the world of music 5 (2016) 2: 67–89

A Sideman on the Frontlines: Gwigwi Mrwebi and South African Jazz History

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Abstract

In the mid-1960s, pockets of the British jazz scene acquired a South African accent. This accent was made up of the polyglot styles that had constituted 1950s black South African popular musics. In Britain, the styles were transmitted and mediated predominantly by mbaqanga: the marabi-based South African jazz, significantly also known as African jazz. Mbaqanga's role in British avant-garde jazz scenes has received careful attention from a small but dedicated group of scholars from both countries, whose writings tend to focus on groups like the Blue Notes or Spear and on musicians like Chris McGregor, Dudu Pukwana or Bheki Mseleku. While giving this scholarship its due, I suggest in this paper that the focus on iconic scenes, groups and musicians forms only part of the story. The dynamics of mbaqanga's role in British jazz were in fact forged elsewhere, in scenes and by people like Gwigwi Mrwebi, who are usually considered marginal to South African jazz history.

Township jazz, sax. Drum circulation boss.
Lies somewhere in the United States.
(Es'kia Mphahlele, *Afrika My Music: an Autobiography* 2001 [1984])

Introduction

South African jazz studies has had a complex relationship with what we may call the individual. Whether indebted to the methodologies of anthropology or social history, the field has tended to be concerned with scenes: social and musical worlds. For social history: archival research, surviving diaries and letters, newspapers and album covers have been mined to portray a musical history from below. Scholars sought lost compositions and recordings, and curated them as part of books or as independent compilations. Music anthropologists amplified the country's jazz worlds despite apartheid's repression, through careful analyses or thick descriptions of genres

and styles, critical biographies and reception histories. Common to both these tendencies in South African jazz studies has been the veneration of oral testimony; in particular, from the musician or musicians whose scene is the scholar's subject. It has been crucial for the musician's story to be captured, something which suggests that their voice is final or at least authoritative. This angst is hardly surprising, and not only because the scholars were white and the musicians black. The birth of South African jazz studies—as opposed to earlier writings on black urban or "town" music—was around the mid-1970s, a decade marked by revitalised anti-apartheid resistance and correspondingly harsher responses from the state. Older spaces of openness and cross-racial contact, such as 1950s Sophiatown and 1960s Hillbrow in Johannesburg, or District Six and other bohemian spaces in Cape Town, had been decisively destroyed. So too had the forms of media, predominantly radio and magazines, that had made South African jazz part of a vibrant public culture. More often than not, the musician and their story were all that remained.

This context has established South African jazz studies as a field that requires the presence of the narrating living musician's voice (Allen 1993 & 2000; Ansell 2004; Ballantine 2012 [1993]; Coplan 2007 [1985]; Martin 2013; Muller 2011; Ramanna 2005). It has also at times led to the depersonalisation of these musicians' lives for the sake of the scene, even while their importance to the scene is given careful attention. What follows in this paper is an attempt to build on previous work, through recounting the life of a largely unknown black South African jazz musician, bandleader and alto saxophonist Gwigwi Mrwebi. This is done in order to show how the story of South African jazz, at home and in exile, may look when seen through one not usually counted amongst the country's jazz pantheon (Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Abdullah Ibrahim etc.). Compared to them, Mrwebi's story is but an anecdote; he was a sideman and his music a sidetrack. But, like them (if not more so), Mrwebi was deeply involved in the most significant moments that shape South African jazz history.

The Apartheid Frontline: Gwigwi Mrwebi and African Jazz

Mrwebi was among the first generation of jazz musicians in South Africa and perhaps the most archetypal (fig. 1). He was stationed with a concert unit in North Africa during the Second World War, as sergeant-in-charge of entertaining Allied troops. On his return he was employed variously as a shop assistant in Sophiatown, a boy's club secretary, and an assistant circulation manager of Drum Publications (De Beer 2001 [1960]:31).

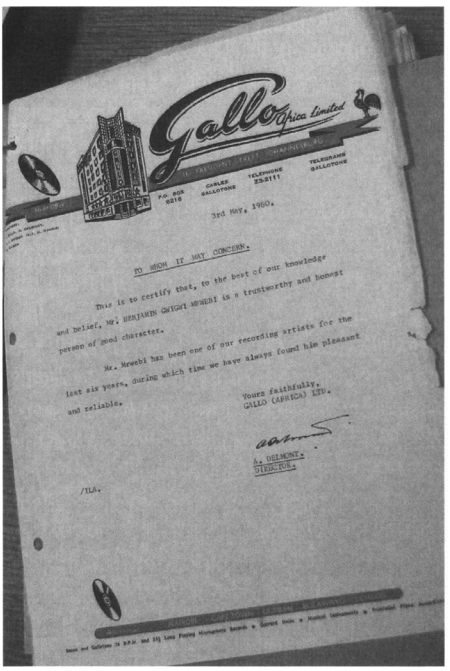
It is through the state's appetite for total information that Mrwebi's biographical details are available. From its records, we learn that he was born on 5 December 1919, in Germiston, east of Johannesburg. His full name was Benjamin Bolanti Gwigwi Mrwebi, Native Identity number 524387, passport number P6809; his most important registration identity was P60/3932, which indexed his passport. Mrwe-

Fig. 1: Gwigwi Mrwebi, Drum, 25 February 1959.

bi's tenure as *Drum*'s circulation manager must have supplemented his meagre earnings from music, because by 1960 he owned a house at Perseel 38, Zone 1, in Diepkloof Location, Johannesburg. Here, he lived with his wife and their two children (SAB/BAO: 4 August 1960). The saxophonist's performance career was long, but his recording career only began in 1954. Alec Delmont, the director of Gallo Africa at the time, testified to the Department of Native Affairs that Mrwebi had proven himself "trustworthy (…) honest (…) of good character (…) pleasant (…) and reliable" for the last six years (fig. 2).

