

## The Anatomy of the South African Jazz Appreciation Societies

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**ABSTRACT** This paper dwells, in the main, on jazz appreciation societies in urbanised South Africa; particularly their origin, role and meaning. On the continent of Africa, South Africa stands out as the country that has a globally recognised jazz tradition and that the tradition is linked to the origins of jazz in the United States of America, which dates back to the early 1900. Yet South Africa jazz has seen different styles come and go, creating a strong tradition of listening to jazz by fashionable audiences who gather on weekends, traditionally Sundays, to listen to their beloved jazz recordings. This ritual is accompanied by specific dress codes, intriguing city language and improvised dance styles. Mostly, not musicians themselves, these people have kindled the jazz tradition throughout times when commercialism has threatened, and continues to threaten the very existence of the art. Drawing from jazz interviews with appreciation society members and jazz radio programme anchors in Gauteng area of South Africa, the study documents the jazz appreciation society phenomenon.

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of South African jazz refers to jazz music that is composed and performed with adaptation to the tendencies of vernacular South African cultures. It is based on common South African harmonic structures, which are in fact relics of the missionary hymnody, but heavily influenced by the rhythmic attributes of traditional music. Its precursor is a music style called *marabi*, an exclusively Black city music genre honed in the ghetto, wrought from suffering and struggle (Ballantine 1997).

In discussing South African music of the 1930s and 40s the concept of *marabi* and South African jazz (Coombes 2004) are used interchangeably. Similarly, the concept of jazz appreciation club is used interchangeably with the concept of jazz appreciation society or jazz collector's society.

Although literature on South African jazz exists (Allen 2003, 2008; Ballantine 1991; Ballantine 1993; Muller 2001), very little is available on the jazz appreciation societies, a thriving subculture that has been supporting jazz and its development for almost a century now. While others mention the societies in passing, Brett Pyper (2011) is keen to document this urban South African subculture.

### Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study was to research and document the origin, role and meaning of

jazz appreciation societies in South Africa. Amongst their value, the societies have served as social clubs, but most importantly their listening session ensured the sustenance of jazz as an elitist brand of music.

### METHODOLOGY

Research that yields this paper is qualitative in nature. Interviews, desktop research and participant observations were fused in order to forge a multiple perspective to one of the underdocumented phenomenon in urban South Africa. Invaluable insight was also obtained through interviews with anchors of jazz programmes from radio stations. We cannot claim to have interviewed them all, but we are confident that the few that took part in the study presented an authentic voice of those who are at the cold face of the phenomenon. Nonetheless, the following is a discussion on some of the key issues.

### Musicological Foundations of Jazz Appreciation Societies

The development of jazz in South Africa has always mirrored that of its counterpart in the United States of America in many respects, especially after World War 2 (Ballantine 1991; Coplan 1982). From New Orleans in what were known as the 'houses of amusement', later to be popularly dubbed jazz clubs, jazz 'went up the

river' to cities such as Chicago and Kansas City, where jazz clubs became the most important institutions for the development of the music genre (Ostransky 1978:34). Similarly, South African jazz moved from Queenstown, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, popularly known then as 'Little Jazz City' (Ansell 2005), for instance, to townships situated to the west of Johannesburg.

Notwithstanding other townships in the Reef and other parts of urban South Africa, Sophiatown became the epicentre of urban life where a concentration of Black professionals was found (Chapman cited in Rafapa 2005). Amongst other things, it was "the centre of literary activities until it ceased to exist. Its residence to esteemed Black writer such as Todd Matshikiza, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Lewis Nkosi and Bloke Modisane, who formed a coterie which met to discuss literature (Barnett 1983:16). On the other hand, Sophiatown was infested with *tsotsis* (thugs or gangsters) (Molamu 1995). The coexistence of Black excellence and *tsotsis*, as it were, moulded a kind of intelligentsia that was equally street wise.

It was perhaps the vibrancy of the South African jazz, which accounted for a thriving nightclub life, and thus blurred the divide. Like in the U.S. where jazz became a crucial component of the social and civic movements such as the Larry Neal's Black Arts Movement (Neal 1972), South African jazz was also the soundtrack for the socio-political awareness of the time; hence, it became difficult to separate it from the anti-apartheid struggle of the time. For all their trouble South African jazz musicians later went into exile. But for most, jazz consumed or performed became the conduit for, or the expression of (self) love and freedom in the otherwise harsh environments. It became an *echappe* from the hardship of apartheid South Africa (Makgopa et al. 2012). Most importantly, it became a catalyst for racial integration (Mason 2007).

