

## Marabi

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A pan-ethnic city music, developed in South Africa's urban slums (principally those of Johannesburg) during the second and third decades of the 20th century. A rhythmically propulsive dance music, *marabi* was forged principally by unschooled keyboard players who were a notorious part of the culture and economy of illegal slumyard liquor dens. Harmonically, it rested upon a cyclical pattern stretched over four measures, with one measure per chord: I-IV-I6-4-V. The cyclical nature of this style clearly derived from indigenous sources, repetitive harmonic patterns being typical of traditional African musics.

The melodies superimposed on these endlessly repeating patterns sometimes became legendary; sometimes lyrics were invented, in some instances containing political commentary or protest. A significant proportion of these melodies are traceable to local traditional origins. But often the tunes were drawn from other sources, such as the familiar stock of African Christian hymns, the commercially popular tunes of the day or Afrikaans dance music.

In performance, cyclical repetitions of a melody or melodic fragment would eventually yield, perhaps, to a similar treatment of another melody or fragment, and perhaps then still others. In this manner, performers would play for long periods without stopping. A simple rhythmic accompaniment would be provided throughout by a player shaking a tin filled with small stones.

The most famous of *marabi*'s venues were the shebeens, and the weekend-long slumyard parties. For almost everyone outside ghetto life, however, *marabi* and its subculture were shunned. Associated with illegality, police raids, sex and a desperately impoverished working class, *marabi* was vilified as a corrupting menace. It is no surprise, then, that no early *marabi* musicians were recorded.

*Marabi* in its classic form had a short life. In the wake of the Urban Areas Act of 1923, officials began to lay claim to inner-city suburbs as 'white'; as the relocation of black residents began, so too did the destruction of *marabi* culture. Gradually stripped of the small, informal domestic space which had nurtured it, *marabi* musicians realized that their art had no future in the new sterile dormitory suburbs. By the early 1930s, those who could were already developing a new genre, rooted in part in *marabi*: South African jazz.

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