Despite Delmont's generous testimonial, there is little indication that Mrwebi recorded much with Gallo. Information is sketchy; however, jazz musicians regularly floated between recording companies and were often uncredited for their efforts. More certain is that Mrwebi played alto saxophone and clarinet for the Harlem Swingsters and the Jazz Dazzlers (Ansell 2004:47), the foremost big bands of the 1940s and 1950s. He was also a composer of South African classics in the style of African jazz/majuba jazz/mbaqanga and was a founding member of the influential Union of Southern African Artists. Mrwebi's first known recording was in 1954 as Delmont correctly noted, as *Benny G. Mwrebi* [sic] *And The Harlem Swingsters, with Taai Shomang*, but it was for Troubadour Records, Gallo's biggest competitor. Two years later, in 1956, he released another album with Troubadour, as *Gwi Gwi and his Gwigzas*. His more visible output as a leader seems to have mostly been his recordings on July 1960 with USA Records, as *Gwi-Gwi and his Jazz Rascals*. Delmont therefore may have been referring to whatever work Mrwebi did for Gallo, perhaps as a sideman or a studio session musician, beyond these recordings.

The few surviving albums Mrwebi left in South Africa remain an important record of African jazz in the 1950s. Their sound, their paratexts and the recording companies that released them present a curious picture of mbaqanga's relationship with the


Gallo Africa Limited

3rd May, 1960.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

This is to certify that, to the best of our knowledge and belief, Mr. BENJAMIN GWIGWI MRWEBI is a trustworthy and honest person of good character.

Mr. Mrwebi has been one of our recording artists for the last six years, during which time we have always found him pleasant and reliable.

Yours faithfully,
GALLO (AFRICA) LTD.

A. DELMONT.
DIRECTOR.

/TLA.

Fig. 2: Testimonial from Alec Delmont on behalf of Benjamin Bolanti "Gwigwi" Mrwebi, 3 May 1960.

entertainment industry's attempts to create and shape black South Africa's popular music imagination. Building on work that covers popular music production in 1950s South Africa (Allen 2003:229–32; Coplan 2007 [1985]:205–6), I consider here two tunes from Mrwebi's South African repertoire: "Umgibe" (1954) and "Hamba Gwi" (1960). Both were produced during significant years in the country's popular music history: the first at the height of the industry's commercial boom whose success was propped up by the popular press, and the second in what is generally considered as the year in which mbaqanga as African jazz met its demise.

"Umgibe" was recorded by Mrwebi and The Harlem Swingsters featuring the trumpeter Taai Shomang and was named after its composer, Gideon "Mgibe" Nxumalo.[1] It begins with a strong solo fanfare from the trumpet that is answered by the band. The short intro gives no indication of the rhythmic pulse that dominates the rest: this is introduced by the rhythm section and the brass in a span of four measures, repeated. The first eight measures also outline the song's harmonic cycle, which moves in strict I–IV–I6/4–V throughout. The rhythm section and the lower brass maintain a swing-shuffle groove, while the frontline trades the song's two main themes with minimal variations. Solos (alto sax, trumpet and tenor sax) are eight measures each. The tenor sax solo is followed by a bridge section that displaces the rhythmic swing accents, with Basie-inspired fills from the piano. The second theme is repeated for eight measures and the tune ends. While "Umgibe" is tightly structured, its cyclical harmony and repetitive bass line open it up to potentially infinite melodic variation (reminiscent of marabi), which is internally suggested by the improvised solos in the tune. This is a typical form of composition for U.S.-American big bands, such as those of Count Basie and other Kansas City Bands, because it is built on riffs. These characteristics identify "Umgibe" as classic big band mbaqanga.

"Umgibe's" recording date, 1954, is significant: it was exactly in this year that the emergence of a new style—vocal jive—was announced in *Bantu World* (Allen 2003:228). For Lara Allen, 1954 was important in the history of black popular music "because it was the period between the establishment of the mass media for black consumers and the full institutionalization of high apartheid" (2003:229–43).

I would add that the 1950s were also important in this history within black popular music itself and saw fierce struggles between musical styles. These struggles resulted in the many hybrid styles perceived as definitive of this decade's black musics. Allen's argument discredits the view that hybrid music was little more than the "candy-floss of popular culture:" she develops her case by examining whether these styles were "inherently hegemonic" or had subversive effects, whether these identified subversive effects constituted "political resistance," and the degree to which these musical styles' "commercial guise" attenuated or emphasised "political aspects" (243). While I am in broad agreement with Allen, I am less certain that her findings for vocal jive are, as she claims, applicable to instrumental 1950s big band African jazz. For our purposes, we need to explore how the music industry's commercial imperatives, which for Allen enabled subversion and often unintentional cultural radicalism, affected Gwigwi Mrwebi's world.

"Hamba Gwi," which was recorded with Gallo on 15 July 1960, provides some clues. Mrwebi pressed this side shortly before his departure for London with the musical *King Kong: an African Jazz Opera*, with the Jazz Dazzlers/Jazz Rascals. The tune's title is in the performative mode, since it translates as "go Gwi" in isiNguni. "Hamba Gwi" is useful to compare with Nxumalo's "Umgibe."[2] Close listening shows that "Hamba Gwi" has retained some features of the earlier composition, including its cyclical form and harmonic progression (which at least here is more rhythmically varied). "Hamba Gwi," however, is more contained. There is essentially one melodic statement varied by a fourth. The tune contains one 16-measure improvised solo by Kippie Moeketsi, which, uncharacteristically for this bebop-orientated alto saxophonist, deviates only marginally from the tune's main statement. It is decidedly more up-tempo compared to its original 78rpm flip-side, "Fika Swanee," which contains breathing space between its melodic riffs. The musical contrast makes for good listening; that the contrast was deliberate is suggested by the titles: "Hamba" (go) and "Fika" (come or arrive). "Hamba Gwi" also bears traces of another contemporary hybrid style, sax jive, suggested by its melodic structure, its type of variation, its concise form, and its limited improvisation that is closer to embellishment of the melody.

