oldest repository of mitochondrial DNA. These are the people, denigrated and discarded by the apartheid regime, who are now believed to be the closest representatives of our human origins. And they are blended into the mixed heritage of so many people of the Western Cape. On Shepherd's *South African History IX* recording, the Khoisan are represented by the clicking sounds of Khoisan language and performance on the xaru, or musical mouth bow of the Khoisan peoples.

*We are ok in our skins with being South African and African musicians within the global space.*¹⁷

Sibongile Khumalo was born into apartheid, but also into a musically rich home guided by her father who was both classically trained and had a deep knowledge of and connection to Zulu music history and heritage. In the spring of 2016, a group of South African jazz musicians called Uhadi, which again, references the old hunting and musical bow of many Southern African hunter gatherer communities, was invited to perform at Lincoln Center. I talked with Sibongile about the use of the bow and its meaning for musicians in contemporary South African jazz and in the specific makeup of her New York City ensemble. Sibongile explained:

Uhadi is the name chosen because it references the root of our music, where we believe we come from as musicians, recognizing, acknowledging, embracing our traditional roots, our indigenous footprints, being comfortable with the past and present in how we shape the future of South African jazz. [South African jazz is] distinct from other kinds of jazz. These elements of our root music, of our folk music give us a distinct sound, they provide a distinct feature in the music, and basically we are comfortable with that, we are ok in our skins with being South African and African musicians within the global space.

So the string which you find in uhadi, refers to the tightness, brought about by the tension which you find in a group [as diverse] as this, but also the flexibility of the string, if you loosen it a bit and allow it to take its own shape, it creates a space for the group to improvise, to make music as a group. It allows for the group, the name itself suggests the need for flexibility, which resonates at the same time, off that small

gourd that you find in the instrument that makes that incredibly loud noise. *Carol A. Muller*

All of us, except perhaps one, all of us are bandleaders in our separate spaces and we have come together to collaborate, to create something that might be definitive of a jazz sound that is not Xhosa or Zulu or Afrikaans or Indian, that might actually come to be identified as “South African jazz.” Because everybody interprets, has interpreted, jazz in the way that they know how, from wherever they come from in the context of South African music as a whole context. Somebody like [Hugh] Masekela is distinct in what he does, but there are other elements of music that comes out of a group, a collaboration such as Uhadi.

What you find in Xhosa music you might not find in Zulu music or Sotho music, so picking up on an ihubo, a Zulu sound of ukuhuba, which is the chant that a Zulu singing musician would make, this would be different for instance to a Xhosa sound, a Xhosa word – [she illustrates both kinds] and over and above that within the Xhosa space of music making, you find the Xhosa women split singing. I can’t do that.

Invariably the band adjusts to what they hear, because they are familiar with the sound that music makers make at home. A lot of this music we hear subliminally, a lot of this music is there, so you incorporate these elements into this music because you have a well to reference from. And it just sort of filters through.

Yes, the music has been created, the melodies are in place, the harmonies are in place, the words are in place, but certain things, I guess like any learned art form or style you have a vocabulary that you draw from. And it sort of manifests itself and forces its way through.

And in the jazz space because improvisation is such an essential element of it, being able to refer to the different languages

from back home is a big boon, it helps. It helps a lot.

CM: So language becomes a kind of musical palette for you in a way.

SK: Yes it does, yes it does.¹⁸

We know that South Africa's "First Lady of Song" Sibongile Khumalo's engagement with all kinds of music comes out of her childhood home, and specifically her relationship with her father, the late Khabi Mngoma, the well-known music educator, conductor, and choral director. In the early 2000s, Khumalo performed the role of the Zulu musical bow player and clan historian Princess Magogo in Mzilikazi Khumalo's opera *Princess Magogo*. Magogo had been a key player in Khumalo's childhood, as she recalls visiting her homestead and hearing her sing Zulu history accompanied on the musical bow. In the last several years, Khumalo has incorporated musical recollections of those rural visits into the sound of her live performances, and others have also rendered similar sorts of traces into jazz performances. This, of course, is not new to South African jazz, particularly, as Makhathini commented above, in the musical renderings of those who went into political exile: Abdullah Ibrahim was quintessentially a narrator of musical memory, and there are echoes of a South African traditional past in the free improvisations of all the musicians of the Blues Notes who followed Ibrahim into exile.¹⁹