### The Making of a Subculture

The late 1930s and early 1940s represented a boom for the live music scene in South Africa in that patrons had a place where they could converge, have a drink, talk politics and dance away the hardship of the day. Jazz musicians and this goes for the U.S. as well had a place wherein they could hone their skills and perfect their craft while simultaneously earning a living. Typical in these environments, exponent of *marabi*, and

its American counterpart Bebop heralded a tendency where, after the audience had left, musicians, both amateur and professional, would spend the whole night 'jamming', and thereby sharpening their skills. The session also expanded the limits of the music of the time to unprecedented levels of sophistication and dexterity. In the absence of formal education, jazz clubs were the primary centres for learning all about the music. So jazz clubs became the most important institutions for the development of jazz, because with virtually no opportunity to study music in formal institutions, bandstand-learning (Prouty 2008), occurring in these sessions became indispensable for the development and improvement of musicianship. In other words, jazz clubs, other than selling alcohol, became some of the most important "educational systems for producing, preserving and transmitting musical knowledge" (Berliner 1994: 37).

For the jazz lovers, jazz clubs were perhaps the only places that provided the opportunity to be closest to the source of the music and its creators; they were, so to speak, the intimacy of the jazz movement. They would participate, to some extent, in the occupational role and ideology of the professional jazz musician. They would learn and accept, at least, "some of the [jazz musician's] norms regarding proper and improper language, good and bad music, stylish and unstylish clothing, acceptable and unacceptable audience behaviour and so on" (Berliner 2009: 772). They would also find expression through dance, and socio-political discussions that went with the smoking and the drinking fashionable in clubs. The intimacy with the music, and especially the creative process of musicians, and the earshot presence of witty conversations by some Drum magazine<sup>1</sup> writers, even the unpredictability of gangsters of necessity galvanised the patrons into a social, political and perhaps creative audience. As a result, patronising jazz clubs translated into being the inner circles of the elite that were socio-politically and musically current in taste; and this social status was what would later define what South African jazz appreciation societies became to represent even today. Put differently, the jazz appreciation societies or clubs are the relics of a subculture, which blossomed during the *marabi* era. As with the development of any subculture, there was an accompanying *lingua franca*. Previously associated with thugs, Tsotsitaal

became the language of status, and the lingo for those who were literate and equally streetwise (Molamu 1995).

### **The Demise of the Live Music Circuit**

Because of their vibrancy and the interracial inclinations, settlements such as Sophiatown made a mockery of the efforts of apartheid South Africa; and as such, they, along with the subculture in clubs, have had to be dismantled. But this could not be the only account for the dissipation of this vibrant culture. First, as the city was developing, other forms of entertainment sprung up, thus competing with the live music scene. Instead of going to listen to music in clubs, patrons could opt to go to a movie house in some other parts of the town for instance. Second, the reduction in smoking and alcohol consumption by the general populace, the lifeblood of the clubs, was also a significant factor that led to the demise of the jazz clubs; an occurrence parallel in the U.S. (Pelligrenellis 2000).

With the numbers of venues diminishing, and those that still run unable to pay musicians, the live music scene was on the decline, leaving the jazz lovers to their own devices. It so happened that this also coincided with the rise of the record industry, meaning that jazz lovers could still access the music of their favourite musicians but on vinyl. But listening to records could not entirely satisfy the need nor recreate the joy for live entertainment. Understood from this point the destruction of Sophiatown in 1953 meant not only the closure of famous clubs but perhaps the dispersal of the jazz appreciation societies.

### **Session Hosting and the Stokvel Tradition**

With the dearth of live music, jazz lovers constituted themselves into jazz appreciation societies, recreating an atmosphere closer to the live jazz clubs environments of the Sophiatown era. To achieve this, they needed music, albeit recorded, and a hustle-free drinking place. The *stokvels*<sup>2</sup>, an already entrenched socio-economic activity in Sophiatown, presented a blueprint which later ensured the resilience of the associations (Pyper 2011). Accordingly, hanging on to the lifestyle developed during the live music boom of Sophiatown, they, in the face of scarcity of live music, resorted to procuring and enjoying jazz music.