Since sax jive was the instrumental cousin of the vocal jive examined by Allen, we may argue that the commercial imperatives that enabled vocal jive's popularity and cultural significance to thrive had distinctive aesthetic consequences for Mrwebi. It is worth noting, first, that whilst the Harlem Swingsters (with whom Mrwebi recorded "Umgibe") had a close musical affinity to U.S.-American big band jazz and are conventionally acknowledged as unsurpassed purveyors of big band mbaqanga, their tenure was with the Troubadour label (figs. 3 and 4).

Troubadour was committed to popular music rather than to jazz. This might explain why, in 1954, they could advance the cause of jive (note that Gwi Gwi and his Gwigzas are labelled "Jive" in fig. 4) while pressing sides from African jazz bands like The Harlem Swingsters. Jazz, African or otherwise, in other words had to seem as close to the hybrid musics surrounding it, which were proving popular with town-

Fig. 3: A typical Troubadour cover, 1950s.

Fig. 4: Packaging African Jazz, 1956.

ship consumers. Mbaqanga, considered as African *jazz*, had to be liquidated into the mass musical hybridities that assured profit to the music industry. For African jazz to remain African, however, required a re-packaging and recasting as a general jazzy popular music to which audiences could jive. For example, *Hamba Gwi/Fika Swanee* was recorded with Gwi-Gwi and his Jazz Rascals (or as the Jazz Dazzlers according to the archivist Rob Allingham). The session was pressed by USA Records (fig. 5),

Fig. 5: Packaging Jazz for Africa.

prior to its assimilation into Gallo Africa later that year (Allingham 2003:723–4). Mrwebi's recording with USA Records was also the first time, at least from available evidence, that the word "jazz" was linked overtly with his music (Jazz Rascals/Jazz Dazzlers), even while the jazz contained within the album's sleeves is already the product of those hybrid styles to which mbaqanga musicians had to conform in order to sell as popular music in the 1950s.

Mrwebi's performing and recording life (1954 to 1960) replays the dominant story of South African jazz in early apartheid (Ansell 2004:59; Ballantine 2012 [1993]:80–2; Coplan 2007 [1985]:200). Briefly: mbaqanga/African jazz was seen as a culmination of black South African jazz musicians' reckoning with African-American jazz that could articulate African urban cultural aspirations, but its potential was thwarted first by commercialism and then by the repression of 1960s apartheid. Revisiting the history of African jazz via Gwigwi Mrwebi also shows us that even at the height of its popularity, African jazz's dominance was always challenged by more popular styles such as pennywhistle kwela or vocal jive. This is why Mrwebi had to be content with being recorded by Troubadour and his ensemble labelled jive. Even when African jazz had carved a space through, for example, USA Records, this proved insufficient. Seen through the life of one individual, the transition from African jazz to so-called sax jive gives further clarity to the dominant story.

It also inserts a healthy degree of uncertainty. We cannot, for one, know whether Mrwebi was fulfilling a contractual obligation when recording "Hamba Gwi" and therefore had to conform. He is not around to ask. We also cannot know if this recording session was a means to make money for the family he was leaving behind in Perseel 38, Zone 1, Diepkloof Location, to tide them over while he toured Britain. That, for example, would support the view of mbaqanga's degeneration into a means of making quick money. The session might even have been a ritual of departure, since musicians like Miriam Makeba had also recorded farewell songs prior to leaving South Africa (Makeba & Hall 1988:73). Indeed, the 78's titles, "Hamba" and "Fika," encourage this reading of departure and return. Historical remnants of Mrwebi's career in South Africa urge us to read how his career as a sergeant in the Second World War transitioned to his success as bandleader in postwar, apartheid South Africa, how in this space he led one of the foremost African jazz big bands (the Harlem Swingsters) and continued in various bands' frontlines until his departure in 1960. Through Mrwebi, the story of African jazz as one of inevitable decline cannot be as boldly drawn; nor can that of its redemption in British or American exile.

The Diasporic Frontline: Mrwebi in Britain

> Summertime in London. A city pretending to be tropical (...) This was the season when, after seven years of exile [c1967], G. B. sent for his wife from Jo'burg (...) GB played the alto sax. Hoped he could improve his music reading. His sax was just fine for us in those municipal halls where you could be playing by ear and no one would be any wiser for it. Sound and rhythm are all. What a musician lacked we compensated for with body movement on the floor. Just fine. In London, GB, like the Manhattan Brothers, had no props. None whatsoever. His sound was foreign to the natives. Took his life in his own hands. Struck out for the professional route. GB a music maker, his wife a seamstress in a factory in the East End.
>
> (Es'kia Mphahlele, *Afrika My Music: an Autobiography* 2001 [1984])

The unnamed GB, like most of Es'kia Mphahlele's characters in his autobiographies and in autobiographical fictions like *The Wanderers*, is a thinly veiled person, in this instance Gwigwi Mrwebi. Mrwebi left South Africa with the cast of *King Kong: an African Jazz Opera* in 1960, to form part of the orchestra for *King Kong: All-African Musical* in 1961 (Dalamba 2011). Very little is known of Mrwebi's everyday life in Britain. Remnants are in the form of recorded jam sessions (now lost), as well as appearances in films and television shows that have yet to be verified. In other words, as a black South African jazz musician living in Britain in the 1960s, Mrwebi becomes again an archetype.

To appreciate this fully, we need to recall that the extensive attention paid to jazz groups like the Blue Notes and their offshoots is an exception and apart from Ian Carr's *Music Outside* (1973) is relatively recent (Dlamini 2010; McGregor 1995; McKay 2005; Muller 2012; Wickes 1999). Again, it is through the apartheid state's policing of its black citizens that we know many *King Kong* members chose to remain in Britain rather than return to post-Sharpeville South Africa, even though their passports were valid for only one year. They applied to renew their passports and to extend their stay for a few more years, but soon ceased to visit South Africa House and disappeared from official records. This disappearance was a measure of success, and Mrwebi's elusiveness during these years may also be read as such. Recouping these musicians' lives for South African jazz history was also aided by related projects aiming to write the story of "black Britain" (Fryer 1984; Rich 1986; Owusu 2000).