Born in 1982 in KwaZulu Natal, a decade before the end of apartheid, Makhathini released eight distinctive solo recordings in four years. Also a producer of other South African musical projects, he sums up what shapes and motivates his music-making:

Growing up [in KwaZulu Natal], I heard a lot [of] traditional Zulu music. It was based on some of the ceremonies and rituals I

attended as a child. As a young man I became involved in isicathamiya and other various acapella music. But the biggest influence for me initially was the Zionist Church, and their use of the drum, meditative chants, and prophecy. The Zionist Church incorporated Christianity and ancestral beliefs. . . . So I was introduced to music as a mode for spirituality. . . . Later on, I became attracted to the idea of how improvised music could be a way of promoting healthy communities.²⁰

I really see my path in South African jazz as a hybrid, a hybrid of a product of South African jazz as well as being influenced by American traditional jazz, so hoping to join the Miriam Makebas with the Ella Fitzgeralds. You can really express yourself with jazz, you are not limited with pitch or melody or rhythm. It's like jumping on a train and you have no idea where it's going to go to. Sometimes it's going to take you to the same place, but most of the time it's going to take you to an unimaginably beautiful place that you never thought you would land up at.²¹

Longing to work with a poet rather than her own lyrics, Melanie Scholtz engaged with anti-apartheid poet James Matthew's writings, in a two-year compositional and performance project, *Freedom's Child*. Here we capture the power of the words of the poet in quotes with the reflections of the singer:

"Freedom Child you have been denied too long, fill your lungs and cry rage."

It's another gravity that hits you in the heart.

"I am black. My blackness fills me to the brim, like a beaker of well seasoned wine. . . . White men say black is the color of despair."

We must listen, go back and listen and to look at the poems in more depth and say, I am privileged, I am here as a result of other people's sacrifice.

"Pain and blood brings our liberty."

*We live in a world where everything is so easy, so convenient . . . we are not really feeding ourselves good things, we're not writing enough, we watch too much television, we don't really know what is going on around us. So when you read poetry like James's work it's like another gravity in your heart.*²²

After releasing *Freedom's Child*, Scholtz joined with hip-hop artist Jitsvinger, musician Benjamin Jephta, and pianist Bokani Dyer to create something new, more modern, and to claim a place for the next generation of born-free South African musicians in *Our Time*. The recording possesses an intentional message about the privilege of being born free, about a new generation of South African artists, who are claiming the baton for new sounds and possibilities coming out of South Africa. As such, Scholtz creates a musical space for her generation, after reflecting back through a music and poetry collaboration on the gravity of what it meant to be an artist of color under apartheid in contrast to the sense of freedom she now celebrates in a democratic dispensation, at liberty to harness self-expression, love, joy, creativity, and passion without bearing the burden of an unjust political system. And it is Melanie Scholtz, this young woman jazz musician, who has the last word about the varied motivations and purposes of South African jazz.

In October 2018, we hosted the performance of South African jazz musicians pianist Paul Hamner and saxophonist and flute player McCoy Mrubata at the Arthur Ross Gallery on campus at the University of Pennsylvania. This was a joint project between Arthur Ross and the South African jazz musicians because, at the time, the Ross Gallery had an installation of South African artist William Kentridge. Hamner and Mrubata played their music amidst the visual treasure trove

of black-and-white Kentridge prints. Their music-making together was folded into a thirty-year friendship and musical partnership that had started before the end of apartheid, and in the odd logic of apartheid racial categories, involved them pursuing a partnership across the categories of "coloured" and "black" South Africa. When we talked with the musicians about the overlaps or conversations that might be rendered by locating their jazz performance in the context of Kentridge's art, we came up with very little. What connections could there be between three men who had grown up in very different circumstances largely based on apartheid racial categories: black, white, and coloured? While all three currently live in the same city, Johannesburg, and are about the same age, beyond a basic notion of the transformative capacity of Kentridge's prints and the work of transformation inherent in jazz improvisation, the question of some point of connection reached a dead end. That was the case then.

