

Mbaqanga

Lara Allen

<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.51740>

Published in print: 20 January 2001

Published online: 2001

Term used to describe two developments in black South African urban popular music.

(1) During the 1940s South African big bands started performing local melodies in swing style, evolving a style that became known as *mbaqanga* or African jazz.

(2) In the early 1960s a second style called *mbaqanga* evolved from 1950s pennywhistle *kwela* and sax jive, a transition best exemplified by the Hollywood Jazz Band. It was the first South African style to be fundamentally created in the recording studio for a mass media audience rather than for live performance and came to dominate popular music in South African townships during the 1960s and 70s. Like that of its antecedents, the harmonic base of *mbaqanga* is the cyclical repetition of four primary chords. Short melodies, usually the length of the harmonic cycle, are repeated and alternated with slight variations, and call-and-response generally occurs between solo and chorus parts. The characteristics that differentiate *mbaqanga* from previous styles are a driving, straight beat, rather than swung rhythms; melodic independence between instrumental parts, the bass and lead guitars providing particularly strong contrapuntal lines; and electric rather than acoustic guitars and bass guitar. Many of these innovations were initially developed by the Gallo Recording Company's premier backing group, the Makhona Tsohle Band, particularly Marks Mankwane (guitar) and Joseph Makwela (bass), who were the first black South Africans to exploit the possibilities of electric instruments. A typical *mbaqanga* band consists of lead, rhythm and bass guitars and drums (occasionally with an accordion, concertina or violin), backing a solo saxophone or vocalists. Top saxophonists included West Nkosi, Thomas Phale and Lulu Masilela. Vocal *mbaqanga* came to be known as Mqashiyo.

Bibliography

And other resources

D. Coplan: *In Township Tonight: South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (Johannesburg, 1985), 183–8

The King and Queens of Township Jive: Modern Roots of the Indestructible Beat of Soweto, Earthworks/Virgin CDEWV 20 (1990)

Sixteen Original Sax Jive Hits, perf. W.L. Nkosi, Gallo Music CDZAC 57 (1991)

From Marabi to Disco: 42 Years of Township Music, Gallo Music CDZAC61 (1994)

R. Allingham: 'Township Jive: From Pennywhistle to Bubblegum: the Music of South Africa', *World Music: the Rough Guide*, ed. S. Broughton and others (London, 1994), 374–80

See also

Mqashiyo

Africa, §3(ii): Principles of timing