Unlike the postwar black settlers in Britain, the remaining *King Kong* members (which included Mrwebi) had no community to speak of, because their numbers

were insignificant (Israel 1999:110–11). Primed by apartheid's measures of influx control, they soon recognised the racist foundations of immigration control and resorted to other, protective measures. Most former *King Kong* members took up menial jobs in laundrettes, factories and entertainment spaces, becoming thereby part of the black, labouring masses. Those who pursued employment in theatre or music encountered other difficulties, in particular when they wished to perform jazz. They relied on each other's shared musical knowledge in their professional lives and formed small, usually short-lived performance groups to perform popular music and jazz. The Manhattan Brothers, for example, were joined by the former Wits University student Sol Klaaste on piano, while Peggy Phango (who played the female lead in the London *King Kong*), Patience Gcwabe, Hazel Futa and Rose Hlela formed a group called "the Velvettes" and regularly backed local rhythm and blues musician Cyril Davies's "All-Stars" (*Jazz News* 16 January 1963). The group did not outlive the sixties. According to Leon Gluckman's research, which was intended to produce a documentary on former *King Kong* members living in Britain eight years after the show's closure, these musicians tended to perform in back room pubs, church halls and strip joints. Their knowledge of U.S.-American popular music, long developed in South Africa's townships, enabled them to obtain gigs in some U.S.-American military bases in Britain (NELM/GP:95.2.2.2.1).

Mrwebi was part of this scene. He mostly secured freelance work, playing in clubs and jazz jam sessions around London (Schaderberg 1987:193). This peripatetic life was often lonely, but it was not an exception to most of the other jazz musicians' lives in Britain in the 1960s. Other studies depict a music scene where jazz germinated in ghettos, mostly caused by the changing musical policies of various venues in London (Carr 2008:1–2; Godbolt 1989; Jack 2009; Wickes 1999:31–2). From about 1964, clubs increasingly catered to rhythm and blues, folk, soul and rock. Before these musical ghettos became as impenetrable as an apartheid township, they provided hybrid creative spaces where South African jazz musicians—whose jazz identity, like those of their British counterparts, was always loose—could participate. This explains why Mrwebi was a regular in such venues and ex-*King Kong* women singers like the Velvettes could be backed by the Rolling Stones. Despite the murkiness of the picture, these musicians' wanderings show us that, rather than seeking a South African community in exile, many were searching for an amenable *musical* community.

For Mrwebi, what would emerge from the search would be a South African jazz whose national identity was as transformed as his relationships to non-South African musicians in these new spaces. It was, in other words, diasporic. Mrwebi's black diaspora (in London) differed from the one South Africans in the United States (mostly New York) encountered. This London saw pro-independence and anti-colonialist speakers crowding Hyde Park Corner, CND rallies, the Anti-Apartheid Movement and other social protest movements (Masekela and Cheers 2004:113–20). Its hallowed institutions—not least the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)—also reflected the political mood. Radio was an important medium for inscribing and

describing the cultural practices of this new Commonwealth, which included the Caribbean (Griffith 2003:204–6) and even black South Africa (Gunner 2010:256–71). Black South African writers and actors living in London were central to this cultural work, even though none of these broadcasts reached, or were allowed into, South Africa (Gunner 2006:52). As a result, they created "South Africa" as an imagined community that perforce looked to a different kind of belonging. Its lineaments can be traced in their works for the BBC African Service, the BBC African Writers Club and the Transcription Centre.

The BBC African Service began to air what would become a monthly programme, "African Theatre," from March 1962 (Cordeaux 1970:147–55). Soon, "African Theatre" began to feature radio drama written by Africans working in London, and was crucial to ex-*King Kong* members as a source of employment (ibid.:148). These ex-*King Kong*ers portrayed West Africans, African-Americans and black Caribbeans as each broadcast required. The African Service's innovations were enriched by the Transcription Centre, which was run by the Africanist Dennis Duerden, and whose secretary and editor was Maxine Lautré—then fiancée of South African jazz pianist, Chris McGregor.

Liz Gunner's research on the Transcription Centre and the BBC stresses the importance of discourse or "talk" as an active component in the making and dissemination of the idea of independent Africa (2010:256–8). Unlike the other spaces that Africans inhabited abroad as monadic figures of exile, the Centre's talk programmes involved intense debate between artists and thinkers that formed social, if fragile, groupings. This fragility was itself symptomatic of the new Africa negotiating its becoming "outside the old imperial tropes and metaphors of the west" (ibid.:257). Gunner points out that:

> Radio allowed a mixing and merging of voices and ideas in a kind of flow of presentness, which, if listened to almost half a century later, gives an impression of the uncertain and existential pushing to and fro of ideas and positions on culture, identity, politics, and on the question of African and black American identities on the global stage (...) It was (...) a technology of voice where the crisp tones and accents of varied inflection (...) rubbed up against those of a more recognisable cultivated Britishness. The very mix and unplaceability of its pieces (...) reflected the beginnings of something new, language in search of a new paradigm of self, nation, region. (Ibid.:259)

Talk's heteroglossia in spaces like the Transcription Centre and in the BBC's radio dramas presented this new Africa as transnational and this talk's transmission by radio suggests that its contents' orientation was also broadly urban. This was, in other words, a familiar space for the ex-*Drum* generation and, in the absence of a nation, they could only appeal to this amorphous region (Africa and diaspora) for a new paradigm of self beyond the identification of exile. South African involvement in the Transcription Centre programmes that the exiled South African writer Lewis Nkosi hosted included political writings by Frene Ginwala, Mary Benson and Ruth First, as well as creative writings by Alfred Hutchinson, Alex La Guma, Bloke Modisane, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Nathaniel Nakasa, Cosmo Pieterse, Richard Rive, Athol

Fugard, Lionel Ngakane and Peter Abrahams (HRC/TC). Even Gwigwi Mrwebi was part of this milieu, having written a morality play on vanity, *Feat Accomplished and a Hero Completely Defeated*, which was adapted for radio by Cosmo Pieterse and remains in the BBC African Writers Club Sound Archives.

