Kwela

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Isizulu term for an urban musical genre popular in southern Africa during the 1950s and early 60s. According to South African musicologist Elkin Sithole, use of the term in music first occurred during the 1940s in connection with a new Zulu vocal music known as the 'bombing style' (Kubik, 1974, p.13; Rycroft, 1957, p.33). When the leader wanted the chorus to respond, he shouted '*kwela*'! '*Kwela-kwela*' expressed the continuous responses of the chorus.

1. History.

Kwela became associated with bands of flute-playing youths in South African townships in the 1950s. Under the influence of jazz records and cinema in the 1940s featuring North American big band jazz by Count Basie, Woody Herman, Lionel Hampton, Glenn Miller, Cab Calloway and others, the ambition of young boys was to emulate swing jazz with the means accessible to them. The reed and brass sections of the North American bands were represented by metal, end-blown flutes, locally called 'pennywhistles', and a new playing technique developed. The double bass was represented by a one-string skiffle bass made from a tea chest (see Benseler, 1973–4 for a photograph) and the playing techniques of an older African instrument, the ground-bow, were revived.

A new style emerged, generally called 'jive' by the performers. The mass media gradually became interested, and, according to David Rycroft, pennywhistle playing first became popular after a locally made film, *The Magic Garden*, featured a pennywhistle boogie played by a disabled boy (1958, p.55). The new music increasingly heard on street corners in Johannesburg, Cape Town and other large cities soon attracted the attention of South African record company talent scouts and was then marketed as 'New Sound', 'Flute Jive' and '*Kwela*'. Some of its exponents became stars, in particular Spokes Mashiyane ('King Kwela') and Lemmy Special Mabaso. The record industry readily adopted the term *kwela* for the genre.

In the late 1950s *kwela* music spread to the states of the then Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1954–63), now Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, where it gained new roots. During the 1960s it developed particularly in Malawi by the musician-composers Daniel and Donald Kachamba (Kubik, 1974; Malamusi, 1994, pp.34–9). With some modifications and a great number of original compositions, Donald Kachamba is one of the last surviving authentic representatives of the *kwela* tradition in contemporary southern Africa. He has played the flute since he was eight years old, when his family lived in Harare, Zimbabwe, and his elder brother, the late Daniel Kachamba trained him. At the age of 14, he impressed audiences with his prolific solo variations (see the film, *Kachamba Brothers 1967*, part 1, 'Where can I get Emery', a ten-bar rock blues). Since 1972 he has been on concert and lecture tours in no fewer than 33 countries and has

released recordings and films. Among his most remarkable contributions as a composer are his multiple flute pieces recorded with a playback technique (Kubik, 1979–80). His music integrates the experience of 1950s *kwela* with contemporaneous central and southern African styles.

2. Form.

Kwela music is based on short, four-segment harmonic cycles such as: CFCG$_7$ and CC$_7$F($_6$)G$_7$. These cycles, expanded and circumscribed by substitute chords, have continued into the more recent forms of South African popular music such as *simanje-manje* and Mbaqanga. Jazz-type chorus forms are occasionally found in *kwela*, as is the 12-bar blues form, for example in Lemmy Special Mabaso's '4th Avenue Blues'.

Beginning in 1958, South African pennywhistle players used flutes marketed by the Hohner company of Trossingen, Germany, and developed for mass production from samples collected by a Hohner agent in Johannesburg from a township youth who had made them locally. Unprotected by patent laws, the original designer will probably never be known. The Hohner flutes were available in C, B♭ and G. At the height of the *kwela* craze, Hohner sold up to 100,000 annually in South Africa alone.

The Hohner flute has a cylindrical bore and six finger-holes. In the manufacturing process, a nickel-plated brass tube is sawn off and galvanized, then the head or mouthpiece is formed. *Kwela* musicians developed a unique embouchure. From the view of the player, the flute is rotated 45° and pushed relatively deep into the inner side of the right cheek, resulting in an oblique head position. The oblique embouchure guarantees that the edge and pipe remain open between the lips of the player. The purpose of the deeper insertion of the flute is to obtain a full, round and much louder tone, as the cavity of the mouth, such as in the performance of the *mqangala* (mouth-bow), becomes a variable resonating chamber.

Blue notes, jazz-type glides and chromatic intermediate sounds were achieved by slight modification of embouchure, finger smearing etc. Several types of trill were also employed. Much of this technique can be studied in the film made of Donald Kachamba (Encyclopaedia Cinematographica E2328, Göttingen), who plays with the original *kwela* embouchure and fingering technique.

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