The jazz clubs (this time not referring to the physical structure but groups of people clubbing together), very different from the interracial, socio-politically creative environments of the Sophiatown era, devised a strategy for album collection. In preparation for a session, for instance, each member of the jazz club would contribute or *gazad* (collectively make money available for a common purpose) an agreed amount to be given to the host who would then go shopping for 'new release' jazz albums in preparation for his or her session.

Like in some *stokvels*, members pay money to affiliate to the club, and each member has an opportunity to host a session on a rotation basis. Under the pretext of 'spreading the gospel of jazz', it is preferable that the sessions are held at different venues. Hosting a session means acquiring the music, the sound system and venue. This requires some intelligence and responsible communication skills since the hosting member would have invested a contribution from the club member and some of his or her personal money. To ensure viability, the he or she is expected to prepare and sell food and drinks as a way of raising funds for himself or herself, pretty much the in the manner it happens in the traditional *stokvel*. The hosting member ensure the success by advertising the event on community regional and national radio stations that are only happy to announce the sessions during the gig guide slots of the jazz programmes, usually broadcast every Sunday afternoon.

A substantial number of key members of these jazz clubs own taverns, an upgrade from *shebeens*<sup>3</sup>, and as such are licenced to sell alcoholic beverages. These members often help other hosting members who may not be in the liquor selling business by way of offering their venues, which come with the requisite licence.

### **The Network of South African Jazz Appreciation Societies**

From the subculture originating from Sophiatown, through the *stokvels* (socio-economic) models, jazz appreciation societies have entrenched themselves in urban South African culture. Over the years, jazz clubs have invested in the development of extensive networks. In some instances, this has manifested in the sector becoming professionalised, only for some to

crumble because of greed. The Jazz Foundation, founded in 1983 by jazz aficionados Oupa Salemane, Pat Mthembu and Mongezi “Monk” Goozin, for instance, is about the first formalised institution that exists primarily as the umbrella body for about 1600 jazz appreciation societies in South Africa; And, of course, there are many other jazz appreciation societies not affiliated to the foundation. As a professional unit, the Jazz Foundation also performs other developmental functions such as establishing networks with overseas institutions and musicians (Salemane 2013).

Attached to the Jazz Foundation are vibrant provincial formations: Gauteng, the most vibrant, comprises three regions, namely East Rand, central Johannesburg and Pretoria. So established are some regions that they each have, over the years, developed discernible “sound preferences” (Maitso 2013; Phaahla 2013; Salemane 2013). For instance, the East Rand region, which also has a strong connection with musicians from the coastal towns in the Eastern Cape Province, is known for its predominantly straight-ahead kind of jazz affinity. Johannesburg central, owing to its complex societal complexion, is more contemporary in sound preference. Pretoria is known for its avant-garde jazz (Maitso 2013; Phaahla 2013) owing to the sensibility of the rhythms of the people from the North, namely Limpopo province, typified by musicians such as Phillip Tabane ‘malombo jazz’ (Galane 2009). Although these sound preferences are not mutually exclusive, the previously mentioned characterisations are discernible nonetheless.

In the provinces, the “sound preference” factor is less of an issue because regions are small, and so close to one another that there is generally a confluence of sound in any given session. The Limpopo Jazz Foundation, for instance, is an umbrella body with around ten affiliates spread around the province. These are; Capricorn, Giyani, Jazz Collectors, Jazz Hub, Jazz Masters Batlokwa, Modjadji, Phalaborwa, Shamavhungu, Tropical Sounds, and Vhembe Jazz Club. Similar mappings can be found in other provinces, making the jazz appreciation sessions one of the biggest monthly musical activities going on in urban South Africa. Arguably, their existence is kindling the tradition of jazz listenership and dance that is commonplace in urban South Africa today.

### The Meaning of Membership

Amateur jazz appreciation members are motivated first and foremost by peer association; the yearning to belong to a clique that is in the main socially conceived as elitist. The primary activity of a jazz appreciation society is to come together with friends or peers and collectively listen and dance to jazz music. Each member has an impressive collection of recording artists assembled over the years with much discretion and pride. The collection customarily has an element of rarity – a special import from overseas, not commercially easily available, and musically above commonplace.