Having glimpsed Mrwebi in the London performing music scenes, his presence amongst such political and literary luminaries is at first surprising. That these figures would have met in the small artistic and political scenes of 1950s Johannesburg provides one explanation, but does not illuminate why Mrwebi, who was hardly known for his literary prowess, would appear in this list as an author (and not, for example, Todd Matshikiza). And so, whereas prior knowledge of South African jazz enabled the exiled musicians to form groups, and their shared knowledge of jazz meant they could collaborate with non-South Africans, South African exiles' radio work contributed to the creation of a different kind of community. The latter seems more circumscribed than the live jazz scenes. Apart from Athol Fugard, it is populated by black South African artists and intellectuals for whom Drum magazine is a common background and, apart from Frene Ginwala, by white South African politicians for whom anti-apartheid activism is a shared commitment. This scene, in other words, more properly resonates with conventional understandings of South African political exile in Britain, rather than with the fluid diaspora in which South African jazz—and Mrwebi—resided. Because this scene was dominated by writers, and has received more sustained scholarly attention, it has often been used to understand the story of South African jazz in Britain.

It was however in music, which supplemented talk, that South Africans' unique contributions were most evident. As it "snaked its way through" the BBC, according to Gunner, jazz often "showed the overt link between cultural identity and political voice" (2010:264). Her observation contradicts Gerald Moore's, for whom the preponderance of jazz was "almost certainly 'caviar to the general'" because the music had taken root more decisively in South Africa than in the rest of the continent (2002:178). Moore's scepticism may be because he does not factor the black diaspora in Britain into his analysis. South Africans in the Transcription Centre and in the BBC reaffirmed the possibility of making a jazz home in this diaspora as they had made a musical home in U.S.-American jazz while in South Africa, and they did this with the help of this black diaspora in London. Black British jazz musicians in the 1960s were engaged in their own dialogues with U.S.-American jazz (McKay 2005; Moore 2007). The alto saxophonist Joe Harriott's mastery of and departure from Charlie Parker's bebop idiolect is one example. Others moved elsewhere, working and performing with musicians across borders of genre, race or origin (Stapleton 1990:87–101). They also collaborated with South Africans, including with Gwigwi Mrwebi. The most important product of these collaborations is *Kwela by Gwigwi's Band*, perhaps the strongest historical footprint of South African jazz's early history abroad.

Jazz, Kwela, Mbaqanga: African Jazz's Inauthentic Syncretisms

Kwela by Gwigwi's Band has three lives: first as a radio programme in 1966, then as an LP in 1967. The album's most recent incarnation is as *Mbaqanga Songs* (2006). In the liner notes to this re-issue, Steve Beresford speculates that Mrwebi's music was incorrectly labelled "kwela" in the 1960s because "mbaqanga" would have been too difficult for Londoners to pronounce (fig. 6). "Mrwebi," I would add, might have been as challenging. So instead of "mbaqanga by Gwigwi Mrwebi's band" we get "kwela by Gwigwi's band." Beresford's comments are perhaps tongue-in-cheek, but we should take them seriously nonetheless. We could, for example, point out that 1960s London (and the U.S.) had already been exposed to and embraced Miriam Makeba's *uQongqothwane* (the so-called Click Song) and Letta Mbulu's *Oogxam* (often labelled Click Song 2), which Makeba popularised. Titling the album "mbaqanga" in the 1960s could have been lucrative.

Whatever reasons there were for the title's changes, they had particular effects on how South African jazz was packaged, performed and received in 1960s London, and on Mrwebi's career beyond this recording.

On 20 September 1966, the Transcription Centre/BBC African Writers' Club presented the first of four programmes dedicated to mbaqanga, the last of which

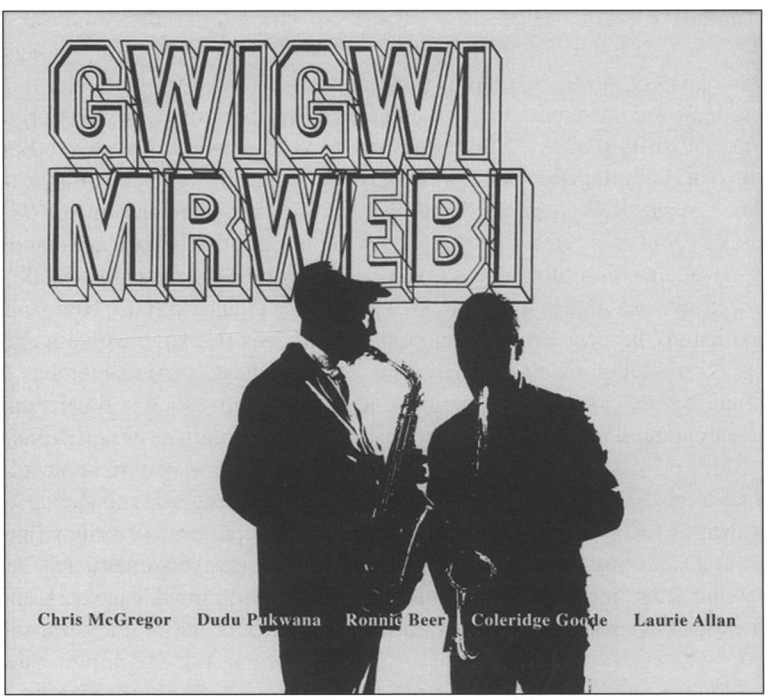


Fig. 6: Gwigwi Mrwebi, Mbaqanga Songs*, Honest Jon's Records, HJRCD 103, 2006.*

was recorded on 13 October (NSA/AWC C134/286-292). Lasting less than twenty minutes, each broadcast highlights a specific aspect of the style. The first outlines its socio-historical function and briefly explores its life outside South Africa in the 1960s. The second and third allude to mbaqanga performance in London, while the fourth meditates on composing mbaqanga in this London scene. Chris McGregor, the South African pianist by then living in London and engaged to the Centre's secretary and editor, Maxine Lautré, narrates all four programmes. The mbaqanga featured all emanates from one source: Gwigwi Mrwebi's band in London, for an album that would be released the following year by Doug Dobell, one of the many producers with which the Centre had dealings.