In drawing together the ideas about jazz as a form of artistic endeavor in contemporary South Africa and listening to conversations Kentridge has had with curators and others about his artistic process, I suggest that Kentridge's process is not that far from the work of contemporary South African jazz. Here are just a few examples: Kentridge, like all jazz artists, works collaboratively, picking out artists, including singers, dancers, visual artists, theater people, and composers, and they begin less with a clear sense of a precomposed piece or path to production than with a strong sense of the possibilities that come with collaborative experimentation, risk-taking, and questions. Each member of the team brings to the studio the hope not that they have answers, but rather that they understand first what the questions even are. They work with uncertainty, seeking out

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the gaps, for the gaps might lead to imaginative leaps. Allowing for the absurd, comments Kentridge, liberates one from the traps of linear thinking, permitting the release of complexity, of collage over straight narrative. There is an openness to dislocation, fragmentation, dismembering, remembering, and remaking, to allow for new and novel ways of making art, theater, and music.

Kentridge starts at the place of the “less good idea,” he relishes the possibilities and virtues of bastardy, there is no need for authenticity, for purity, for any real feeling of a center.²³ Erasure is his method of construction; he urges the viewer/listener/reader and cocreators to be fully engaged in the making of the work/performance/installation. At the very core of his process, one might argue that Kentridge relishes the contingent, the improvisational,

the provisional, the spontaneous, even the unexpected. And he wants everyone to play: “play creates the conditions that help the other part to happen,” he suggests. “I am more moved when uncertainty remains,” he says elsewhere.²⁴

Frankly, I can think of no better description of the values and processes of South African jazz. Stretching the string, borrowing, juxtaposing, rendering, disappearing, reappearing, liberating, restoring, remembering. So far from the American centers of jazz composition, performance, and canonization, South African jazz embraces the freedom to expand creatively on all kinds of possibilities, and to experiment with a multitude of partnerships, languages, instruments, and sounds, relishing the power of peripheral thinking and all the “virtues of bastardy.”

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Melanie Scholtz, “Melanie Scholtz,” YouTube, uploaded November 8, 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZZrHzZHicA>.
- ² See “RIP the Orbit: Time to Build New Jazz Spaces,” *sisgwenjazz*, January 4, 2019, https://sisgwenjazz.wordpress.com/2019/01/04/rip-the-orbit-time-to-build-new-jazz-spaces/?fbclid=IwAR3OKdJflPInpqmXo-aOeECue8XxyJNOh1VC_3jkHhvcnR-FpU11KphHJY.
- ³ Giovanni Russonello, “Three Jazz Pianists, A Generation After Apartheid,” *A Blog Supreme*, NPR Jazz, March 28, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2015/03/28/395541160/three-jazz-pianists-a-generation-after-apartheid>.
- ⁴ Majola Majola, “Sibongile Khumalo: An Eternal Breath of Life,” *noted.man*, March 16, 2016, <http://www.notedman.com/khumalo-breathes-life/>.
- ⁵ For Johannesburg, see, for example, “Afrikan Freedom Station,” *Gauteng: It Starts Here*, <https://www.gauteng.net/attractions/attraction-afrikan-freedom-station>; and “Johannesburg Jazz Safari,” *Coffee Beans Routes: Pan African Creative Travel*, <https://coffeebeansroutes.com/johannesburg-jazz-safari/>. For Cape Town, see “Where to Watch Live Jazz in Cape Town,” *CapeTownMagazine.com*, <https://www.capetownmagazine.com/jazz>; “Township Dinner and Jazz Experience,” *MyCapeTownStay.com*, https://www.mycapetownstay.com/Township_Dinner_and_Jazz_Experience; and “7 Top Jazz Venues in Cape Town,” *Travel by XO*, April 2, 2013, <http://blog.xoafrika.com/destinations/7-top-jazz-venue-cape-town/>. Please note, however, that the website presence does not necessarily mean that these events and spaces are still in existence; a website is not always taken down when a business shuts down.
- ⁶ Seton Hawkins, “Vuma Levin: Musical Painting,” *All About Jazz*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/vuma-levin-musical-painting-vuma-levin-by-seton-hawkins.php?page=1>.
- ⁷ See African Noise Foundation, “The Legacy,” *Vimeo*, October 14, 2014, on <https://vimeo.com/108933925>.