Members are generally proud that they belong to the group that listens to the noble music of jazz and they are aware that the music requires some intensive listening over a long period in order for an individual to truly understand and enjoy it, and the message it conveys. Furthermore, they believe that their mission is to influence others into appreciation of jazz. Much as young and rowdy behaviour is unwanted during sessions, members are proud to have influenced and recruited youngsters into jazz appreciation. Not only is the music critical at sessions, but also social behaviour in general.

### Etiquette and Behaviour

Club members emphasise cleanliness in appearance and immaculate, courteous behaviour. Amongst other things, membership to a jazz club entails an explicit and exquisite dress code, which accentuates, above all, cleanliness. Typically, the dress code is classic Humphrey Bogart *manier á la Mafia* originating from the 1940s New York Bebop generation led by saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, additionally typified by a goatee with a beret and suit combination, the trench coat, Harris Tweed suits or English style hats, Pringle cardigans and shiny shoes, preferably two-tone. The shoe, which is kept shining and spotless at all times, is a focal point; and most of the dancing revolves around it. According to Maluleke (2012), “you cannot go to a session in *tekkies* (sneakers)”.

Members also boast immaculate and state of the art sound systems in their equally spic – and – span cars.

During session drinks, beer or wine, if not whisky or brandy, are consumed stylishly and

strictly from a glass instead of the rather clumsy but typically South African manner, probably inherited from the *shebeen* era; gulping it straight from the 750ml bottle. Members have to adopt a particular style of social behaviour, to which there is strict adherence. Because the regular gathering for a common activity, members develop interpersonal skills, which behaviour can be transferred to other social etiquettes, engagements and interactions.

### Features of Record Collection

Since the beginning of recorded jazz in 1917, record collections of aficionados typically represented a wide range of popular jazz artists, including Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Louis Jordan, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Nat King Cole, Horace Silver, Art Blakey, Miles Davis and John Coltrane (Berliner 1994). According to Phaahla (2003), for most members of jazz clubs, however, the “jazz sound” is equated to what is called *mbobo* – the sound of clarinet, saxophone, trumpet or the organ typified by the likes of Eddie Harries, Stanley Turrentine, Miles Davis and Jimmy Smith respectively. Others still collect Champion Jack Dupree.

Perhaps due to a limited scope of clarinet, saxophone and trumpet or organ repertoire in South African jazz, and the predominance of the singing tradition in general, a South African jazz lover would naturally include, amongst others, Miriam Makeba, Hugh Masekela, Jonas Gwangwa, Dudu Pukwana, Abdullah Ibrahim in their collection. Other clubs such as the Andy Narell Jazz Appreciation Society or the Jazz Fusion Update, for instance, specialise in Smooth jazz and Fusion, while others such as the now defunct Timbila African Music Appreciation Club used to focus on African music. The total collection of the entire membership of music appreciation societies in South Africa ensures the representation of the major milestones of the jazz at least from the South African perspective.

Most clubs, perhaps with the exception of Pretoria appreciation societies, seem not conversant with the music of Sun Ra, Ornette Coleman, Art Ensemble of Chicago or Cecil Taylor (Maitso 2013). Nor do they recognise these Free jazz exponents, the simple reason being that these artists’ music is regarded as ‘too deep’

and intellectual. Besides, it does not conjure well with the traditional and conservative dancing routines; a vital component of a jazz appreciation society. It is polyrhythmic, atonal. And it features erratic idiosyncrasies, which are not compatible with the gentlemanly/lady-like behaviour that is expected from members of a jazz appreciation club.

Jazz in general, and Free jazz in particular, is a very complex music for the unschooled ear, especially with the advent of Bebop where, according to Green (1971) in the Larousse Encyclopaedia of Music “[t]he new musicians divorced the music once and for all from the mass ear. From here on, jazz was to be a musicians’ music, its harmonic conventions so convoluted that it became increasingly difficult for the untrained ear to distinguish the justified neologism from the unjustified solecism.” Appreciation at this level is deemed the preserve for the hardcore aficionados.

### The Ritual of a Typical Session

In South Africa, jazz is normatively allocated or restricted (depending on one’s perspective) to the Sunday afternoon slots. Radio stations throughout the country play jazz music in the afternoon. Sunday afternoons are also reserved for most jazz appreciation society sessions. One reason is that on Saturdays most members are normally busy with family business such as shopping and attending to funerals. In addition, it could be assumed that most jazz lovers are not churchgoers. Soon after lunch, they crisscross the landscape of urban South Africa going to sessions. One at the venue a predictable ritual unfolds. Perceived at a macro level, most sessions follow a particular pattern; starting with less danceable tunes building up to bluesy sounds, most of which bearing an element of danceability.