Plugging mbaqanga's interpretation by Gwigwi Mrwebi's band in London was problematic because it was not wholly consistent with the Centre's ethnological representation of the New Commonwealth. One way to bypass this inconsistency was to present mbaqanga as a legitimately diasporic cultural practice, hence McGregor's insistence that what is heard is Gwigwi Mrwebi's band *in London*. McGregor thus legitimises the band in a number of ways: by explaining that "many beautiful mbaqanga songs have been made known to the world at large by the great folk singer, Miriam Makeba," by pointing out that "the trumpeter Hughie Masekela who lives now in New York (...) about two years ago released a record of mbaqanga music under the title *Trumpet Africaine*," that many of Dollar Brand's compositions "have a distinct mbaqanga flavour" and that the ex-*King Kong* singer, Patience Gcwabe, "who is working in London in cabaret, always includes one or two of these songs in her programmes" (NSA/AWC C134/286).

Subverting the demands for native authenticity, as Paul Gilroy has argued, requires more than this tactic. The realities that expressive cultures of the Black Atlantic enclose cannot be explained merely by assuming anti-essentialist stances, however strategic such may be, because these realities are historical (1993:102). McGregor historicises the musical style by explaining that mbaqanga bands "usually consist of a rhythm section and up to twelve frontline instruments" (NSA/AWC C134/286). Mrwebi's band was a sextet, with drums (Laurie Allan), bass (Coleridge Goode), piano (Chris McGregor), two alto saxophones (Gwigwi Mrwebi and Dudu Pukwana) and a tenor saxophone (Ronnie Beer). Beyond instrumentation, mbaqanga's rituals also recall those of jazz, and McGregor suggests this when explaining that mbaqanga music is linked to dance parties that take place over weekends (ibid.). His description therefore encloses a reality of modern black American jazz life that is shared but is not identical with African jazz life. Introducing mbaqanga to audiences in Africa and in its diaspora in this manner is important because, while it offsets the necessity of native authenticity, it highlights narrative authenticity. The story of borrowing from and transformation of black diasporic musics is represented not only by describing mbaqanga bands and the rituals over which they presided, but also by the successes of this borrowing *in* the diaspora, *in* London and/or New York.

Mrwebi becomes central to this story of a diasporic mbaqanga. He was leading a diverse ensemble consisting of black and white South Africans, and black and

white Britons. He had also composed more than half of the repertoire; the other half consisted of Dudu Pukwana's compositions. Despite the presence of Pukwana and Mrwebi, and despite McGregor's framing, this ensemble's heterogeneity—in particular the presence of non-South Africans—has caused some discomfort (Dlamini 2010). Such responses forget the historical conditions that enabled the four musicians from apartheid South Africa—two black and two white—to play together as South Africans. Even Mrwebi and Pukwana inhabited different worlds. Mrwebi was of course a veteran performer of mbaqanga in South Africa. Pukwana, although much younger, was similarly well-versed, but had not dedicated his performance career to the style. For example, his collaborations as a pianist, a saxophonist and as composer with McGregor and Beer in South Africa had included mainstream post-bebop jazz. Pukwana and Mrwebi's relationships with mbaqanga were a result of the widely different scenes of Port Elizabeth, Cape Town and Johannesburg jazz. As we have seen, Mrwebi's forays into London's hybrid live music scenes to meet and jam with other musicians were frequent, even if largely undocumented. It is therefore equally likely that Mrwebi met with the black British double-bassist Coleridge Goode and the white London-based drummer Laurie Allan during his wanderings, and chose to record this album with them in order to highlight "the highlife and calypso framework"—the diasporic element in other words – that some have viewed with some regret (Dlamini 2010:226 and 272).

In any case, South African jazz musicians in London remained a relatively small group. To perform mbaqanga in this space meant availability and musical competence could trump national origin. Writing on the politics of black musics in the formation of black British identities by diverse settlers, Paul Gilroy has decisively argued that this black diasporic musical heritage was "indelibly marked by the British conditions in which it grew and matured" (1993:82). So it was with mbaqanga. Mrwebi's South African musicians could jettison native authenticity in favour of a diasporic authenticity determined by the usefulness of black musics, whether these were highlife, calypso, rhythm and blues, or kwela. This process describes what I mean by "inauthentic syncretisms." I use this phrase in dialogue with Coplan's "authentic syncretism," to suggest that at least in its early history in London, mbaqanga's syncretic experimentations did not privilege "the cultural reality of black experience" as necessarily black South African experience (Coplan 2007 [1985]:232). Instead, mbaqanga in London enclosed the realities of South Africans' presence there precisely through transformations of the style.

If establishing mbaqanga as a diasporic cultural practice required the example of other South African jazz musicians working in the so-called West, as well as evidence of borrowing from black American jazz and the transformation of a nation-identified musical style, then an account of how this music came to be diasporic was equally important. First, McGregor's description of black music's routes, including mbaqanga's, allowed the latter to be described as a jazz style. Second, songs with titles like "Mra," "Nick Tete," "Mini Mntembo," and "Sipho" reference pioneering figures of South African jazz and mbaqanga: Christopher Columbus "Mra"

Ngcukana, former Blue Note member Nick Moyake, and the great pianist, composer and mentor, Tete Mbambisa. South African places were referenced by some song-titles listed by McGregor: "Ezindongeni," "Kweleentonga" and "KwaZakhele," and all allude to the Eastern Cape the South African musicians had left behind. Finally, Mrwebi's music stresses remembered musicking rather than place or landscape as such. Thus songs like "Zangomva," "Nyusamkhaya" and "Hayini Bo," like the earlier "Hamba Gwi," refer to performative gestures associated with dance. It is dance, in fact, that links McGregor's descriptions of mbaqanga in all four programmes: "the dance music of South African Townships" and "the South African folk dance" (NSA/AWC C134/286–292).