- ⁸ See “VISION Festival XV,” Arts for Art, <https://www.artsforart.org/vf14.html>. Prioritizing spontaneity, jazz singer Sathima Bea Benjamin would cite the aesthetic preferences of Duke Ellington as she experienced him in a recording studio in Paris in 1963: he used only one take. This resonates with the preference for fewer rehearsals articulated here by Ngqawana.
- ⁹ African Noise Foundation, “The Legacy.”
- ¹⁰ Seton Hawkins, “Nduduzo Makhathini: Jazz is a Shared Memory,” All About Jazz, February 1, 2018, <https://www.allaboutjazz.com/nduduzo-makhathini-jazz-is-a-shared-memory-nduduzo-makhathini-by-seton-hawkins.php>.
- ¹¹ African Noise Foundation, “The Legacy.”
- ¹² Louis Moholo-Moholo, *Bra Louis–Bra Tebs*, Ogun, 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGwMcf6wMJg>.
- ¹³ Author conversation with Penn students, Kyle Shepherd’s Atlantic Films studio, Cape Town, January 2019.
- ¹⁴ Jitsvinger in Dylan Valley, “What is Afrikaaps?” YouTube, uploaded March 3, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SVpBHC1_tU.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ See the promotional video for the 2012 release of *South African History !X* at Gallo Records, “Kyle Shepherd–South African History !X (Official EPK),” uploaded March 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXSHivweibo>.
- ¹⁷ I interviewed Sibongile Khumalo for Jazz at Lincoln Center’s South African Jazz tour. For videos of the interview, see Jazz at Lincoln Center’s JAZZ ACADEMY, “South Africa’s ‘First Lady of Song’ Sibongile Khumalo, Part One–Four,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ynLrbN2pg2o>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-KE4uzokXZw>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-aCgNJRH_o; and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZcgrqC1MPg>. See also Jazz Day South Africa, “Sibongile Khumalo,” YouTube, uploaded September 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NirSyilh7Y>.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ See Christine Lucia, “Abdullah Ibrahim and the Uses of Memory,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11 (2) (2002): 125–143; and Carol Ann Muller, “Musical Remembrance, Exile, and the Remaking of South African Jazz (1960–1979),” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Revival*, ed. Caroline Bithell and Juniper Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ²⁰ Hawkins, “Nduduzo Makhathini.”
- ²¹ Scholtz, “Melanie Scholtz,” interview as the 2010 Standard Bank Young Artist Award winner for Jazz. Some of the other women are keyboardist/singer Thandi Ntuli, saxophonist Linda Sikhakhane, and trombonist/singer Siya Makuzeni, all of whom are tightly connected to each other and to the broader history of South African jazz. See Thandi Ntuli, *Exiled*, Bandcamp, February 1, 2018, <https://thandintuli.bandcamp.com/>; Linda Sikhakhane, *Two Sides, One Mirror*, Bandcamp, January 16, 2018, <https://lindasikhakhane.bandcamp.com/>; and Siya Makuzeni, *Out of this World*, Bandcamp, September 12, 2016, <https://siyamakuzenisextet.bandcamp.com/album/out-of-this-world>.
- ²² The words and juxtapositions are drawn from an interview with Melanie Scholtz. See Slow-design Cape Town, “Freedom’s Child–Melanie Scholtz Sings J. Matthews,” YouTube, uploaded April 4, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQQ43kBZdSk>.
- ²³ There are many video recordings of Kentridge speaking of his process and rendering performances on YouTube. The most recent comes from his Brooklyn production “The Head & the Load.” See Park Avenue Armory, “Artist Talk: The Head & the Load,” YouTube, December 6, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJtUH5HSrWI>.
- ²⁴ William Kentridge and Rosalind C. Morris, *That Which Is Not Drawn* (New York: Seagull Books, 2014).