From the start to the finish of a session, members take turns; it could be an hour each, to ‘play’ their personal collection. A careful analysis of each slot reveals the player’s taste and level of sophistication. Others would be specialising only one type of jazz to an extent that whenever they are straightjacketed. Jerry Molelekwa, the father of the late South African jazz piano prodigy Moses Molelekwa, is known as “Bra Monk” because of his unflinching love for Thelonious Monk. Whenever he plays, one can

expect a heavy dose of Monk's music. Others, because of their ability to carry the audience along or through the different musical moods become 'personalities' whose sessions' slots are revered. Apart from this ability to maintain interest throughout, the sophistication of the music, whether the DJ (in this instance refers to a member whose is playing) is going through the avant-garde or bebop to hard bob, also sets them apart; they become some kind of celebrities.

Members are expected to comment intelligently about the music that is 'playing' as an indication of their dedication to jazz. This could include commenting on facts about the artists and the session musicians on a particular recording; usually studied from the album sleeve. The best in relative terms among them usually moonlight as anchors of jazz show in local and national radio stations. This being part of their work, these kinds of members buy jazz history books to augment their knowledge about jazz. With age, they grow to become the connoisseurs. Talking to them one gets the sense of reminiscing about the live jazz environments they once enjoyed, and this is a position every younger members envies.

Eventually the session builds to levels of excitement where, apart from the DiscJockeying prowess, the ability to *dobol* or *dig* a solo dance improvisation becomes an attraction. Members take turns outshining one another on the dance floor. The dancing is strictly solo and individualistic rather than collective so as to give each member the chance to show off his or her dance skills which are painstakingly well rehearsed and improvised to entertain a normally encouraging and receptive audience. This ritual is inspired by the jazz solo where an individual instrumentalist is given prominence. Intrinsically, members set out to outshine one another, albeit amicably, in a manner comparable to the 'cutting sessions' fashionable in jazz clubs. This practice has its origin in African traditional dancing whereby a group will form a circle to sing and clap hands in rhythm and support for a solo dancer in the middle. This is also therapeutic as it takes some courage to stand up and perform alone in front of an audience. Members feel a sense of support and belonging while performing in front of an appreciative audience. The feeling is similar to when one is thrown into the air and caught by a support group on which the individual is entirely reliant.

Basically, a member has three opportunities for self-expression and self-affirmation; being a

knowledgeable member and astute collector, a DJ capable of exciting the listeners, and a *diga* (jazz dancer) capable of keeping the audience spellbound. Achieving any or all of the three during a session, is as gratifying as it is for a prolific jazz instrumentalist who has a rapport with his or her backing band and the audience.

## CONCLUSION

Apart from being mentioned in passing in some literature on South African jazz, jazz appreciation societies in South Africa are an old phenomenon, which for some reason has eluded scholarly scrutiny. These societies form an overlapping experience from live performance in a physical space (club environment) through to listening to recordings in the company of friends and fellow music lovers in designated spaces. Piggybacking on the stokvels culture, jazz appreciation societies fulfil a socio-economic function while also serving the development of jazz listenership. Putting the financial spinoffs and the sense of belonging aside, being a member builds character, strong communal sensibilities and it boosts one's self-esteem.

For all their socio-economic benefits, jazz appreciation societies warrant scholarly attention. Insight into their operations reveal a wealth of knowledge which could assist in reconstructing or beefing up the history of a social phenomenon that has successfully revitalised jazz through its different epochs.

## NOTES

1. Drum magazine was a pristine and prestigious Black publication of the 1940's with a crop of a trend-setting caliber of writers.
2. Stokvels, (acculturation of the concept 'stock fairs' (Pyper 2011: 203), are social clubs comprising a limited number of people who meet on a monthly basis to collect money. This money is then landed to the host as capital to buy food and drinks, which the gathering members and their visitors would buy and consume on the day. This opportunity is afforded every single member on a rotational basis.
3. *Shebeenis* defined as a dingy drinking place a precursor to the township tavern, were Africans would gather to drink bottles of whisky stolen from the hotel cellars (Nakasa 1975:55).

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