Mbaqanga as dance allows this otherwise distinct jazz style to converge with highlife and calypso in London and to retain links with South African dance styles like the phatha-phatha. By highlighting the music's use for dancing, McGregor folded mbaqanga into the broader music and dancing cultures of black London in the 1960s and reproduced the hybridity we have argued for in those live scenes. Proof of this experiment's success is that in a 2005 compilation of black British music from the 1960s, in which highlife, calypso and West African music predominates, "Nyusamkhaya" by Gwigwi Mrwebi's band is included; in the same compilation, Mongezi Feza and Chris McGregor share a session with the Nigerian vocalist Tunji Oyelana, and the pianist Sol Klaaste had his session with Ambrose Campbell and his Emergent Music for the album *High Life Today* (1966). When a *Melody Maker* critic

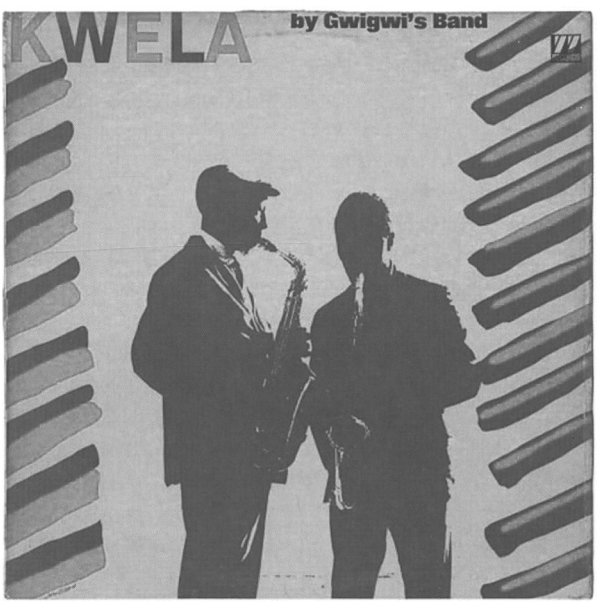


Fig. 7: Kwela by Gwigwi's Band, Dobell's '77 Folklore Africa/101 (UK). Gwigwi Mrwebi (left) and Dudu Pukwana (right).

reviewed the Campbell and Mrwebi releases, he "truly" did not "know whether to call this music jazz or what, but it's African dance music, broadly speaking, played by an international brigade of musicians including several well-known jazz players" (14 January 1967). That this jazz confounded the critics is an important refusal by these musicians to reify Black Atlantic music cultures as bounded traditions, as current discourse at the BBC, and the Transcription Centre's ethnomusicologists, had sought to do.

Some months after the final mbaqanga broadcasts, Dennis Duerden produced the album *Kwela by Gwigwi's Band* for Doug Dobell's '77 Records, in January 1967 (fig. 7). Maxine McGregor (Lautré) remembers that the record "seemed somewhat unremarkable and might have been different had all the original Blue Notes been available" (1995:103). Her summation resembles Dlamini's (2010) because it assumes this was a Blue Notes gig, but it is more forgivable in her celebratory biography of her late husband. A more important statement is her speculation as to why this record was unremarkable, namely that "it lacked, perhaps, an authentic spark" (1995:103). It would be difficult, in any case, to locate an authentic spark in the album. As I have argued, the mbaqanga it features is "London Mbaqanga," its South African jazz lay on the frontlines of jazz's definitions in 1960s Britain and, as not all the musicians in the session were South Africans, it is no reconstruction of South Africa in exile. *Kwela*'s reception in Britain shows that the vocabulary for understanding South African jazz was still largely dependent on previous interpretations of South African jazz in *King Kong* (1961), where this style had dominated. For example, while the album is called *Kwela*, the music within is mbaqanga. The liner notes, which were written by Maxine Lautré, also describe Mrwebi's music as kwela. It is worth recalling here that kwela was one of the earliest and the most popular manifestations of South African popular music in post-war Britain and that this status was cemented by *King Kong*. By 1967, therefore, kwela was a brand name for South African jazz and was used as such in the album.

Within days of *Kwela*'s release, *Melody Maker* suggested that the album took one to South Africa "or thereabouts" but, "since the principals are South Africans, [they] take it the music has authenticity" (14 January 1967). *Melody Maker* was the only print publication to foreground native authenticity as an assurance of musical authenticity. This angle might have been influenced by the pairing of *Kwela* with Campbell's *High Life Today* in the press. Described as "a kind of United Nations of performers" (ibid.), Campbell's group was no less international in its makeup. However, perhaps because Campbell referenced the new mood of "third worldism" by dubbing his style "Emergent Music," thus shielding it from categorisation, the question of native authenticity was irrelevant. In any case, *Kwela* was duly described as "the simple, repetitive dance music of the South African townships" with a "near-hypnotic power" that was, at least, "a notable dance alternative to pop paralysis" (*Sunday Times* 15 January 1967).

But the most interesting face of the authenticity debate for this record relates to live music versus recorded output. Critics decried *Kwela* as an inauthentic repre-

sentation of the musicians' South African jazz. *Melody Maker*'s writer confessed to finding it "monotonous and a shade pedestrian" and "bet that McGregor's free-form kwela at Scott's Old Place is more forceful and animated" (14 January 1967), even though this was not McGregor's gig. Another suggested that:

> [I]t is a pity that the only recorded example of McGregor's work, the recently issued Kwela by Gwigwi's Band (77 Afro/101), which includes [Dudu] Pukwana, [Ronnie] Beer and [Laurie] Allan, does not give anything like an account of what these musicians are *really* up to. As a party record, and as an example of South African urban dance music, it has its moments of interest. But even on this level it is, I am afraid, rather humdrum (...) I can only recommend strongly that people go and hear the Chris McGregor band for themselves. They won't be treated to a set of cosy, harmonic platitudes, nor will they be expected to listen with their feet. (*Morning Star*, 31 January 1967, my emphasis)

Whereas six years earlier (in *King Kong*) the dance rhythms of South African jazz were deemed its more redeeming feature, they were now antithetical to jazz and its modes of consumption (such as not listening with one's feet). By contrast, as early as 1965 Chris McGregor was already toying with the possibility of the Blue Notes performing mbaqanga in rhythm-and-blues clubs with a singer (McGregor 1995:86). In line with the social and musical dynamics of Gwigwi Mrwebi's London, it is instructive to find a group of musicians lionised for playing jazz without "harmonic platitudes" (the Blue Notes), seeking entry into his world.

South African jazz musicians' ventures into popular music were also pragmatic: the more varied the kinds of music they could play, the more the popular gigs could subsidise their jazz endeavours. Thus McGregor is elsewhere quick to mention that members of Mrwebi's band "at present are the only exponents in London" of mbaqanga (NSA/AWC C 134/286). Indeed, throughout the mbaqanga programmes, McGregor was careful to distinguish mbaqanga from jazz. He was clear that, apart from Mrwebi, the South African musicians involved in the 1966 session were otherwise "members of the modern jazz group the Blue Notes," that Goode would be known to "jazz fans" for his work with the Joe Harriott Quintet, and that Allan was a prolific freelance jazz drummer. But jazz's position in these broadcasts differed from its customary position in the Transcription Centre, where it often appeared "alongside indigenous singing and instrumental music" from elsewhere in Africa (Gunner 2010:262). These South African episodes therefore could only profile mbaqanga with another kind of jazz: American. On radio, any convergence was checked by the complete absence of mbaqanga's other name: African jazz. Instead, mbaqanga became "a living dance music" whose collusion with jazz was because it was "subject to change in fashion" (NSA/AWC C 134/286).

In the album, the presentation and reception of mbaqanga as kwela removed South African jazz from a long-desired jazzing tradition. Where in *King Kong* this jazzing tradition had been domesticated as "folk" music (Dalamba 2011), the association with kwela recast the style as generic South African popular dance music from "the townships." Relations to African-American jazz, and especially the socio-

political importance these had signified (Ballantine 2012 [1993]), were thenceforth severed in popular and scholarly writings. Instead, South African jazz was recorded as important in the formation of British jazz for its avant-garde stylistics, leading to the almost exclusive focus on the Blue Notes and later musicians associated with Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath.

Conclusion

There are no doubt more details to be unearthed about Gwigwi Mrwebi beyond the few presented here. They would require, for example, finding out how Mrwebi used his existing networks to secure the necessary documents for travel and residency in the United States. This would enable us to begin tracing his life in Boston as a mature student on a music scholarship (Mphahlele 2001 [1984]:112–3). The South African jazz historian would then revisit what we know about our musicians in the United States, beyond familiar information and recordings. We could then contextualise how Mrwebi struggled to make ends meet as a student and working musician: I have already discovered he worked as a taxi driver to supplement his music scholarship. Mrwebi was in Atlanta, Georgia, when he collapsed from a chronic heart condition, having completed two years of his studies (Mphahlele 2001 [1984]:112). According to Mphahlele, "a few compatriots were going to carry his corpse to Boston" to be buried (ibid.), a poignant and unusual portrayal of South African jazz communities in the United States. Mrwebi's biography, in other words, may yet tell us more about South African jazz history.

What this paper has done is show that Mrwebi has more than a bit part in this history. His career in the army suggests he already had musical skills before enlisting. His few noted recordings in South Africa happened in crucial years of South African jazz's history: at the vanguard of African jazz's birth, to when it segued into commercial popular music. His liminal existence in Britain's live music scenes enabled (or required) him to collaborate with a variety of musicians, and tells us more about South Africans' ordinary musical lives in Britain as a result. Mrwebi's eschewal of South African avant-garde circles relegate him a sideman to this tale, even though he was a pioneer collaborator in the insertion of South African jazz into the British jazz diaspora. Jazz scholars and writers, finally, have given his most high profile recording to Chris McGregor: the renaming of *Kwela* as *Mbaqanga* in 2006 seems authorised more by the BBC broadcasts (McGregor) rather than by Mrwebi's music. When looking for Mrwebi, the quintessential jazz sideman, we uncover a key figure for navigating how South African jazz abandoned its foundational cultural nationalism for a diasporic jazz dialect that would characterise the Afro-popular and free jazz forms of this music elsewhere. But, the most important reason for spending time on the saxophonist is because he lived and played. When oral testimony is no longer possible, textual historical research must step unto the breach: to continue the project of writing South Africa's musical history from below. Arguing this might

lead us to the discredited "few great men" mode of history writing is unhelpful: we mostly have focused on a few icons and even fewer scenes. Our jazz's past, in my view, requires more people.

Acknowledgements

This article is culled from my doctoral dissertation. I would like to thank my supervisor, Roger Parker, for his guidance and support during (and after) the period of searching, researching and writing. I am grateful also for the conversations I have had with the generous and incredibly intelligent former jazz exile, Ndikho Xaba, and dedicate this article to him. I would also like to thank my anonymous readers for their insightful comments and recommendations. Funding for this project was provided by the Commonwealth Scholarship, by St John's College at the University of Cambridge and by the Humanities Faculty Research Office in the University of the Witwatersrand.

Notes

1 "Umgibe" (Audio Example 1).
< http://www.journal-the-world-of-music.com/Media/5.2/UMgibe.mp3 >

2 "Hamba Gwi" (Audio Example 2).
< http://www.journal-the-world-of-music.com/Media/5.2/HambaGwi.mp3 >

Archives

HRC/TC
Transcription Centre Papers (Inventory), Harry Ransom Centre, University of Texas at Austin.

NELM/GP
Leon Gluckman Papers, Manuscript Collection, National English Literary Museum, Grahamstown.

NSA/AWC
National Sound Archives, British Library, London/African Writers' Club Audio Collection, C134/286 to 292, "Mbaqanga—The Gwigwi Mrwebi Band," parts 1–4, 20 September to 13 October 1966

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